

# Children of Migrant Workers: Supporting the Invisible Student



## INTRODUCTION

Federal statistics estimate approximately 3 million migratory and seasonal agricultural workers reside in the U.S., many with school-age children living a migratory lifestyle (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2018). Children from migrant families face numerous economic, social, and physical challenges impacting their health and education.

The information within this brief is tailored to school leaders, educators, policymakers, and community-based organizations. Foundational definitions and explanations of relevant laws are provided. Unique challenges related to physical health, social-emotional development, and academic achievement are then outlined, and for which school-linked and community-based services may help ensure the well-being of children from migrant families. Additionally, practical recommendations are offered and federal/national resources are listed to help schools identify and advance the success of children from migrant families.

## MIGRANT WORKERS

A migrant farmworker is defined as an individual who is required to be absent from a permanent place of residence for the purpose of seeking paid employment in agricultural work. "Migrant farmworkers" are also called "migratory agricultural workers" or "mobile workers." Seasonal farmworkers are individuals who are employed in temporary farm work but do not necessarily move from their permanent residence to seek farmwork; they may also have other sources of employment.

There are an estimated 3 million hired farmworkers in the US, including migrant, seasonal, year-round, and guest program workers. The term "migrant farmworker" includes people working temporarily or seasonally in farm fields, orchards, canneries, plant nurseries, fish/seafood packing plants, and other locations. Guest workers who temporarily live in the US through the federal H-2A program to work on farms are also migrant farmworkers. Other examples in the US that utilize mobile workers include construction, meatpacking, poultry plants, landscaping, and disaster response demolition and clean-up (Migrant Clinician, n.d.).

## COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND CHILD LABOR LAWS

The compulsory education law is a legal rule dictating that children must attend school by a certain age and until they reach a specific age. All states have a compulsory education law but the age ranges differ by state with the typical requirement to start school by age 6 and to remain enrolled until the age of 16. This law was originally enacted to improve literacy rates and ensure that every child receives a basic education (Yeban, 2016).

In the United States, there exists a federal child labor law, but its details vary by state. Enforced through the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), this law ensures that work undertaken by youth is safe and does not jeopardize their health, well-being, or educational opportunities (Department of Labor, 2018). Federal prohibitions indicate that children under 18 years cannot operate or clean power-driven machinery or vehicles, nor can they work in mines, quarries, or with excavation (Department of Labor, n.d.). Although child labor laws for migrant youth vary by state, generally, children aged 12 and older can work



outside of school hours in non-hazardous activities with parental consent.

The minimum age for agricultural employment is typically 12, and those under 12 can work on small farms with parental consent. At 14, children can work any non-hazardous job on a farm, and at 16, there are no work restrictions. Federal regulations lack hourly limits, and some agricultural operations are exempt from federal minimum wage requirements. As a result, state laws may align with federal standards, but some impose stricter regulations around child labor, including maximum hours and days per week for children under 16 years of age (Mikolajczyk, 2022).



## PHYSICAL HEALTH CONCERNS

The health and well-being of migrant children and families are impacted by a host of challenges stemming from their living and working conditions.

- **Migrant Students face unsafe work conditions and** are at risk of infectious diseases due to their living and working circumstances. These conditions often involve physically demanding work (e.g., livestock handling, packing and sorting goods) and elevate the chances of injuries and fatalities due to potential safety gaps (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). Additionally, migrant children may be exposed to pesticides and other dangerous chemicals. At times, children are forced to reuse pesticide-exposed clothing, increasing the likelihood they will suffer health issues such as respiratory problems and skin irritations, impacting their ability to learn. Finally, some work may be informal or clandestine, lacking oversight for proper safety measures.

- **Migrant workers face dangers from extreme heat** as they are frequently exposed to high temperatures without adequate access to water and shade, resulting in heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and dehydration.
- **The physically demanding nature of agricultural work** exposes migrant workers, including children, to the risk of musculoskeletal injuries due to tasks such as lifting heavy loads and repetitive motions, potentially resulting in chronic pain and disability.
- **Migrant children often lack a stable medical home,** leading to inconsistent healthcare and visits to multiple providers who contend with inaccurate medical data due to frequent relocations that cause loss or misplacement of medical records.
- **Limited access to healthcare among migrant children,** caused by financial barriers, absence of insurance, or geographic isolation, may lead to untreated illnesses, injuries, and chronic health conditions.
- **Limited access to nutritious foods among migrant families,** often relying on low-cost, high-calorie options, can result in poor eating habits associated with deficiencies in essential micronutrients. This can increase the risk of diseases such as anemia and rickets (Dondi et al., 2020).
- **Migrant children often lack access to adequate housing,** exposing them to environmental hazards such as mold or pests (e.g., rodents or cockroaches), which can trigger conditions such as asthma that are often associated with chronic absenteeism. Exposure to lead, for example in paint or in drinking water, is highly dangerous and can lead to a host of physical ailments as well as cognitive deficits and learning disabilities.

