The Mobility of English School Children

A quarter of a million pupils change school each year, excluding compulsory moves (such as from primary to secondary school). Children from lower-income families are more likely to change school than children from high-income families. And when children do change school, those from higher-income families are more likely to move to better performing schools than those from low-income families.

A recent research study undertaken by the Centre for the Economics of Education and published in *Fiscal Studies* has found pupil mobility (i.e. the extent to which children switch schools) to be strongly linked with measures of social disadvantage, pupil’s previous academic attainment, and school test score performance. Children from lower-income families are more likely to change schools than other pupils, and this is true for pupils at all levels of schooling. Pupils who move schools are more likely to have a lower previous academic achievement than pupils who stay at the same school, and pupils at schools with lower Key Stage performance levels move more than pupils from higher performance schools.

Although pupil mobility has become a key issue in the recent British policy debates in education and is often identified as an important potential influence on the educational achievement of pupils and their progression through the schools years, empirical analysis of mobility in the English education system has been scarce. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the extent of and patterns in pupil mobility for all state school children in England. Exploiting a large administrative longitudinal data source, the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), for two academic years, 2001/2002 and 2002/2003, the researchers examine the extent of mobility; how it differs for different ages of children; and how it is affected when they extract compulsory school shifts (such as from primary to secondary school) from the picture. Pupil mobility is measured on the basis of whether there is a change in the school that a pupil attends between two academic years.

The results show mobility to be quite prevalent, with 4.4 percent, or around a quarter of a million, of pupils making non-compulsory moves in the school year of study. The findings show that mobile pupils are more socially disadvantaged than non-mobile pupils and are less likely to have a good educational record. Moreover, the empirical results suggest that pupils are less likely to move if the school they attend has good average performance levels. Children do, on average, move to better schools. Over half of children end up in better performing schools than the one they left. However, the results show that more advantaged individuals are much more likely to make the move to a better performing school than are children from less well-off backgrounds. Examining regional variations in mobility by government office region, the researchers conclude that pupil mobility is more marked in London than in other regions of the country. The findings also suggest that pupils who move school and home simultaneously are typically more socially disadvantaged than pupils who move school only.

In conclusion, having established some basic facts about pupil mobility in England using for the first time using a national database covering all state schools in England, this study offers findings that are of relevance to both academic debates and government policy discussions.

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Notes to editors:
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