



The revolving door: Student mobility in Auckland schools

A Child Poverty Action Group Monograph
Donna Wynd

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The revolving door: Student mobility in Auckland schools

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Executive summary

Transience, also known as residential mobility, has been a “perennial concern for schools” (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, p. 8). The Education review Office identified transience as a barrier to students’ learning as long ago as 1997 (Education Review Office, 1997). In recent years it has become apparent that the issue continues to impact on schools. Yet despite its regular appearance in ERO reports, there have been few, if any policy initiatives to address transience, or even follow on from some of the excellent New Zealand research that has been done already.

One problem with transience is that there is no one agreed definition, nor one that captures all the possibilities of children changing residence. Moreover, it is difficult to assess the mobility of individual students from school data. For schools the issue is one of assisting transient students, some of whom may have already attended several schools during the school year.

While there appears to be a link between poor educational outcomes and transience it is difficult to attribute poor educational outcomes to transience alone. Transience often reflects other disadvantage and it is the combination of factors that contribute to a child’s educational outcomes. Schools note that not only do transient students often fall behind academically (as evidenced by concern around national standards achievement rates), they may suffer socially as well.

In 2002 Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) conducted a survey of South Auckland primary schools. The methodology used in that survey did not measure children’s mobility directly, rather it measured turnover within the school roll. That survey was repeated for this report, with an expanded selection of schools. It is assumed that turnover of students within the school reflects transience of the children themselves. Comments from the schools supported this assumption. The 2002 survey found an average turnover rate of 29%. This survey found a median turnover rate of 23.5%, with a steep social gradient. Decile 1 schools had a median turnover of 30% with higher-decile schools having far lower turnover rates. The survey respondents were biased towards decile 1 and 2 schools so the figures for higher-decile schools may not reflect the experience of all the schools in those deciles. Approximately 40% of schools added comments to their survey response. Many noted the high rates of student transience, and listed a number of reasons why they perceived this was happening. One principal referred to his school as having “a revolving door”.

The results of the survey strongly suggest that for many decile 1 and 2 children, residential mobility may be a significant additional factor impeding their educational success. As well as transience, schools observe other underlying problems. Some schools noted students moved in response to changes in employment, or changes in accommodation or family circumstances. High levels of private rental housing appear to be associated with residential mobility, with families moving to reduce accommodation costs, or being subject to insecure renting arrangements. Low rates of home ownership for Māori and Pacific people also mean transience disproportionately affects Māori and Pacific children: the decile 1 schools that responded to the survey have between 84-100% Māori/Pacific students.

The results of CPAG's survey suggest that transience among children in low-decile schools is a significant issue for both the children and the schools themselves. These problems go well beyond the scope of the education sector. Government efforts to improve education outcomes by focusing on teacher quality and test results fail to place children's education in the context of children's broader economic and social needs. More work is needed to determine the extent and impact of residential mobility among children, and any solution must be a political one. A broad-based commitment is needed to ensure families have stable, affordable accommodation, and that economic growth provides steady, well-paid jobs.

1. Introduction

Transience, also known as residential mobility, has been a “perennial concern for schools” (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, p. 8). The Education Review Office identified transience as a barrier to students’ learning in 1997 (Education Review Office, 1997), and the New Zealand Educational Institute published research on transience several years later (Lee, 2000). Transience among school children has received some media attention (Heather, 2014; Johnston, 2013) although there have been few calls for a policy response. In part this is probably because so little is known about it. What do we mean by transience? How often do families change residence? How many children change residence, and is it necessarily a bad thing? Is it the shifting that is problematic or the other factors that make life difficult for families such as low income or family disruptions? And, from an educational and policy perspective, is transience a problem for the education sector or the broader housing and social sector, or perhaps both?

While there is little data available, there seems little doubt transience is viewed by schools and the education sector as having a detrimental effect on some children’s education. Education Review Office (ERO) reports and Ministry of Education publications note transience as being a factor in children’s education outcomes. The ERO appears to be of the view that it is something schools can and should deal with, but the problems associated with transient children may be too complex for schools alone to deal with.

In 2008/2009 Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) conducted a series of interviews in Auckland primary schools as part of its research into school breakfast programmes (Wynd, 2009). During the course of these interviews it became apparent that transience among primary school children was a serious problem for some of the schools. Transient students were perceived by school staff as disruptive to the wider school environment. The provision of a breakfast at school, with its associated social benefits, was seen as one way of helping students establish links with their peers. While food and the safe social setting of breakfast clubs helped, schools often had difficulty reaching transient children.

This report is an attempt to gain a better understanding of transience among primary school children. CPAG conducted a survey of Auckland primary schools to ascertain roll turnover rates and to see what, if any, impact schools themselves thought transience was having on students, their learning, and the wider school environment. This report begins by considering what is meant by transience, and then briefly reviews the evidence linking transience to educational outcomes from New Zealand and elsewhere. This is followed by a section on the role of neighbourhoods, and then by a section outlining what is known about the extent of transience in New Zealand.

The second half of the paper outlines the methodology of the survey and the results, followed by a discussion and conclusion. This survey does not purport to be an in-depth study. Rather, it is a snapshot of the extent of transience in Auckland primary schools. However, the results suggest far greater attention needs to be paid to transience and its effects on children’s education, and that more research is needed to determine the extent and causes of residential mobility among children. CPAG hopes this report can inform a wider debate around transience and its relationship with children’s education outcomes and wellbeing.

2. Definition

There is no universally accepted meaning of 'transience' (also known as residential mobility). Rather, the term is used loosely to refer to a person or group of persons who shift their place of residence in a given period. Many of the definitions of transience come from health research (particularly AIDS and sexual health, and mental health), including moving residence two or more times in the last six months (Davey-Rothwell, German, & Latkin, 2008; German, Davey-Rothwell, & Latkin, 2007). Transience is often confused with homelessness (itself a term difficult to define), migration, and residential itinerancy (Coulter, van Ham, & Findlay, 2013, p. 11). This lack of clarity is illustrated by the use of the term in ERO reports, in which schools frequently refer to 'high rates of transience' within their student populations but it is not clear what the schools mean by this.

In New Zealand, the ERO uses the New Zealand Education Institute's (NZEI) definition of transience, which is a student who attends two or more schools per year (Education Review Office, 1997, p. 2; Mutch, Rarere, & Stratford, 2011). This definition refers only to inter-school transience and may not indicate how often a child has shifted residence but stays in the same school. Gilbert and Bull (2008, p. 2) also distinguish between student movement rates (how often an *individual student* changes schools), and rates of student movement in and out of a school. It is the movement of students in and out of a school that is the focus of this paper. Despite numerous ERO reports noting transience as a factor in children's achievement, there appears to be no publicly available formal record of transience among schoolchildren kept by the Ministry of Education using the aforementioned – or any other – definition.