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## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CONCERNS

Migrant children encounter a range of interrelated social and emotional challenges while adapting to new environments, including cultural assimilation stress, discrimination, bullying, coping with cultural differences, and family separation due to work commitments.

- **Migrant students may face acculturation stress** while adjusting to new cultures, languages, environments, and social norms, causing confusion, frustration, anxiety, and a sense of not belonging. In addition, migrant children may lack support from extended family that they may have had in their home state or country.
- **Migrant children can experience discrimination, prejudice, and bullying** based on their ethnic background, accent, or migrant status, leading to feelings of shame, fear, isolation, and low self-esteem.
- **Migrant students with diverse cultural backgrounds can struggle with adjusting** to varying cultural expectations between home and school, impacting academic performance and socialization in the classroom.
- **Migrant students may endure homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety** due to extended family separations resulting from seasonal work opportunities.
- **Migrant youth often bear the responsibility of financially assisting** their families and caring for younger siblings due to the unaffordability of child care and the high cost of living.
- **Migrant youth from undocumented families** may live with a constant fear of deportation, depending on their circumstances.
- **Migrant youth face limited access to mental health care**, including services for developmental disabilities.

## ACADEMIC CONCERNS

As we delve into the academic landscape of migrant education, notable concerns emerge. The U.S. Department of Education does not monitor graduation rates for students in the Migrant Education Program. Therefore, it is unknown how many migrant students leave farm work behind to pursue higher-paying jobs. However, it is evident that children in the Migrant Education Program perform below the national average on state reading and mathematics assessments administered in the third through eighth grades. Approximately 28% of

migratory children score proficient, compared to 40% of other children from impoverished backgrounds (APM Reports, 2019).

Migrant children confront diverse academic challenges in new educational environments. Language barriers, cultural adjustments, and inconsistent access to quality education contribute to a complex set of hurdles that can impede their learning.



- **Many migrant families living in poverty face limited access to basic resources**, affecting their success in school. The lack of reliable internet and limited technology exacerbate educational disparities for migrant youth.
- **Intergenerational poverty may lead to lower literacy skills** in migrant families, hindering parents' ability to support children with schoolwork and understand school-specific expectations.
- **Non-English speaking students may struggle to communicate with teachers and peers**, impacting their understanding of instructions and hindering proficiency in English assignments. The inability of students or their parents to communicate may contribute to difficulties navigating the US school system and can foster general mistrust of the education system.
- **Missed school, disruptions in learning, and challenges** in catching up stem from frequent relocations, often driven by parents' work commitments. Additionally, summer work commitments further limit opportunities to address learning loss.



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## POSSIBLE SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

School and community leaders are encouraged to employ various strategies to effectively support migrant children and their families.

- **Learning gaps can be exacerbated for migrant students** due to the confusion and frustration resulting from varied curricula and graduation requirements between schools.
- **Access to educational resources is restricted for migrant families** in rural or remote areas, as they face challenges in reaching schools and libraries.
- **Continual movement hampers migrant children’s consistent access to resources** and support, limiting participation in extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities.

## BIASES & ASSUMPTIONS

Biases and assumptions about migrant families or children of migrant workers can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination, disregarding their diverse backgrounds, cultures, and unique circumstances. Furthermore, some educators or school staff may incorrectly assume that migrant workers do not prioritize their child’s education.

- **Although the majority of migrant workers in the US are from Latino/Hispanic countries**, that is not always the case. Assumptions about citizenship or immigrant status may wrongly limit them to a specific nationality or racial group, overlooking their varied experiences.
- **School staff may also incorrectly assume** that migratory families speaking Indigenous languages also speak Spanish based on their country of origin, which is not always accurate.
- **Faulty assumptions can be made** that only rural schools enroll children of seasonal agricultural workers. However, migrant children are also present in schools in urban districts.

