

# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM 40 ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION TO ADDRESS THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

More than 101,000 New York City students were identified as homeless over the course of the 2020-2021 school year. Approximately 28,000 of these students spent time in City shelters, while more than 65,000 were “doubled-up,” staying temporarily with others in overcrowded housing.<sup>1</sup> Even before the pandemic, students experiencing homelessness — 85% of whom are Black or Hispanic<sup>2</sup> — faced tremendous obstacles to success in school. For example, in 2019, only 29% of students experiencing homelessness in grades 3-8 were reading proficiently, 20 percentage points lower than the rate for their permanently housed peers, and only 61% of students who were homeless graduated high school in four years, 18 percentage points lower than students who are permanently housed.<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 has further magnified the educational challenges faced by students who are homeless.

**No child in New York City should be homeless.** While the next Administration works to tackle the homelessness crisis, it must also focus immediate attention and resources on the education of students who are homeless. We recommend that the next Administration:

## Launch a bold interagency initiative led by City Hall to tackle educational barriers for students who are homeless.

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*Interagency coordination and leadership are sorely needed to improve the education of students who are homeless. The agencies at the table should include the Department of Education (DOE), the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the Human Resources Administration (HRA) (which oversees domestic violence shelters), the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) (which oversees Runaway and Homeless Youth shelters, as well as certain after-school and summer programs), and the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS).*

City Hall should seek input from stakeholders to help identify barriers and inform solutions and should consult with other city agencies as needed. City Hall should set ambitious goals and oversee the implementation of plans to:

- **IMPROVE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE:** Even prior to the pandemic, more than half of students in shelter were chronically absent, missing at least one out of 10 school days. And during the pandemic, students in shelter had strikingly low attendance, significantly lower than any other group of students.<sup>4</sup> The City should develop and implement a plan to use strengths-based, data-driven interventions that work to improve the attendance of students who are homeless, drawing from successful initiatives such

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<sup>1</sup> See Advocates for Children of New York, *Student Homelessness in New York City*, Nov. 2021, available at <https://advocatesforchildren.org/node/1875>, based on data obtained from the New York State Education Department. Includes students enrolled in New York City Department of Education schools and New York City charter schools.

<sup>2</sup> Data obtained from the New York City Department of Education pursuant to a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request.

<sup>3</sup> See New York State Education Department, *Grades 3-8 Assessment Database (2018-19)* and *Graduation Rate Database (2018-19)*, available at <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>.

<sup>4</sup> See Advocates for Children of New York, *Disconnected: The Pandemic’s Toll on Attendance for Students in Shelter*, Oct. 2021, available at <https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/node/1857>.

as the [Attendance Matters pilot](#) in shelters and approaches being used in community schools. To implement its plan, the City must invest in qualified shelter-based staff (see recommendation below to hire DOE Community Coordinators).

- **INCREASE SHELTER PLACEMENTS CLOSER TO WHERE CHILDREN ATTEND SCHOOL:** The City places more than 40% of families in a shelter in a different borough from their child's school.<sup>5</sup> This practice leads to long commutes, unnecessary school transfers, school absences, and barriers to participation in after-school and sports activities. To address this problem, the City should 1) develop a plan to increase the percentage of children placed in shelters in the same community school district as their youngest child's school in situations where domestic violence or intimate partner violence does not prevent the family from remaining in their community of origin<sup>6</sup> and 2) implement a process where families who are not initially offered a shelter placement close to their children's schools are proactively offered the opportunity to voluntarily transfer shelters closer to their children's school provided there is an appropriate unit available.
  
- **REVAMP CITY, SHELTER, AND SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY PROTOCOLS AND POLICIES TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN:** The average length of stay in shelter spans two school years. As the various agencies that work with families who are homeless make policy decisions, it is imperative that they consider the impact such decisions may have on the education of children who are homeless, lessen any harmful effects, and promote policies that simultaneously help families quickly move into permanent housing and support the educational success of children in shelter. For example, if the City opens more shelters, it should account for the space needed for educational and recreational activities for the children living there, the educational support and staffing needed to help children succeed in school, and coordination with the local schools. The City should also revisit policies that have a harmful impact on children. For example, the lengthy and burdensome shelter eligibility process that can take weeks to complete often results in children missing school and experiencing added instability and trauma. Finally, the City should provide supports for DHS and shelter providers to focus on the educational success of students. For example, the City should provide training and resources to shelter providers who empower Client Care Coordinators to coordinate efforts to improve school attendance and should publicly acknowledge and celebrate those providers whose residents see an improvement in attendance.
  