3. The impact of transience and influence of neighbourhoods

3.1 What impact does transience have on schooling?

Popular wisdom holds there is a negative relationship between transience and students' learning (Kaase & Dulaney, 2005, p. 2). Transience can affect children in a number of ways including their education, health and social development (Dong et al., 2005; Education Review Office, 1997; Jelleyman & Spencer, 2007; Mutch et al., 2011).¹ While transience need not be a bad thing, it can prove disruptive, not only on the individual child but on their friendships and the wider school environment (Education Review Office, 1997; Gilbert, 2005, pp. 72-75). Rumberger (1999, p. 32) found:

Overall, we found that student mobility often produces an array of negative psychological, social, and academic consequences for children...But surprisingly, we found that student mobility adversely affects the academic achievement of even non-mobile students if they attend high schools with high rates of student transience.

Changing residence is not in itself unusual or necessarily detrimental: in the increasingly mobile 21st century people shift residence for a number of reasons including employment, their children's schooling, and their stage of life. Nevertheless, "residential moves are fairly rare in most people's lives" (Coulter et al., 2013, p. 4).

There is little formal research investigating the impact of transience on children's lives. Much of the research originates from the USA where the focus has been on transience arising from homelessness. Many education publications note the adverse impact of transience on education outcomes, although this largely seems to be assumed, while in health much of the research is also focused on the impact of homelessness. In New Zealand, families with children are less likely to be homeless although there is evidence that their numbers are increasing (Heather, 2013).

Researchers have distinguished between moves that are strategic (going to a better school) or reactive (involuntary move in response to economic or family circumstances) (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999; Xu, Hannaway, & D'Souza, 2009). The key issue is whether moving residence is voluntary, whether children move to a better school or into a more favourable home or neighbourhood environment. (On the other hand, immobility may also reflect lack of choice of residential location.) For children in low-income or jobless households, frequent shifting is likely to reflect economic insecurity and is therefore more likely to be reactive.

The problem of transience among schoolchildren is significant. In 2012 approximately 4,000 children attended two or more schools in the school year, with Auckland having the greatest number of transient students (as would be expected), followed by Northland, Waikato, the Bay of Plenty, East Coast and Otago (Johnston, 2013). This is consistent with ERO reports that note high rates of transience among schools in these regions, particularly South Auckland (see Appendix 1).

¹ Moving house may also impact on people's access to primary healthcare as they "actively need to find and change GPs every time [they] shift...in practice, many may just use Emergency Departments unless they have a chronic illness..." Dr Nikki Turner, pers comm.

High rates of transience have been found to be associated with disadvantage (Johnson, 2002), with decile² 1 and 2 schools having much higher rates of transience than other schools (Hodgen & Wylie, 2002, p. 3). A 2001 survey conducted by the New Zealand Principals Federation found that 47% of transient students in decile 1 schools moved because of housing as compared with 9% of decile 10 students. Highlighting the link between family instability and low income, 39% of decile 1 students moved because of ‘family issues’ compared to just 4% of decile 10 students (Hodgen & Wylie, 2002, p. 7).

Education Review Office reports observe a relationship between high rates of transience and impaired school achievement.³ This relationship was noted as far back as 2004. Then, the Ministry of Education (McGee et al., 2004, p. iv) found:

“One of the issues that became apparent during data collection which had an impact upon both primary and secondary schools was that there were some reports of high student turnover – in any one year – sometimes referred to as transience. High turnover, it was said, impacted – sometimes severely – upon curriculum implementation. Teachers spoke of the serious consequences of frequent changes of school. Students were affected by a reduced continuity of study and reduced learning experiences. Carefully planned and sequenced learning experiences were required for sustained learning that built upon previous learning. For teachers, a frequently changing class of students meant that their goal of connected learning was difficult – if not impossible – to achieve for all students.”

Transience does not cause poor educational outcomes: there are other confounding factors with studies showing that transience compounds existing adversity (Dong et al., 2005; Jelleyman & Spencer, 2007; Xu et al., 2009, pp. 2-3). Additionally, often schools with high rates of transience also observe low rates of children having attended early childhood education: “Y1 [year 1] students often have had no or little pre-school education and need to settle into the school environment and its language norms” (Findlayson Park School, 2013). South Auckland principal Shirley Maihi observes the problem as one where “if [children] haven’t had stable schooling there’s going to be huge learning gaps. And it’s really hard to catch up” (quoted in Johnston, 2013).

3.2 Influence of neighbourhoods

Also influencing children’s experience of transience is the nature of the neighbourhood families move to and from. Neighbourhoods generally reflect the socioeconomic status of their inhabitants (although the rapid gentrification of some Auckland suburbs shows neighbourhood socioeconomic status is neither fixed nor permanent).

Children’s education can be affected by high levels of transience within the school environment. In most cities, and Auckland in particular,⁴ low-income families tend to be concentrated in specific areas. High levels of transience within a neighbourhood tend to undermine already low levels of social capital⁵ (see Hawdon & Ryan, 2008, pp. 130-131), and contribute to high levels of turnover within

2 A school’s decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. A school’s decile does not indicate the overall socio-economic mix of the school. See <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/SchoolOperations/Resourcing/ResourcingHandbook/Chapter1/DecileRatings.aspx>.

