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When Students Are in Flux, Schools Are in Crisis

By SAM DILLON

INDIANAPOLIS - At Riverside Elementary School here, students wander the halls. Several times last term, the police dragged out disorderly 11-year-olds in handcuffs. Crack dealers work the neighborhood, where four young men have been killed over the last year.

These are the obvious signs of a school in crisis. Yet there is a less visible but powerful condition that is both cause and symptom of Riverside's chaos. Its student body is in perpetual motion. In 2002-3, 437 children transferred into the school or moved away in midterm, far more than the school's total enrollment of 330.

"Every time rent comes due, some child leaves," the principal, Donna Smith, said. "Parents lose jobs. Kids get tossed back and forth between relatives. Children are moving in and out of the school all the time."

Schools like Riverside are not unusual, experts say. In thousands of schools in poor neighborhoods, student turnover is constant and rapid. That presents tremendous challenges, forcing teachers to repeat reviews of topics previously taught and complicating efforts to maintain discipline, because the arrival of even one new child can disrupt other students' work and alter classroom equilibrium.

Students who change schools frequently achieve less academically than those who stay put, studies have shown. Even the use of standardized tests to track a school's academic progress, a central goal of President Bush's No Child Left Behind law, can lose meaning, because where there is high turnover, the student population tested one year has dispersed by the next.

Yet the tumultuous effects of all the movement on students and schools have attracted little attention from researchers or policymakers.

The authorities have not even designated a standard method to measure turnover, although many districts try to track it. A decade ago, two Texas professors identified 62 formulas used by districts across the country to quantify what was variously described as the mobility, stability or turbulence of student populations. Today, there has been no progress toward standardization.

Riverside, in a distressed neighborhood of one-story bungalows, many boarded shut, is "in need of improvement," in the language of Mr. Bush's federal law.

Careful planning, however, can help a school contend with high turnover. Three miles east of Riverside in Indianapolis is Charity Dye Elementary, a school that draws from a similar urban population but has won recognition for high achievement from the Education Department. Last year, 175 students in a total enrollment of 295 transferred in or out during the academic year.

Alexis Johnson, who heads a fifth-grade class at Dye, has developed a procedure to incorporate new students into her classes at midyear. She assigns another student to be a buddy, gives diagnostic tests to identify strengths and weaknesses and prescribes a special program of study, she said. Still, all the students moving in

and out can be destabilizing.

"It really disrupts," Ms. Johnson said. "We have to interrupt to tell the new students what we're doing. And until they get used to how we do things, it seems like they're walking backward when we're walking forward."

Recognizing the obstacles faced by children on the move, some states have adopted measures to minimize the disruption. North Carolina and Maryland are moving toward standardized curriculums. That would mean, in theory, that students changing schools would find course work in new schools to be much the same as in the old. New York City has adopted standardized reading and mathematics programs for most schools.

Helping students who change schools adjust mainly falls to teachers.

Denise Drain instructs about 20 students in one of the two fifth-grade classes at Riverside. But at least 13 children joined the class or moved away, and by January, Ms. Drain's grade book had become such a jumble of erased names and additions that she drew up a new one.

"One new student can change a classroom's entire dynamics," she said. "If there's a new boy, who will be his friend? Where will he fit into the pecking order? If it's a girl and she's cute, all the boys will try to make her laugh."

One of Ms. Drain's boys used his fingers to count the nine schools he has attended since kindergarten. He is 11. In March, he was handcuffed and arrested at the school for disorderly conduct after he had "trashed a classroom" and yanked another student out of his seat, according to a police report.

David Kerbow, a researcher at the University of Chicago who is one of the handful of American academics who studies student mobility, has analyzed transfers in the Chicago public schools. About 60 percent result from families' moving, Mr. Kerbow said. Some remaining transfers are parents' efforts to install their students in higher-achieving schools, a goal that is rarely achieved, Mr. Kerbow said.

"Students tend to leave and go to schools that are very similar," he said. "Very few students go from a low-achieving school to one where achievement is high."

Many parents also move their children to new schools to remove them from conflicts either with school authorities or other students, he said.

A high proportion of the transfers to Riverside seem to fit that description, said Vicki Graves, who teaches the other fifth-grade class, in a room down the hall from Ms. Drain.

"Most of the students who come late move because their parents know they're in trouble at other schools," Ms. Graves said. She began the year with 27 students. As school was ending there were 21, among them 12 or 13 who arrived in midterm.

"A boy came in early May, and he's just trouble," Ms. Graves said. "He was cussing somebody out 15 minutes into getting here. He's already been suspended." Another boy arrived in December, she said.

"He's mentally capable, but he sneaks out of the room," Ms. Graves said. "He walks the hall. He's verbally aggressive to adults. All that is anger, because his father disappeared, his mother left. She's back, she left, she's back, she left. Now he's with his grandmother."

He was arrested for fighting at the school in December and again in March, according to police reports.

Ms. Graves estimated that she lost 25 percent of her teaching time attending to the interruptions caused by transfers.

"I spent six weeks on fractions - adding them, dividing them - and then I get new people in, and they haven't done fractions," she said. "So I have to slow down and catch them up."

Teaching in such a transient classroom is physically exhausting, she said.

"I didn't know teaching was going to be like this," Ms. Graves said. "I'm 48 and I'm supposed to work until I'm 60. But I can't do this for 10 more years."

"You have so many kids moving around, and you know their home life is a mess, you just want to help them. But they can't understand that you just want to make a difference. Any sign of kindness, they mistake for weakness, and then you have to battle your way back."