- **BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:** During the pandemic, many students in shelter could not access remote learning because their shelters did not have Wi-Fi or sufficient cellular reception for the iPads provided by the DOE to work. Even after the pandemic ends, students and families who are homeless will continue to need high-speed Wi-Fi and devices to participate in a range of educational activities from completing DOE school applications to accessing school records to completing research reports. While the City finally installed Wi-Fi in family shelters, the City will need to maintain connectivity and ensure it is sufficient for students to participate in online learning, ensure students have working devices, and bridge the digital divide for students who are homeless. As part of these efforts, DHS's model budget for shelters should be updated to include the cost of Wi-Fi as a utility, and shelter design guidelines should be updated to promote the wiring of any new facilities for Wi-Fi.

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<sup>5</sup> See NYC Mayor's Office of Operations, *Fiscal Year 2021 Mayor's Management Report – Homeless Services*, page 273, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/mmr2021/dhs.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Domestic violence is one of the leading causes driving families to seek shelter. Some families can safely remain in their community of origin; for others, DHS arranges for shelter placements in different communities, including in shelters in a different borough. However, far too many families are placed in shelters outside their borough even where there is no safety concern.

- **IMPROVE ACCESS TO ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:** The City should ensure that students who are homeless can access the academic and social-emotional support offered by the DOE and other city agencies and identify and address gaps in services. For example, as the DOE develops plans to use federal COVID-19 relief funding for supplemental programming, the City must prioritize students who are homeless; ensure full access, including addressing issues such as transportation to any programming that takes place outside the regular school day or during the summer; and conduct targeted outreach and engagement to ensure students who are homeless can participate. The City should also provide robust, supplemental programming in shelters that have space to provide such services and conduct targeted outreach to families to promote participation. In addition, the City's interagency collaboration should include providing increased support to help families living in shelter with the 3-K through high school application processes and setting aside seats at each school for students who need a new school when they enter or change shelter placements so they are not relegated to schools that did not fill up at the start of the year.
  
- **INCREASE ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND SERVICES:** Children who are homeless are disproportionately likely to miss out on early childhood education and services. The City should work to increase enrollment among children who are homeless in early childhood education programs, including 3-K, Pre-K, EarlyLearn, Head Start, and preschool special education programs. The City should also ensure that children in shelter receive developmental screenings and that infants and toddlers suspected of having developmental delays or disabilities are referred to the Early Intervention program, as required by law, and are evaluated timely and receive needed support. The City should relaunch and expand the interagency work it has been doing to increase Pre-K enrollment among children living in shelters, including early childhood education enrollment drives at shelter sites.
  
- **IMPROVE ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES:** Students who are homeless often experience barriers to getting timely special education evaluations and services. Thirty percent (30%) of students in shelter have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) entitling them to special education services (significantly higher than the 21% of permanently housed students who have IEPs).<sup>7</sup> But [research](#) shows that NYC students who are homeless receive IEPs later than permanently housed students, missing out on services during the early years when they could be most beneficial. The City should develop protocols to address barriers and ensure prompt evaluations and delivery of services so that children with disabilities don't fall further behind. Unstable housing and moving from one shelter placement to another must not be an excuse for delay. School-based and shelter-based staff must have the training and information needed to ensure children who are homeless get the evaluations and services they need promptly and expeditiously.
  
- **IMPROVE LANGUAGE ACCESS FOR FAMILIES AND SUPPORTS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS:** The barriers to participating in their children's education are magnified for families experiencing homelessness whose primary language is a language other than English. The City should ensure that families who are homeless receive school-related documents and information in their primary language and have access to translation and interpretation. The City should also ensure that English Language Learners who are homeless get the language instruction and support they have the right to receive and that school-based and shelter-based staff have the training and information needed to assist.

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<sup>7</sup> Data obtained from the New York City Department of Education pursuant to a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request.

- **EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS TO PARTICIPATE IN AFTER-SCHOOL AND SUMMER PROGRAMS:** While after-school programs can provide students with opportunities for social interactions with peers and provide parents with a safe place for their children to be while they are working, looking for work, or looking for housing, students who are homeless often face barriers to participating in after-school and summer programs. For example, many students who are homeless attend schools far from where they live, but bus service is available only at the end of the school day – not following after-school programs. In addition, students who switch schools mid-year may find that the after-school program at their new school or near their new temporary housing is already fully subscribed. The City should take steps to address these barriers so more students who are homeless can participate in school-based or community-based after-school and summer programs and to expand on-site after-school and summer programming at shelters.
- **PREVENT HOMELESSNESS OR SHELTER ENTRY:** Given the importance of reducing homelessness in the first place, City agencies should work together on a plan to help schools identify families at risk of homelessness or shelter entry and connect them with services and support. This work should include replicating any successful practices coming out of the recent pilot to share aggregated school attendance data with Homebase homeless prevention services providers to better target prevention strategies and exploring how this work could be expanded and strengthened.
- **IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND OUTCOMES:** A key goal of the interagency initiative should be to measure and improve educational outcomes for students who are homeless by addressing the issues mentioned above as well as other key areas.