3 See Appendix 1.

4 A discussion of socioeconomic stratification of New Zealand children is in Wynd (2013a, p. 14).

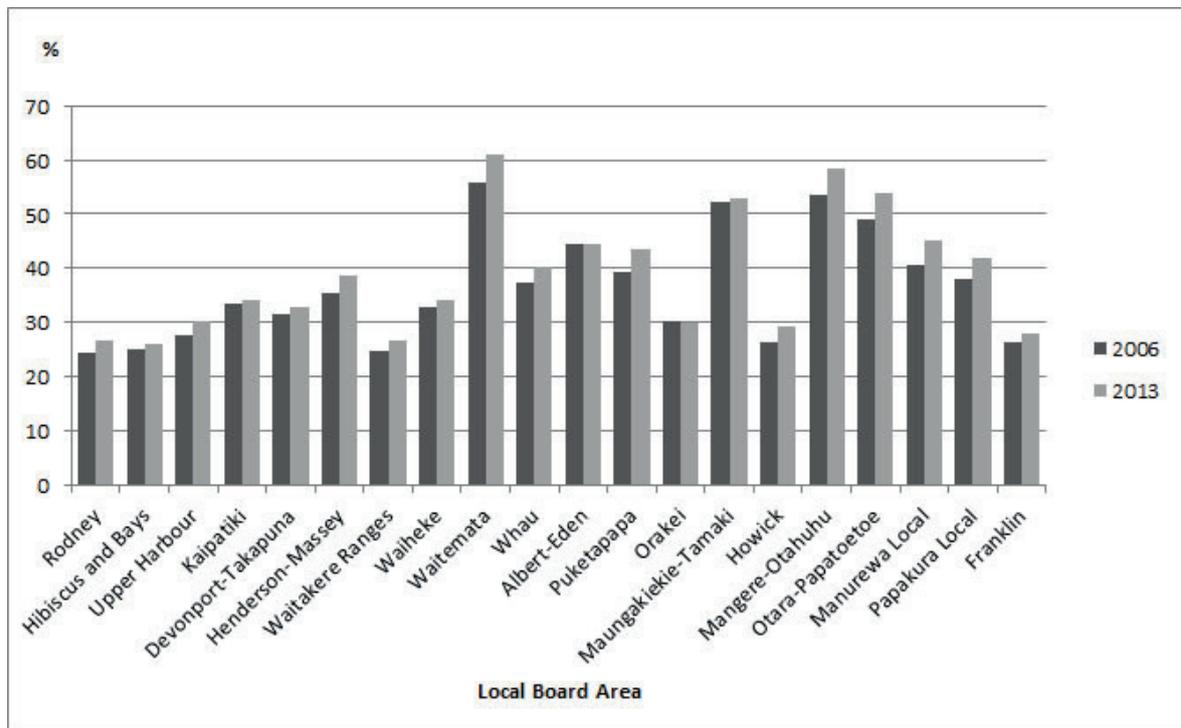
5 ‘Social capital’ is defined by the OECD as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (OECD, 2007, p. 103).

area schools. For schools, this means a higher proportion of unsettled and potentially disruptive students in the classroom. Neighbourhood poverty has also been associated with lower test scores in children (McCulloch & Joshi, 2001). In addition, the concentration of students from low-income families can limit the opportunities that might be provided by schools with a wider socioeconomic mix of students (Wylie, 2013, p. 137). In the context of ethnically and socially stratified Auckland, 'brown flight' (Aldridge, 2012; Collins, 2013) further concentrates disadvantage at local schools.

Where residents are economically disadvantaged and forced to rent, areas with a high proportion of rental housing (see Figure 1) may have rapid turnover of people within the neighbourhood, with schools accordingly recording high rates of transience among students (see for example Hansard, 2013; Johnston, 2013).⁶

Low-decile schools have much higher student turnover rates than others, often because poorer parents have to shift house when they cannot afford rents. For example, 42 per cent of low-decile primary schools had student turnover rates of 20 per cent or more, according to the 1999 New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) national survey; only 7 per cent of high-decile primary schools came into this category. When children have a stable enrolment in a school, teachers can develop good relationships with students and their families, both of which are important to successful learning (Wylie, 2013, p. 136).

Figure 1: Percent of rental housing (% not owned or partly owned, and not held in a family trust) by Auckland local board area, 2006 and 2013



Source: Statistics New Zealand 2013 census. <http://stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/data-tables.aspx>.

⁶ Some high-income neighbourhoods also have high rates of rental properties and shifting among residents. The key difference is the element of choice is more likely to be present among higher income earners than families on low incomes.

Residential mobility is associated with renting, with homeowners more likely to stay in one place. This creates problems for children in rental accommodation, with researchers finding that families most likely to change residence are in private rental accommodation, and that the majority of renters move into another rental property rather than into their own home (Morton et al., 2012, pp. 104-105). Morton et al (2010, pp. 38-39) also observed high levels of residential fluidity among some New Zealand families. A broad pattern of high rates of transience among primary school-aged children in low-decile schools with high rates of Māori and/or Pacific students has also been identified. This probably reflects low rates of home ownership in Māori and Pacific families, with 43% of Māori and 34% of Pacific people living in owner occupied dwellings, compared with 70% of Europeans (Flynn, Carne, & Soa-Lafoa'i, 2010).⁷ Decile 1 and 2 schools are clustered predominantly in local board areas that also have a high proportion of rental housing, particularly in South Auckland.

There has been much debate about the role of neighbourhoods in social outcomes for young people. Factors that can affect outcomes for children include the concentration of disadvantage including families where English is a second language,⁸ and low levels of attachment between residents which may reduce social capital within the neighbourhood (see for example Morton et al., 2010, pp. 41-42).⁹ Where transience is associated with population decline, welfare and other services may leave the community (for example the closure of low-cost legal services), further disadvantaging those residents who remain.

Neighbourhoods are complex and varied, and clearly not all low-income neighbourhoods have high rates of transience and low levels of social cohesion. Factors that can make a difference include the built environment (access to facilities such as parks and early childhood centres), the availability of local employment opportunities, and the provision of services such as public transport and youth law centres. Research on New Zealand adolescents points to the role of neighbourhoods in children and young people's wellbeing, but also highlights that other factors are important (Aminzadeh et al., 2013, p. 13):

Students living in neighbourhoods characterised by higher levels of social cohesion and membership in community organisations reported higher levels of wellbeing. The association between student self-reported wellbeing and neighbourhood membership in community organisations varied according to the individual socioeconomic status of students. Neighbourhood membership in community organisations showed a stronger protective effect for students who were more socioeconomically deprived.

7 Using SoFIE data from 2006, Grimes and Young cite home ownership rates of 39% and 29% for Māori and Pacific respectively. See Grimes and Young (2009).

8 The ERO reports used to compile the list in Appendix 1 show a high correlation between high levels of transience and children who have "English as an additional language".

9 A discussion of neighbourhoods can be found at Wynd (2013b, p. 16). A discussion of the concept of social capital can be found in Putnam (2000).

4. Extent of transience in New Zealand

There is little direct New Zealand research (and almost none of it recent) into the extent of transience among schoolchildren. This is despite transience being consistently cited in education literature, ERO, and national standards reports as a factor on children’s educational outcomes.

An indirect measure of the effect of the prevalence of transience comes from the ERO’s guide to student guidance and counselling (Education Review Office, 2013). 78% of schools reported dealing with student problems of household poverty, including poor housing or transience related to poverty, and 57% reported transience caused by family breakdown (see Table 1. Note these figures are for secondary schools).