- **Provide academic support**, such as tutoring or technology resources (iPads/laptops), tailored to the specific needs of migrant students.
- **Conduct comprehensive needs assessments** to identify academic, social, and emotional needs. Technology such as the **Migrant Student Information Exchange (MSIX)** allows States to share educational and health information about migratory children who travel from state to state and who, as a result, have student records in multiple state information systems.
- **Conduct ongoing English language proficiency assessments** throughout the year, especially for mid- or end-year arrivals, and modify texts and materials to enhance comprehension for students with limited English proficiency, utilizing simplified vocabulary or visual aids.
- **Incorporate the experiences and contributions of migrant workers/students** into the curriculum to boost self-esteem and foster understanding among peers.
- **Connect students and families to community resources**, including health clinics, mental health support, and migrant advocacy organizations, to address academic and non-academic needs tied to social determinants of health and education.
- **Provide group therapy sessions to address socio-emotional challenges**, offering a supportive environment for sharing feelings and experiences. By providing therapeutic support groups, schools create a safe space that fosters emotional well-being and resilience among migrant students by connecting them with peers facing similar circumstances.

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- **Foster inclusion and cultural awareness** by encouraging collaboration among all students and celebrating diverse cultures through multicultural events at school.
- **Welcome and involve migrant parents** by easing their anxieties through informational sessions, communication, encouraging them to be part of school events or activities, and educating them about their vital role in their child's learning.
- **Adhere to federal Civil Rights law**, ensuring that all school employees are aware of the legal mandate for public schools to be open and accessible to all students, irrespective of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, color, national origin, immigration status, or disability.
- **Share information about advocacy groups** and other services that may support students and their families, including organizations like the [League of United Latin American Citizens \(LULAC\)](#), [Immigration Advocacy Network](#), and [Farmworker Justice](#).

4. [The MEP Consortium Incentive Grant \(CIG\)](#) encourages innovative approaches to enhance education and support services for migrant children and youth. It fosters collaboration among state migrant education programs and partners to improve outcomes, serving as a valuable resource for schools to enhance support systems and ensure academic success for migrant students.

## NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

1. [National Center for Farmworker Health \(NCFH\)](#) provides health care services and resources for migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families.
2. [Migrant Legal Action Program \(MLAP\)](#) offers legal services and advocacy for migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families.
3. [National Association of State Directors of Migrant Education \(NASDME\)](#) supports migrant children and youth with educational services and advocacy, representing state-level leaders in migrant education.
4. [Justice for Migrant Women](#) educates lawmakers about issues hindering migrant women's potential, raising awareness of workplace threats, wage theft, and dangerous working conditions.
5. [Student Action for Farmworkers](#) based in Johnston County, North Carolina, is an organization that fosters collaboration between students and farmworkers, facilitating mutual learning, resource sharing, and efforts to improve farmworker conditions.
6. [The National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association \(MSHS\)](#) is dedicated to supporting the unique needs of migrant and seasonal farmworker children. Through nationwide partnerships, MSHS offers a secure alternative in seasonal agriculture, prioritizing family well-being. Additionally, the organization oversees the [National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Programs \(MSHS\)](#).

## RESOURCES

### FEDERAL PROGRAMS

The [U.S. Department of Education's Office of Migrant Education \(OME\)](#) oversees four grant programs dedicated to supporting migrant students.

1. [The Migrant Education Program \(MEP\)](#) addresses unique educational challenges for children in agricultural migrant families, aiming to support their academic success and career goals.
2. [The High School Equivalency Program \(HEP\)](#) provides educational and support services to eligible migrant and seasonal farmworkers, helping them obtain a high school equivalency credential for improved postsecondary education or workforce opportunities.
3. [The College Assistance Migrant Program \(CAMP\)](#) offers financial and academic aid to migrant and seasonal farmworker students in their first year of college, promoting academic achievement and facilitating career prospects and economic mobility.

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) supports child wellness, positive development, and school success by promoting collaborative partnerships that bridge health and education to create supportive environments for success. A nonpartisan organization with a strong national reputation in technical assistance, professional development, applying and translating research, and program evaluation, CHHCS uses a public health lens to apply its expertise in children's health and education to build and sustain equitable conditions for children to thrive. [healthinschools.gwu.edu](http://healthinschools.gwu.edu)



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