## Ensure every shelter has staff qualified and equipped to support students' educational needs starting by hiring 150 shelter-based DOE Community Coordinators.

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*While shelters help parents transition to permanent housing, helping the children residing there to get a high-quality education must also be a core part of their mission. Families and youth living in shelter need support with a wide range of school-related issues, but there are not enough shelter-based staff who have the time, skills, and expertise to effectively provide this assistance.*

Currently there are 117 DOE Family Assistants assigned to help families in shelter, a number that has not grown over the past decade even though the number of school-aged children in shelter has increased by **thousands of students**, and Family Assistants must divide their time between multiple shelter sites. The Family Assistant title is a very low-paying position (\$28,000 for 10 months), making it hard to recruit and retain staff who have the skills needed to help families navigate NYC's complex school system. Furthermore, since Family Assistants do not work over the summer, there is very limited support to help families in shelter get school placements and busing arranged for the start of the school year.

To ensure students in shelter can access a high-quality education that can, over time, reduce family homelessness, the DOE should hire additional staff to work on the ground in shelters and better compensate them to help build a corps of DOE shelter-based staff with the skills to effectively connect students with school and other educational supports. These staff members should proactively assist families with getting school placements, bus service, or special education services in place as quickly as possible when they enter shelter and for the start of each school year; work to ensure that students in their assigned shelter are attending school each day and help address barriers when students are not getting to school; and help to connect students to after-school programs, tutoring, counseling, or other support.

While the DOE took the positive step of hiring 200 staff members to work in schools with high numbers of students who are homeless to provide them with counseling and advocacy, three out of four students in shelter attend a school that does not have such a staff member. Furthermore, since students have the right to stay in their original schools when placed in shelter, students residing at any given shelter often attend many different schools. Thus, it is important to make sure that each shelter has staff working on site who can focus on coordinating with families and schools to support the educational needs of the students residing there. NYC should overhaul the education support system in shelters to help students access a high-quality education starting with hiring 150 shelter-based Students in Temporary Housing Community Coordinators.

## Maintain and build upon recent initiatives.

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While there is much more work to do, key gains made to support students who are homeless should be continued. These initiatives include:

- **Revamping and elevating the DOE's Students in Temporary Housing office** under the DOE Deputy Chancellor of School Climate and Wellness, including approving 6 additional Students in Temporary Housing Regional Managers for a total of 18;
- **Hiring 100 school-based "Bridging the Gap" social workers** and **100 school-based Students in Temporary Housing Community Coordinators** who focus on assisting students who are homeless;
- **Hiring shelter-based Client Care Coordinators**—social workers who, while not focused on education, have helped support children and families in shelters;
- **Guaranteeing yellow bus service** for K-6th grade students in shelter who need it to stay in their original schools;
- Launching **after-school reading clubs** at certain shelters;
- **Initiating an interagency work group** focused on increasing access to pre-K for children in shelters and providing pre-K offers to age-eligible children living in shelters whether or not they applied; and
- Ensuring all school-based staff charged with supporting students in temporary housing receive **training on outreach, identification and support** for students who are homeless.

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Advocates for Children of New York  
Alliance for Quality Education  
Barrier Free Living  
Bronx Impact at Children's Aid  
BronxWorks  
CAMBA  
Center for Urban Community Services  
Children's Aid  
Children's Defense Fund-NY  
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families (CACF)  
Coalition for the Homeless  
Committee for Hispanic Children and Families  
Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative, NYU Metro Center  
Educators for Excellence - New York  
El Puente  
Enterprise Community Partners  
Gateway Housing  
Goddard Riverside

Good Shepherd Services  
HERE to HERE  
Hispanic Federation  
Homeless Services United  
NAACP New York State Conference  
New Destiny Housing Corporation  
New Alternatives for Children, Inc.  
New York Immigration Coalition  
NY Lawyers for the Public Interest, Inc.  
NYC Coalition for Educational Justice  
Partnership with Children  
Providence House, Inc.

Safe Horizon  
Sanctuary for Families  
Sheltering Arms Children and Family Services  
South Bronx Rising Together  
The Education Trust–New York  
The Legal Aid Society  
The Opportunity Network  
The Partnership for the Homeless  
United Neighborhood Houses  
Volunteers of America - Greater New York  
Women In Need (Win)  
Zone 126