Table 1: Problems secondary schools address through guidance and counselling

Problem identified by school	Percentage of schools identifying these problems
Household poverty related, including poor housing, parent/s working long hours, transience caused by poverty, condoned absenteeism due to family responsibilities (such as caring for younger siblings), students working inappropriate jobs/long hours	78%
Poor mental health, including anger, anxiety, body image, eating disorders, depression, self harm, stress, psychosis, ideas about suicide	61%
Family dysfunction, including family breakdown, domestic violence, intergenerational problems, transience caused by family breakdown, condoned absenteeism	57%

Source: Education Review Office (2013, p. 10)

A more direct indication of the prevalence of transience among school children comes from Ministry of Education figures. The figures in Table 2 below show how many individual children have attended 2 or more schools in the school years 2009-2013 (note the 2012 figures differ slightly from those provided to Fairfax Media (Johnston, 2013)). With the exception of 2011 (when the figures were affected by the Canterbury earthquakes), the figures showing the number of students attending 2 or more schools during the year, as well as the number of students per 1,000 attending 2 or more schools, is consistent although falling slightly in 2012-2013. However, it is likely the number of schools attended by some children is underestimated. One respondent to CPAG’s survey cited a child who had attended 12 schools.

Table 2 also shows the number of children per 1,000 students who shift school more than twice per year. This proportion is relatively small – less than 1% of the overall student population. While these numbers show most students remain at the same school for the duration of the school year, they are an average. Figures in Table 3 (below) and from CPAG’s survey, clearly show there is a socioeconomic gradient to student mobility, with lower decile schools having higher rates of student mobility.

Table 2: Number of children attending 2 or more schools in 2009-2013

Number of schools attended	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
2	3,324	3,440	4,328	3,285	3,259
3	416	423	496	408	414
4	61	53	66	56	65
5	14	14	12	12	7
6	4	3		1	1
7	1				
TOTAL	3,820	3,933	4,902	3,762	3,746
Number of students with 2+ transfers (per 1000 students)	4.7	4.8	6.0	4.6	4.6

Source: Ministry of Education. Data held with CPAG.

Note: the increase in student movements in 2011 was caused by the Canterbury earthquakes of 2011.

Further data obtained from the Ministry of Education for the 2010-2013 school years (Table 3), show figures for the “average student movement rate”. The average student movement counts the number of children coming or going within a year, excluding students starting or completing their schooling (that is, it excludes, for example, new entrants), compared with the school roll in March of that same year. As such, it is a measure of churn, or turnover within the school. The figures show high rates of turnover rates among primary-aged children in low-decile schools. The figures show rates of transience fall by about 40% from the lowest to the highest decile, and that rates of turnover are much lower for secondary students than primary students. The NZCER observes that these figures “do seem rather high” (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, p. 10). The figures are higher than those obtained for this CPAG survey, but this could be because the Ministry has a full dataset rather than a survey, or because of the different methodology used in calculating the figures.¹⁰

The data in Table 3 clearly show the impact of the Canterbury earthquake. It also shows the average student movement rate falling – sometimes quite noticeably – between 2010 and 2013. There is no obvious reason this has occurred, and in the absence of better information we can only speculate about what is behind these figures. None of the schools that responded to CPAG’s survey noted a fall in the transience rates among their students.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Education will shortly be publishing its own indicators on school turnover rates and student transience. The report will be available at <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/indicators>.

Table 3: Average student movement rate, 2010-2013 for primary and secondary sector

School sector	School decile	Average student movement rate			
		2010	2011	2012	2013
Primary	1	61.1	59.8	52.8	52.8
	2	64.3	59.7	49	48
	3	52.1	58	50.3	46.5
	4	54.6	51.5	45.7	50.2
	5	46.2	50.7	42.2	46.5
	6	47.8	52.2	41.2	42.1
	7	50.1	52.6	45.2	40
	8	42.3	46.6	44.7	35.5
	9	42.3	48.3	36	36.6
	10	38.4	52	32.7	29.4
	TOTAL	49.8	53.1	43.7	42.5
Secondary/ Composite	1	45.4	31.6	28.3	30.8
	2	32.4	44.3	25.2	23.6
	3	26.9	24.6	19.3	21
	4	21.7	19.4	16.7	17.5
	5	16.4	17.4	14	11.3
	6	14.9	16.4	13.2	11.7
	7	19.2	17.8	15.8	11.6
	8	11.7	12.4	9.1	8
	9	9.4	11.3	8	6.2
	10	6	7	4.8	4.8
	TOTAL	21.3	22.5	16.9	16
All schools	1	58	54.2	47.9	48.4
	2	57.6	56.5	44	42.9
	3	47.1	51.2	44	41.3
	4	48.3	45.3	40	43.7
	5	40.7	44.5	37	39.9
	6	40.5	44.2	34.9	35.2
	7	43.6	45.5	39.1	34.3
	8	36.2	39.8	37.7	30.1
	9	36.8	42.1	31.3	31.5
	10	32.3	43.5	27.5	24.8
	TOTAL	44.1	46.9	38.3	37.2

Source: Ministry of Education. Data held with CPAG.

The student movement rate is not an indication of a pure increase or decrease in roll number, as it is counting students arriving at or leaving a school. The Canterbury earthquakes of 2011 increased the number of student movements nationally, particularly affecting Canterbury and the surrounding regions.

Just published research by the NZCER (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, pp. 8-10) notes student turnover within schools has been a “perennial challenge” (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, p. 8). The NZCER’s 2013 survey of primary and intermediate schools also found “fifty-six percent of the principals said that student mobility and transience posed issues for their school: 17 percent generally and 39 percent sometimes” (Wylie & Bonne, 2014, p. 8). Consistent with other research, and the results of this survey, they also found a strong socioeconomic gradient to student mobility.

5. Schools survey 2014

5.1 Methodology and data

In 2002 CPAG conducted a place-based survey of South Auckland schools to assess the rates of transience within their student populations in the 2001 school year. It found an average turnover rate of 29% (Johnson, 2002). It was decided to repeat the 2002 survey in order to ascertain if transience remained a problem for schools, and whether transience rates had changed. It is important to note that the methodology used here does not directly measure transience rates among children. Rather, it is a measure of turnover of the school roll. Nor does the survey provide information on the number of children who leave and return to the same school in that year.

