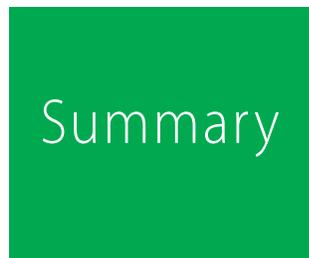




Patterns of student mobility among English language learner students in Arizona public schools





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Summary

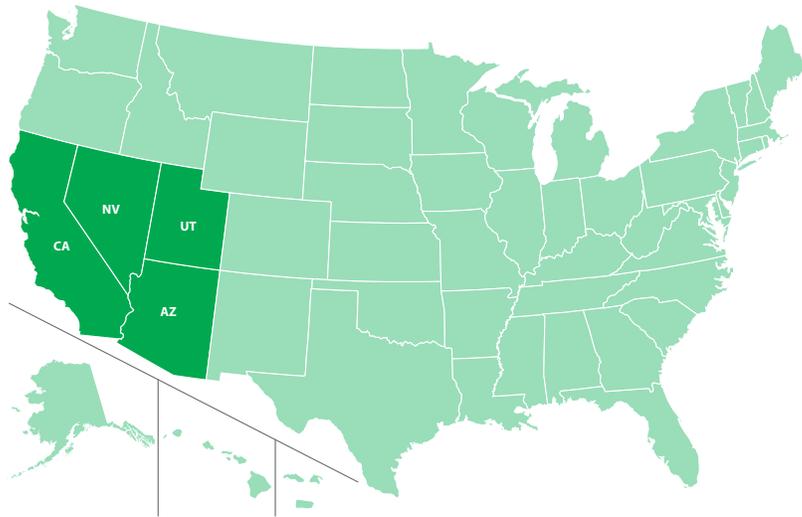
October 2010

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Issues & Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on current education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues & Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

October 2010

This report was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under Contract ED-06-CO-0014 by Regional Educational Laboratory West administered by WestEd. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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Fong, A.B., Bae, S., and Huang, M. (2010). *Patterns of student mobility among English language learner students in Arizona public schools*. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2010–No. 093). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

This report is available on the regional educational laboratory web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Patterns of student mobility among English language learner students in Arizona public schools

More than a quarter of Arizona students experienced at least one mobility event in each of the four years examined, and the proportion was higher for English language learner students than for other students. Students were more than twice as likely to transfer to a school in another district than to one in the same district.

High rates of student mobility (nonpromotional change of schools) are associated with lower student achievement (Rumberger and Larson 1998; Engec 2006). While studies have examined mobility among all students, less is known about the mobility rates of English language learner students as a group, an important omission since research has found that mobility increases the time needed to become proficient in English (Mitchell, Destino, and Karam 1997). Arizona's high rates of residential mobility (Berkner and Faber 2003) and high proportion of English language learner students (Hoffman and Sable 2006) make studying student mobility among English language learner students in Arizona especially relevant.

Using data from an Arizona Department of Education dataset that includes all students enrolled at an Arizona public school at any time during 2004/05–2007/08, this study looks at three types of student mobility: students who transferred between public schools in Arizona, students who had breaks in enrollment

of at least 19 days, and students (other than kindergarten students) who entered school for the first time during the observation period (2004/05–2007/08). In addition, the study sought to confirm for Arizona public schools findings from other studies of an association between student mobility and other student characteristics such as special education status and race/ethnicity.

This study examined five research questions on student mobility in Arizona public schools:

1. Within a given school year, what proportion of English language learner students and other students are mobile? Did these proportions change over 2004/05–2007/08?
2. Does the proportion of students who are mobile disaggregated by English language learner status vary by education level? Did these proportions change over 2004/05–2007/08?
3. Within a given school year, what proportion of students disaggregated by English language learner status made intradistrict transfers? What proportion made interdistrict transfers?
4. Do intradistrict and interdistrict transfer rates vary by district size? Did these rates change over 2004/05–2007/08?

5. How does the average number of mobility events that students experience over the observation period vary by student characteristics such as English language learner status, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, special education status, gender, race/ethnicity, and grade level?

The study finds that more than a quarter of Arizona students experienced at least one mobility event in each of the four years examined. It also found that

- The proportion of students who experienced a mobility event was higher for English language learner students than for other students.
- Mobility rates declined for both groups from 2004/05 to 2007/08, but at a faster pace for English language learner students. By 2007/08, the difference in mobility rates between English language learner students and other students had narrowed from 3.6 percentage points to 0.9 percentage point.
- Students who transferred between schools were more than twice as likely to transfer to a school in another district than to one in the same district.
- Both intradistrict and interdistrict transfer rates varied with the enrollment size of the district: the intradistrict transfer rate increased with district enrollment, and the interdistrict transfer rate decreased with district enrollment.
- Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and students in special education programs averaged more mobility events than did their counterparts.

How English language learner students were defined affected whether English language learner students averaged more or fewer mobility events than non-English language learner students. When defined to include all students who were classified at any time as English language learner students (as they were in the study), these students averaged more mobility events than other students did. When defined to include only students who were classified as English language learners during their final enrollment spell (as in the sensitivity analysis), English language learner students averaged fewer mobility events than other students did.

The study, in response to a request by the Arizona Department of Education to examine the magnitude of student mobility throughout the state, especially among English language learner students, begins to fill the information gap on the mobility rate of English language learner students in Arizona. However, several other questions could be usefully examined. Has the difference in mobility rates between English language learner students and other students continued to narrow since 2007/08? What about the timing of school transfers? Do some students in Arizona move more frequently during the school year than during the summer months, for example? Finally, did students transfer to better or worse schools, as measured by academic achievement? Answering these questions could help in understanding whether some transfers (for instance, those in the summer months and those to higher performing schools) are beneficial, while others are disruptive and harmful to students' academic progress.