



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

Student movement rates high in some parts of New Zealand, but problem more complex than it looks

Some New Zealand schools have high numbers of students moving in and out during the school year. For principals and teachers in these schools, this movement is a major issue. However, while it is widely discussed, this issue hasn't been systematically researched in New Zealand. A recently released report by NZCER shows that when we look beyond the initial figures this issue is rather more complex than it first appears.

The report describes the first phase of a research project that is looking at the educational issues faced by communities with high levels of residential movement. The work is part of a bigger project called *Building attachment in families and communities affected by transience and residential movement*¹

The researchers collected student movement data from 20 schools (in four areas of New Zealand) and interviewed the principals of the schools. Almost all of these principals thought that high student mobility was—very definitely—a problem for their schools. According to them, it disrupts school programmes and classroom routines, increases a school's administration costs, and impacts negatively on a school's overall achievement profile. Some schools have strategies for dealing with this issue and others don't. All collect roll movement data, but few analyse it.

NZCER's analysis of the information collected by the study schools showed an average annual roll turnover² of 33 percent. The highest turnover rate was 45 percent and the lowest was 9 percent. Rates were higher in low-decile schools. In one area most of the movement was to or from other parts of New Zealand: however, in the other three areas students were mainly moving between schools in the same district.

An examination of the number of schools attended by individual students showed that each school had a small number of students who had attended a very large number of schools (10-15 and occasionally more). Movement by this small group of very frequent movers had a major effect on overall turnover rates.

¹ For more information on the *Building Attachment* project see the website www.whypeoplemove.net.nz. This project is being co-ordinated by the Centre for Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment (CRESA) and is funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FoRST).

² The term 'turnover' as used here does *not* include new entrants and graduates.

These turnover rates are high by international standards: however they fit with New Zealand's overall movement patterns.

New Zealanders are on average a highly mobile people³ (and this is generally seen as being a good thing). However, we also have a very small number of people who, for a variety of reasons, move very frequently. This group often has multiple needs that can sometimes stretch a community's resources—especially its education, health and social services.

The NZCER researchers compared the achievement and attendance records of students who had changed schools three or more times *in addition to* moves from one *level* of schooling to another (primary to intermediate for example) with those of other students in the same year group in the same school. There were some issues with the quality of this data. However no significant relationship between frequent movement and reduced educational achievement was found. (There were some small differences in mathematics achievement at primary school level). However, in this exploratory study frequent movers were not distinguished from *very* frequent movers—this is something that will be looked at more closely in future work.

The initial findings of this study are interesting for a number of reasons. While the principals clearly saw frequent movement as a major disadvantaging factor for students, the achievement data tells us that movement doesn't necessarily cause problems for individual students. However, very frequent movement *is* probably a surface-level 'indicator' of other deeper-level issues that could have a disadvantaging effect. This distinction—between frequent movement as a *cause* of educational disadvantage and its link with other factors that could affect a child's ability to learn—is important here. There is little point in schools (or other organisations) putting a lot of effort into trying to address the issue of frequent movement if it isn't actually the root cause of the problem. The other factors need to be teased out and addressed separately—with support from other government and community agencies.

On the other hand, however, it is clear that schools find it operationally difficult to manage when significant numbers of children come and go during the school year. We need to look more closely at why schools find frequent movement difficult to accommodate when, as the census data shows, it is a typical characteristic of many New Zealand households.

The first phase of this project was mainly a scoping exercise, designed to collect baseline information and identify trends. It is clear that more work is needed. In the next phase (2005-2006) researchers will continue to collect movement data in the case study schools. However they will also collect information on students' sense of connection to school and to peers, and their engagement with learning. There will be a closer focus on the small group of students who are moving *very* frequently.

The education part of the wider *Building attachment* project is being led by NZCER Chief Researcher Dr Jane Gilbert.

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³ For example, according to the 1996 Census, half of New Zealand's total population had moved at least once in the previous five years (60 percent of all children aged between 5 and 9 had moved at least once in the previous five years).