The methodology used in the 2002 paper was used for the 2014 survey. Transience rates were calculated as follows:

- $2013 \text{ Closing roll} - 2013 \text{ opening roll} = \text{growth in school roll for year (includes mainly new entrants)}$
- $2013 \text{ total enrolments} - \text{growth in school roll} = \text{number of students in turnover}$
- $\text{Turnover rate} = \text{number of students in turnover divided by average school roll (e.g. opening + closing roll divided by 2)}$.

This information was requested from a selection of schools in the Henderson, Whau, Mangere-Otahuhu, Otara-Papatoetoe, Manurewa, and Papakura Auckland Council local board areas. Criteria for selection were that the schools were contributing or full primary schools, and that they had a roll of >200. These wards were selected because they covered a range of school deciles. The literature suggests that transience is associated with low-decile schools, and these wards had a bias towards decile 1 and 2 schools, although there were schools of all deciles in the selected sample. Nevertheless, this selection of schools resulted in a bias towards decile 1 and 2 schools, which are clustered predominantly in South Auckland. CPAG's 2002 study had been a place-based survey, focusing on schools in South Auckland. It was decided to retain the focus on South Auckland but expand the sample set to include some West Auckland wards. This provided a wider mix of schools and enabled some comparisons to be made between different deciles. A total of 93 schools were selected.

A letter and survey form (which included space for any additional comments) was sent to each of the selected schools. A total of 52 responses were received – a response rate of 55%. Most schools provided only the numbers requested but 20 (38%) provided valuable comments, and these are discussed below.

5.2 Survey limits

This survey is a one-off survey. It is not a time series, and therefore can make no claims about changes to school roll turnover rates over time, except with respect to the survey conducted in 2001. Nor does it directly measure transience rates of the children attending the schools: rather it assumes that high rates of turnover of the school roll reflect transience among the children attending. It is also likely that it underestimates children's residential mobility. The results also vary from the results using the Ministry of Education's formula. One school provided its Ministry transience rate, and it was significantly higher than that obtained using the methodology in this report. There also appears to be some inconsistency among schools as to how they record student enrolments. For example, one school was unable to provide information because it still had a manual system for keeping rolls, and another had changed its system during the year. It is also unclear whether children who left and returned during the year were consistently recorded as new enrolments.

5.3 Results

52 schools responses were received. The breakdown of respondents is set out in Table 4 below. There is a bias towards decile 1 and 2 schools for two reasons: these were the schools that had the greatest response rate, and schools in the Auckland region are more likely than those elsewhere to be decile 1 or 2. For similar reasons, half the respondents came from 2 South Auckland local board areas (Mangere-Otahuhu and Manurewa) while a further third came from the more diverse areas of Henderson and Otara-Papatoetoe.

Table 4: Survey respondents, by school decile and Auckland Council local board area

Decile and number of schools		Local board area and number of schools	
Decile	Number	Local board	Number
1	19	Henderson	9
2	15	Mangere-Otahuhu	12
3	5	Manurewa	14
4	4	Otara-Papatoetoe	9
5	4	Papakura	4
6	2	Whau	4
7	1	TOTAL	52
8	1		
10	1		
TOTAL	52		

The results showed the median turnover rate in the 52 schools sampled was 23.5%. The overall turnover rate was 22%. This compares with an overall rate of 29% in the 2001 survey. For this survey the median rather than the average was calculated as some anomalous outliers in the data suggested schools were not consistent in their recording of enrolment data. Rather than leave the data out (on the basis that there is no way to know how schools record enrolments), the median for the group and subgroups was calculated. It is likely this variability in enrolment data also partly accounts for the fall in the overall turnover rate (some schools recorded a zero turnover rate, which seems improbable).

Table 5 below shows schools' median turnover rate by school decile. The figures show a clear socioeconomic gradient, with lower-decile schools having much higher rates of student turnover. The figures show decile 1 schools on average roll turnover slightly less than one third of their students, while students in high-decile schools were far less likely to change schools. This also came through in some of the comments from schools (see section below). Unfortunately the response rate for higher decile schools was very low, so the results must be treated with some caution as it is unlikely that the sample of one or two schools reflect the experience of all the schools in a particular decile. It is also likely that the greater the problem transience is for the school, the more interest there would be in responding to the survey.

Table 5: Turnover rates by decile

Decile	Median turnover rate
1	30.4
2	23.9
3	17.0
4	20.2
5	8.4
6	11.0
7	12.5
8	4.2
10	8.6
TOTAL (median)	23.5

The results also show clear differences between local board areas (Table 6), although these are not as strong, being moderated by some board areas having a mix of schools (for example Otara-Papatoetoe). Henderson shows the lowest turnover rate, and it is notable that the sample included no decile 1 schools, one each of decile 2 and 3, 3 decile 5, and 2 decile 6 schools. On the other hand, the Manurewa sample, which has the highest turnover rate, had 6 each of decile 1 and 2 schools. Two Manurewa schools had turnover rates of over 60%, figures that reflected the fact that their rolls fell during the 2013 school year while the number of enrolments during the year was equivalent to approximately half the school roll. This suggests a great deal of turnover among residents in the school catchment, and strongly indicates that residential mobility needs to be given greater policy attention.

In Otara-Papatoetoe, turnover rates ranged from 10%-40%. This variability was closely correlated to decile rating, with the decile 1 schools generally having higher turnover rates than higher decile schools. Similar mixed results were apparent in the Papakura sample, with figures ranging from 30% for a decile 1 school down to 13% for a decile 5 school. The figures are all lower than those from the 2001 data although the local board areas are not a perfect match for the suburbs in the earlier survey.

Table 6: Turnover rates by local board area

Local board area	Median turnover rate
Henderson	12.2
Mangere-Otahuhu	23.5
Manurewa	31.2
Otara-Papatoetoe	26.5
Papakura	19.9
Whau	23.5
TOTAL (median)	23.5

The results for local board areas do not show a strong correlation with the percentage of rental housing in the local board area (see Figure 1). Mangere-Otahuhu has the highest proportion of rental housing but has a student turnover rate of less than Manurewa or Otara-Papatoetoe. The lower turnover rates in Mangere were also noted in the 2002 report (Johnson, 2002, p. 5). An explanation may be that families are in relatively stable state housing rather than more uncertain private rentals, but more work is needed to determine if this is the case. Recent changes to the rules around eligibility for state housing may show up as greater turnover rates in places such as Mangere-Otahuhu in the event of any future survey.

5.4 What the schools said

The survey form sent to schools included a space for comments. CPAG was interested to know what impact schools thought transience was having on them and/or their students, or any other matters they thought were relevant. Most schools declined the opportunity to add anything besides the requested data, however 38% of respondents did. Those comments are considered below.

