

# The Family Stability Initiative



## The Issue

One of the most detrimental factors affecting a student's ability to succeed in the classroom happens outside the school walls. Student mobility is an issue facing school-age children and youth who often move from school to school because of family financial instability. High student mobility has negative effects on both the academic achievement and social-emotional development of children.

Student mobility is often affected by the most basic of human needs – stable housing. Low income families often face considerable obstacles which prevent them from finding and remaining in stable housing. Residential mobility occurs when low-income households struggle to pay rent or mortgage payments or keep current on utility bills. The federal government considers the cost of housing to be manageable when it does not exceed 30 percent of household income. In the Kansas City Metropolitan area, housing costs exceed this level for a quarter of homeowners and for nearly half (47 percent) of renters. Families who find themselves no longer able to meet their housing expenses often must move to less expensive housing, find families or friends to stay with, or seek shelter in homeless facilities. This often results in the need for a child to switch schools – sometimes more than once in the same school year. A recent analysis of 2014-15 student mobility data by research at the University of Kansas found that 6,000 students in the Kansas City metro switched schools two or more times. Multiple moves have many negative consequences for a child's emotional wellbeing, academic performance, and health. In addition, high rates of residential mobility negatively impact an entire school. Student performance is worse in schools with high mobility rates.

## The Opportunity

Financial instability leads to frequent moves and puts many low-income families at continual risk of homelessness. Increased residential stability would allow students to remain in the same school, giving them the best chance of academic success. This is why United Way of Greater Kansas City partners with a national initiative called the Family Stability Initiative. United Way supported this idea because it employs strategies that address the connection between family income and educational outcomes for youth. It also places a focus on adult education and helping low-income heads of households improve their readiness for work through education and life skills.

## Why it matters

Research has consistently shown that student mobility, defined as "making a school enrollment change at a time not required by the grade structure of the school system," has devastating negative effects on school attendance and academic performance, including decreased math and reading test scores, and leaves kids at an increased risk for behavioral issues and dropping out of school. Given the challenge of maneuvering through multiple moves and the changes associated with them, it is not surprising that mobile students academic performance suffers.

Research has found that these highly mobile students may be as much as six months behind their peers in academic performance, and children who moved three or more times had significantly higher dropout rates than children who had a more stable school experience.

The Kansas City Area Education Research Consortium recently presented local student mobility data. They examined all public school students in Clay, Jackson, and Platte counties. In 2015, a total of 36,799 students transferred schools. Of these, 6,350 changed schools two or more times. This means that more than 1 in 5 students (22.7 percent) switched schools at some point during the school year. Mobile students also had a 4.5 percent lower attendance rate compared to students who did not move, and were less likely to be proficient in Math and English than were their peers.

Mobile students may face a wide variety of adjustment issues with each move, including new teachers and classmates, being at a different place in curriculum of a given subject, and new textbooks and school culture.

# The Family Stability Initiative

The Family Stability Initiative is a two-generation approach, seeking to stabilize families and prevent homelessness and help students remain in their home school. United Way provides funding for dedicated case management and targeted emergency assistance that helps families in crisis maintain or secure stable housing and implement an ongoing plan to achieve their financial and educational goals.

## The Approach

The Siemer Institute for Family Stability is a proven model of case management that targets the families of school-age children. The institute was founded by Al and Barbara Siemer of Columbus, Ohio. The Siemers are long-time supporters of United Way and chose to partner exclusively with local United Ways in their efforts to replicate the program model in communities throughout the country.

The goal of The Siemer Institute for Family Stability is to support families so their children can remain in the same school, giving them the best chance of academic success. The program targets neighborhoods and schools with high student mobility rates. It creates long-lasting change by addressing and resolving the issues that push families to the brink of homelessness. The program's success is based on intervention, prevention and education. Full-time case managers work intensively with families for a year or longer. The intensity, frequency and duration of assistance are based on the specific needs of each family. In addition to case management, the program offers financial assistance of up to several thousand dollars to help stabilize families' housing and to assist in covering costs associated with work or education goals. In the past year, the Family Stability Initiative served 147 families in Kansas City.

### Families receive individual attention and guidance from a case manager who provides:

- » Assistance in negotiations with landlords and other entities to help families remain in their homes
- » Help in locating resources for health care, after-school programs and programs for children with special needs
- » Job training, budgeting assistance, and connection to resources to prevent future crises
- » Short-term financial support for rent, transportation, job training and utility bills
- » Connection to other community resources that help the family achieve its goals

Locally, families served over the past year have achieved the following results:

- » 98 percent avoided a disruptive move that negatively affected their children's education
- » 74 percent attained or maintained a permanent residence
- » 72 percent set and achieved at least one additional financial goal
- » 35 percent developed and maintained a monthly budget
- » 54 percent saw an increase in income
- » 4 enrolled in post-secondary education

## Focus on Results

Data from communities where this model has been implemented over the past decade have shown that the program is highly successful in preventing homelessness through:

- » Improved housing stability
- » Increased life-skills capabilities, such as budgeting
- » Increased school stability for children
- » Greater capacity to avoid future crises

## Our Partners

United Way is currently partnering with two Missouri school districts: Kansas City and Independence, and there are plans to expand to more districts. Our partner districts have identified specific schools with high rates of student mobility from which referrals are made to the program. United Way contracts with Metro Lutheran Ministry and Community Services League to employ a full-time case manager whose time is spent working exclusively with families from designated schools.

