Promoting effective physical education in today’s schools requires a mindset that takes into account societal trends. As a defining characteristic of American society since its inception, residential mobility has been touted as a means by which families can increase life opportunities in pursuit of the American Dream. Once seen as a means for pursuing happiness and fulfilling an inalienable right, residential mobility is now largely considered a means of survival in response to the changing economic landscape in the past few decades.

By Brian Culp
The rise in residential mobility among families has created a pervasive issue in American schools that impacts the academic, social, and physical achievements of youth. This article aims to outline the profiles of two unique populations impacted by residential mobility and provide recommendations for how we can help to meet their needs through physical education. For the purposes of this article, the term “mobile” will describe those persons impacted by residential mobility.

Mobility and Youth

Two types of youth from mobile families have received particular attention lately — namely, students from migrant families and those from military families. Research on migrant youth indicates that they are primarily from low-income families who live in high-poverty areas (Jaramillo & Nuñez, 2009). Additionally, they are at risk for poor health, are educationally disadvantaged and academically challenged, and face social isolation, in large part due to cultural and language barriers (Portes & Rivas, 2011). California, Florida, and Texas have the largest concentration of migrant students in the United States (Scherrer, 2013). Many youth also work with their families in addition to balancing the demands of school. The mobility of migrant youth across states and, in some cases, across national boundaries makes it difficult to keep accurate records on yearly school attendance.

Youth from military families have not received as much attention as migrants, but their experiences are no less important. The Department of Defense (DOD, 2010) reports that there are currently more than two million children of military parents living in the United States. These youth make an average of six to nine school changes between kindergarten and high school graduation. When experiencing a deployment, military children ages three to six years old were found to exhibit behaviors of stress including physical complaints and fears of separation (Phelps, Dunham, & Lyons, 2010).

In its research on military youth, the DOD (2010) found that older children who began to understand the realities of their parents’ absence exhibited fear, irritability, and aggression. Further, teenagers were found to be rebellious and at a greater risk for using drugs and engaging in early-age sexual behavior. Along with the emotional distress that often accompanies a parent being absent for a long period of time, issues of engagement, disengagement, and reengagement with parents who have been deployed are apparent. Similar to migrant youth in mobile families, military youth have been found to score lower on achievement test scores across all academic subjects compared with students in the general population (DOD, 2010).

A Challenge or an Opportunity?

An opportunity exists for physical educators to help improve the quality of life for mobile student groups. Unfortunately, the imperative to change is slow. For better or worse, we live in a society burdened with an increasingly ineffective Congress that we must continue to lobby. In the meantime, there are things that we can do to aid mobile students through physical education, regardless of how long they are in our programs.

What We Can Do

Although we cannot control issues that result from mobility, we can make an attempt to understand the challenges students face and plan accordingly. To this end, it may be appropriate to provide directed interventions for transient students who exhibit frustration and stress (Jaramillo & Nuñez, 2009). These interventions should give students a sense of belonging, constant encouragement, and a means by which to contribute to the culture of the school. The following are some specific strategies for use by physical educators.

Physical education taught in a positive and nurturing learning environment benefits all youth but has particular benefits for mobile youth.

Learn about transient migrant and military youth in schools

One finding reported by Richardson et al. (2011) pointed to the critical need for school districts to improve the flow of information to staff and educators related to mobile students. Unless we have extensive experience with mobile students, most of us know little about aspects of their lives, such as dealing with community prejudices and the timing of parental military deployments. Until this is discussed routinely, physical educators should be proactive and find pertinent information through websites such as http://www.osymigrant.org and http://www.operationmilitarykids.org.

Create positive environments

Physical education taught in a positive and nurturing learning environment benefits all youth but has particular benefits for mobile youth. Mobile youth who are “outsiders” to the established routines need to feel “a sense of belonging” to combat feelings of emotional stress. Along with support services provided by schools, we can actively engage community volunteers in out-of-school physical education programs that are bilingual or affiliated with local military organizations. Part of maintaining a positive environment means understanding our limitations. If problems do occur, we need to be mindful of professionals trained to work with child and adolescent behavioral or health issues who can improve our understanding of the specific needs of these youth.
**Submissions Welcome!**

Readers are encouraged to send “Advocacy in Action” submissions to column editor K. Andrew R. Richards at advocacy@shapeamerica.org.

The purpose of the Strategies column “Advocacy in Action” is to provide tangible, real world examples of grassroots and national-level advocacy activities taking place in the fields of physical education, health education and physical activity. Submissions should be 1,000–1,300 words, or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages.

### Contextualize instruction

As physical educators, we should actively try to make connections and facilitate cooperative activities to help mobile students transition into physical education, along with differentiating instruction, working to meet learning style preferences, and understanding language dominance (Gomez & Ybanez, 2012). What is equally important is the use of cultural negotiation, a means of communication and instruction that is progressive, equitable, and inclusive. Cultural negotiation takes into account contextual situations, previous content learned, and background experiences of the youth with whom we will be working (Culp, 2013).

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to highlight the challenges faced by youth from migrant and military backgrounds who are impacted by residential mobility. There is no easy fix for the economic trends that impact students. However, schools are a representation of society and a provider of social spaces where students interact constantly. Thus, our physical education programs can provide a nurturing environment that provides some measure of stability. For this reason, it is important that we develop and involve mobile students in high-quality, effective programs so that if they must leave, they can do so with a positive image of physical education and physical activity that will last a lifetime. We can further advocate for mobile youth by supporting school policies that identify their needs and include physical activity as an important focal area.

### References


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