5.5 Transience rates

Of the schools that commented, most had something to say about the high rates of transience among their student population. Comments included: “It’s like a revolving door – kids come and go with relentless monotony”; “our school community is very transient and we lose as many as we gain”, “these [high turnover] figures are very usual for our school.” One school with an average roll of 690 noted that over 1,100 students (nearly twice the school roll) had attended at some stage during the year. Another noted an 8 year-old that had been to 12 different schools in the last year, another that “a new enrolment in Year 4 has already attended 11 schools”; and yet another said “throughout 2013, we had a family that would move between Auckland and Hastings multiple times, depending on the fruit picking season.”

The comments collected in this survey suggest that the problem of transience is most likely concentrated in a group that changes residence frequently. One school referred to a “floating group” of families, while another talked about a number of families leaving then re-enrolling in the same year. It is possible therefore that the major problems lie with a small group of families changing residence multiple times, rather than a large number of families shifting once or perhaps twice.

5.6 Impact on student learning and the school

It is hard to imagine any child finding the experience of attending multiple schools easy, either socially or academically. The difficulties faced both by children who shifted schools multiple times, and their peers, was a constant theme in the survey responses.

One issue that arose was even managing to reach the children: “very difficult to get traction on these kids...no matter what school they attend (or don’t!!)”; and “often these children come with low self-esteem and a lack of interest in learning.”

This ‘lack of interest’ reflects in the perceived shortfall in student achievement. Comments included:

- “Very unsettling for children’s learning – many schools”;
- “It impacts achievement levels therefore National Standards; lowers the whole group; affects data.” Interestingly, this school went on to note that “students don’t seem to be overly affected”;
- “Their [a group of children who moved frequently] learning was severely impacted (testing below the National Standards) and also their social relationships. They found it hard to build friendships...”;
- “The high turnover of students is a constant challenge for teachers/the school in meeting student learning needs.”

One principal composed a lengthy comment on the relationship between transience and school achievement:

I know from years of experience that transience always increases when poverty grows more markedly. I also know that it is probably one of the most significant factors in schools in terms of children not achieving. With a few exceptions the kids “on the move” are often the most “at risk” academically. They often also have poor attendance and other complex factors that militate against school success. It is an issue that seriously affects schools and is not given proper recognition by the Ministry of Education.

It is not just academic results that are affected; it is also children’s relationships with their peers: both the ones moving and their friends staying, can be distressed. One school noted children who shifted frequently had trouble forming friendships, while a former teacher observed that transient children tended to be attention-seeking and disruptive, or withdraw into themselves.¹¹

5.7 Reasons children change schools

Children change schools for a number of reasons, and as noted above, these shifts are not necessarily detrimental to their schooling or wellbeing. Factors that appear to impact on whether moving is a positive experience or not include the reasons for shifting and what say children have in the moving process.

Schools listed a number of reasons they viewed as influencing families’ decisions to move residence. The most commonly stated reason was work (including moving elsewhere in New Zealand or overseas), but others included changes to family circumstances, changes to accommodation arrangements, children moving into the school zone, and moving to “avoid immigration” [immigration

11 Pers comm, 2014.

department]. One school commented that they were “starting to see overcrowding as families move in together to save on rent.” Given the well documented impact of overcrowding on children’s health (Baker et al., 2012; Office of the Children’s Commissioner Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, 2012, p. 12), this is an alarming development.

5.8 Other reflections

Several other comments about the impact of transience, as well as other comments about what is happening in children’s lives are worth commenting on briefly.

The first – noted by several schools – is that student transience imposes a cost on the schools involved. One school pointed out that the unscheduled arrivals and departures meant they were doing additional paperwork for approximately 300 students per year. Other schools also commented on this. Others noted that their national standards achievement data declined because transient students often tested below national standards; while another noted delayed learning and behavioural issues, which impacts on others in the classroom.

A decile 5 school commented that in addition to an average turnover of about 10%, they had “4-6 students in every class who don’t have enough food... we also have a washing machine, dryer, a shower and spare uniforms for students who come to school needing pastoral care for when home systems are not working”. This raises two key questions, namely whether hunger among New Zealand schoolchildren is creeping up the income ladder; and if “home systems” are not working in a middle-income school catchment, to what extent are they not working in less well-off schools?

5.9 Mitigating factors

Schools did note when their student turnover was not high, and in some cases outlined the reasons for this. Lower turnover rates tended to be associated with higher deciles, although this was not always the determining factor.

One school stated that their school population was reasonably stable because they had new families moving into the area (presumably having purchased and planning to remain in zone), and another stated they “had more students wanting to come in than leave”. This suggests the reputation of the school can also be a factor.

One response from an integrated school noted that they were fortunate their turnover rates were low, possibly because parents didn’t have a choice of other Catholic schools in the area. However, a question also emerged around parents’ commitment to their children’s school. One school commented that while their transience rates were high, “we have a more stable roll in our Samoan and Māori bilingual units, our parents and community are more engaged and committed to attending and remaining in these units.” Possibly this commitment is also reflected in the lower rates of turnover observed in Catholic schools that were in the sample. It suggests that one way to mitigate high rates of transience among students might be for schools to engage better with families where this is practicable. The ERO also recommends schools engage with families, and found that “schools that were effective at meeting the needs of transient students were found to have an overall approach made up of well-developed systems, positive relationships and a responsive school culture...” (Education Review Office, 1997, p. 16). They also found Māori and Samoan language units were “highly effective” (p. 12) in making links with whanau, although it is unclear if this is due solely to the efforts of the school or because the parents of children attending those units are more likely to be committed to keeping their children at the school.

6. Discussion

The excerpts in the table in Appendix 1 and the results of the sample of schools surveyed for this report show that, among lower-decile schools, student transience is an issue both for individual students and the wider school. It is difficult to assess how many children are affected as schools can measure only the number of children who come into a school or leave during the year. The calculations used in this report give a figure for turnover within a school, but offer little insight into the comings and goings of individual students. However, it is reasonable to assume that there is a strong relationship between students changing residence and turnover within schools, although student turnover will give only a partial snapshot of overall student mobility.

Although it is difficult to estimate directly the extent of mobility among students, the evidence here strongly suggests that there is a group of mobile students within the school system – a “floating group” – who are likely to be more disadvantaged than their peers at school. Moreover, they are more likely than others to have behavioural problems and potentially disrupt other students.

The data demonstrate that high rates of student turnover are concentrated predominantly in decile 1 and 2 schools, although not all decile 1 and 2 schools report high rates of student turnover. The survey here was conducted among urban schools, although the ERO reports suggest the problem of transience is also an issue in some rural schools. The common factor is a low decile rating.

The concentration of school transience among disadvantaged children should be a concern for the education sector and policy makers. Children who shift because their parents are employed in seasonal work, or work short-term jobs, or because they are caught in a cycle of chasing cheaper, often unstable rental accommodation, or because family circumstances have changed, are often faced with compounding disadvantage. The comments from the survey respondents suggest not only that transience affects children’s educational outcomes, but their social outcomes as well (a finding consistent with the 2007 ERO survey). Although official reports are silent on this, there are serious questions about the longer-term social implications of a core of disadvantaged children with few attachments to their peers or neighbourhoods. Further, where poor educational outcomes are compounded by ill health, future economic and social costs may be significant for the child and wider society. In short, transience can be yet another factor denying children equality of opportunity.

The key question arising from children’s transience is whether it is a problem for the education sector alone, or a wider problem that needs to be dealt with through other sectors, specifically housing and the labour market.

The ERO appears to take the view that it is schools’ duty to reduce the impact of transience through the provision of pastoral services such as social workers, and to attempt to keep families from moving (Education Review Office, 1997). However, if families are moving for work reasons or to find cheaper accommodation, then there is little schools can do, especially if the travel costs involved in keeping a child at a particular school are a drain on family finances. Despite their often valiant efforts at making schools safe and secure spaces, it may not always be possible for schools to mitigate the disadvantage in some children’s lives.

If families are shifting frequently because of work, this raises questions about the sort of work families have, for example how well-paid they are, and whether work is permanent or temporary. The requirements of recent welfare reforms have placed strict requirements on people to look for work

and take work opportunities that arise, even if work is only temporary or seasonal. In 2012 one third of workers were non-standard workers, in that they were either self-employed, temporary employees, or part-time workers. One in 10 employees were in temporary work, with about half of these workers saying they would prefer an ongoing or permanent job (Statistics New Zealand, 2014, p. 5). The impact of precarious, short-term unemployment on children and families must be considered, as in the example given earlier of the couple shifting between Auckland and Hawke's Bay to pick fruit.

Another key issue affecting transience rates is housing. The high cost of housing, especially in Auckland has been a burden on low-income families for many years. Overcrowding is one facet of this, and transience is another. Transience is less an education issue than the outcome of a shortfall in affordable housing and lack of security for renters.

In 2008, CPAG noted that the private sector was not building houses for low-income families (Wynd & Johnson, 2008). While central and local government have made some moves to provide affordable housing, for example through Special Housing Areas,¹² the response has been well short of what is required. Housing affordability has continued to decline, with recent restrictions on first-home buyers creating a further barrier for low income families and leaving them reliant on rental housing.

The weekly rental on a 3-bedroom rental property in South Auckland averages about \$400, with houses on the Auckland isthmus costing considerably more.¹³ Renters have few rights with respect to their tenancies, and are vulnerable to rent rises, or being evicted with little notice. As home ownership rates decline (see Figure 1), the pool of mobile renters is likely to increase, with the attendant risk to children's education. It is likely that the "floating group" observed by schools is moving between rented accommodation, propelled by evictions, uncertain family circumstances and precarious employment. There is very little New Zealand research on the extent of residential mobility and what drives it, but for a significant group of children in low-decile schools, it affects them either directly or indirectly.

Schools are also affected. Frequently moving house is associated with behavioural problems that the school and teachers have to deal with, and learning difficulties that, in an age of national standards, impact on schools' national standards' pass rates. Indeed, ERO reports regularly cite schools as commenting that if they could measure national standards pass rates among their stable student populations the results would be different to those which include their transient student population.

The churn of families moving in and out, whether because of financial stress or changing family circumstances also impacts on neighbourhoods, which in turn impacts on the wellbeing of children. Chaotic neighbourhoods with low levels of social cohesion may result in children skipping school if they feel unsafe at school, or on the journey to and from school. That such neighbourhoods often have few public services only adds to the disadvantage and sense of unease for children in low-income households (Nicotera, 2008).

12 See <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/ratesbuildingproperty/housingsupply/Pages/specialhousingareas.aspx>.

13 Data from <http://www.crockers.co.nz/market-research/latest-market-research.aspx>.

7. Conclusion

The results of CPAG's small survey suggest that transience among children in low-decile schools is a significant issue for both the children and the schools themselves. There is mounting evidence, both formal and anecdotal, that transience adds to existing disadvantage to impair children's education outcomes, and that this may be compounded if children live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a high turnover of residents. In Auckland, where disadvantage is concentrated in South and parts of West Auckland, the resulting high levels of school roll turnover identified here should be of considerable concern for policymakers in the education and other sectors.

High rates of school roll turnover, and the high rates of residential mobility they imply, have a marked social gradient, with decile 1 schools having markedly higher turnover rates than high decile schools. Low rates of home ownership for Māori and Pacific people also mean transience disproportionately affects Māori and Pacific children: the decile 1 schools that responded to the survey have between 84-100% Māori/Pacific students.

The data also suggest that high transience rates are associated with private rentals, although this may change as Housing New Zealand tenancies come up for review. Indeed, it is likely that shifting long-term, stable residents out of Housing New Zealand properties will increase the churn of residents within those neighbourhoods with the attendant adverse impact on children.

The key policy question is whether transience is something that the education sector can deal with on its own. Given that transience is often associated with other problems, this seems implausible, especially if those problems are associated with uncertain employment and lack of secure residential tenure. Arguably, the issue is one of housing and, perhaps to a lesser extent, employment, specifically the lack of secure, affordable housing in urban and some rural areas. This requires a policy response in the housing sector, and one in which central and/or local government will have to play a more active role. Transience impacts on families, children and neighbourhoods. The solution must be a political one: broad-based commitment is needed to ensure families have stable, affordable accommodation, and that economic growth provides steady, well-paid jobs.

These problems go well beyond the scope of the education sector. Schools can only mitigate the worst effects of children living in households suffering multiple disadvantages. Government efforts to improve education outcomes by focusing on teacher quality and test results fail to place children's education in the context of children's broader economic and social needs.

In light of the significant differences in roll turnover rates between decile 1 and 2 schools and high-decile schools, greater efforts need to be made to understand transience among primary school children. While this survey gives an outline of the extent of transience in Auckland schools, more work is needed to learn the extent of children's residential mobility, and what it means for their educational, social and health outcomes.

Apart from comments hidden in ERO reports and occasional media reports, the issue is largely unacknowledged and unexplored. This must change if we are to truly give all children the opportunity to achieve the best from their education.

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Appendix 1

Comments on transience in ERO reports showing date of report and school decile

	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
1	Ruapotaka School (Panmure)	Contributing	Not stated	The school's previously high student transience rate has settled somewhat over the past two years.	18/09/2013
2	Panama Road School (Otahuhu North)	Contributing	Not stated	Many of the students live in rental housing and there is a high level of transience in the school population. Two thirds of students are from the Pacific, the largest group being Tongan. Twenty-four percent of students are Māori. Many of the students begin as new entrants with no or very little early childhood education.	17/05/2013
3	Kaingaroa School (Kaitaia)	Full primary	Not stated	Transience levels are high. Each year, for the last two years, approximately 25% of the students have been new enrolments.	9/08/2013
4	Hikurangi School	Full primary	Not stated	One of the challenges facing the school is responding to the high levels of transience of the many students who move from school to school.	26/06/2013
5	Musselburgh School (Dunedin)	Contributing	Not stated	The board trustees, principal and senior leaders have identified the many factors impacting on students' achievement, including transience and students with special learning needs.	30/04/2013
6	Glenbrae Primary (Glen Innes)	Contributing	Not stated	The board could consider setting targets to improve attendance levels, and working with parents and families to help reduce the current high rate of transience within the school's community.	26/10/2012
7	Findlayson Park School (Manurewa)	Contributing	1	High student transience also makes data analysis difficult.	11/07/2012
8	Oranga School (Penrose)	Contributing	3	Although Tongan students still comprise thirty-three percent of the school population, New Zealand European/Pākehā numbers have increased to twenty-one percent and fewer Māori students now attend. The school's community sometimes experiences high levels of transience.	27/04/2012

	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
9	Orautoha School (Raetihi)	Full primary	6	Transience and absenteeism make it difficult for teachers to track student achievement patterns and to formulate targets. However, collated assessment information indicates that students who attend regularly do make progress and in some cases, accelerated progress. [NB School roll 12]	14/03/2012
10	Henderson South School	Contributing	2	The school has a growing roll with a significant rate of transience. Many students speak English as an additional language...	7/11/2011
	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
11	Manurewa West School	Contributing	2	High levels of student transience and non-attendance, however, continue to impact on student learning and achievement.	27/10/2011
12	Dawson School (East Tamaki)	Contributing	1	Transience continues to have a considerable impact on achievement levels. Many students arrive at school achieving well below expectations for their age...	26/09/2011
13	West Harbour School	Full primary	3	School leaders note the impact that the school's high rates of transience have on achievement data. Monitoring the progress of students who have had most of their education at West Harbour School may present a different achievement profile.	10/10/2011
14	Totara Grove School (Whangarei)	Contributing	2	The school is now analysing data to see the effect high levels of transience and significant numbers of students with special needs are having on overall student achievement.	10/10/2011
15	Takanini School	Full primary	1	School data over the last five years show that rates of student transience are reducing, but movement of students in and out of the school continues to be a factor that teachers consider in their work to improve student achievement.	24/08/2011
16	Mangakahia Area School (Northland)	Composite	3	Many students move into and out of the school during the year. This transience interrupts students' learning and can hinder their academic progress.	8/09/2011

	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
17	Wanganui East School	Contributing	2	Transience continues to have a considerable influence on low achievement levels. Many students arrive at school achieving below expectation for age...	3/08/2011
18	Royal Road School (Massey)	Full primary	2	The school has high levels of transience and staff cater for this by providing effective programmes. Many children start school with little formal early childhood education and have English as an additional language.	1/07/2011
19	Tikipunga Primary School (Whangarei)	Contributing	2	Senior leaders closely monitor and report on student progress, including the impact of high levels of student transience.	3/02/2011
20	East Gore School	Contributing	3	Transience is a barrier to learning for a significant group of students...	26/08/2010
21	Sunset Primary School (Rotorua)	Contributing	1	Management and staff have identified many challenges in raising levels of student achievement including behavioural needs and high levels of transience of students.	30/06/2010
22	Manaia View School (Whangarei)	Full primary	1	...the high level of student transience complicates data analyses and impedes the capacity of data to provide useful information about student progress over time. Senior managers are now considering tracking progress over time for students who have only attended Manaia View School.	23/02/2010
23	Don Buck School (Massey/Ranui)	Full primary	3	By successfully sustaining a positive school tone despite the high transience of the roll...	2/12/2009
	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
24	Avalon School (Porirua)	Contributing	2	There is a high level of transience with some students attending the school for short periods.	1/12/2009
25	Homai School (Manurewa)	Contributing	2	The high transience rate amongst Pacific and other students makes it imperative that teachers quickly and effectively assess student's learning levels when they arrive so that continuity to students' learning is not compromised.	7/10/2009

	School (and location)	Type	Decile	Comment contained in ERO report	Date of report
26	Onepoto School (Northcote)	Contributing	1	Despite a continuing high rate of transience, students soon settle into the school...	17/06/2009
27	New Lynn School	Contributing	4	There are high levels of transience in the student population, and most students, when they begin their schooling at New Lynn, are not achieving at nationally expected levels.	17/09/2009
28	Awapuni School (Palmerston North)	Contributing	2	A high rate of transience in the local community leads to frequent changes of school for many students.	27/02/2009
29	Leabank School (Manurewa)	Contributing	2	Students who remain at the school for the duration of their primary education generally achieve well in relation to national standards. The school's data shows that students affected by transience and poor attendance achieve less well than their peers.	5/03/2009
30	Colwill School (Massey)	Full primary	4	Achievement information in mathematics shows variability across year level groups and is influenced by a considerable transience and ESOL factor, as new students arrive and others leave the school.	18/02/2009
31	Sutton Park Primary (Mangere)	Full primary	1	The principal and staff are aware that an increasing number of children do not receive their entire primary school education at the school. This transience makes it difficult to track students' progress in learning and impacts negatively on overall school-wide achievement levels.	15/09/2008
32	Prospect School (Glen Eden)	Contributing	3	Senior managers have identified that the high rate of student transience is a challenge to the effective tracking and monitoring of student progress and achievement.	10/09/2008
33	Otahuhu School	Contributing	1	Senior managers are concerned about some areas of student achievement. They are aware of the need to work collaboratively with parents and local schools to develop strategies to help reduce the effect of transience on student learning and achievement.	7/05/2008

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