



Advocates for Children
of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL ACCESS AND SUCCESS FOR RISING NUMBERS OF STUDENTS IN TEMPORARY HOUSING

INTRODUCTION

In 2016-2017, 104,088 students in New York City schools were identified as homeless.¹ If these students made up their own school district, it would be one of the thirty largest districts in the nation, with twice the number of students as the entire Boston public school system.²

In New York City, students in temporary housing have worse educational outcomes than their permanently housed peers across a number of measures. Outcomes are particularly bleak for students living in New York City shelters—38,000 students during the 2016-2017 school year.³

For example, during the 2015-2016 school year:

- » 53% of NYC students living in shelters were absent on 20 or more school days—missing the equivalent of *one month* of school.⁴
- » Only 15% of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently in reading.⁵
- » Only 12% of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently in math.⁶
- » 10% of middle and high school students living in shelters were suspended from school.⁷

¹ New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, “Data on Homelessness in New York State,” <http://nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html#data>.

² See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Table 215.30 (2016), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_215.30.asp.

³ See New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, 2016-17 Data, http://nysteachs.org/media/SED_SIRS2016_17x.xlsx.

⁴ Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, “On the Map: The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2017” (Aug. 2017) (hereinafter ICPH On the Map), page 32, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section2_HousingInstabilityUnderminesSchoolStability.pdf.

⁵ ICPH On the Map, page 61, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section4_EducationalAchievementofHomeless-Students.pdf.

⁶ *Id.* at 69.

⁷ ICPH On the Map, page 77, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section5_BehavioralChallengesandDisciplineofHomelessStudents.pdf

These outcomes can be better understood in the context of the many barriers to school success that children in shelter face. Homelessness can create a chaotic living environment where students are exposed to high levels of stress. In addition to the trauma of housing loss, children may have been exposed to other traumatic experiences, such as domestic violence, which is now the primary driver of homelessness in New York City. Homelessness uproots children from their systems of support and care, which may include relatives, friends, teachers, service providers, medical providers, and mental health providers. Families who are homeless must balance competing priorities including juggling multiple social services appointments and the search for permanent housing. These stressors exacerbate the challenges that children living in poverty already face.

While school can serve as a key source of stability for students, the City places most families in shelters far outside their neighborhoods. Last year, only 50% of families were placed in the same borough, let alone school district, where their youngest child had been attending school prior to the family entering shelter.⁸ As a result, families must decide between long commutes to school and transferring schools. When students transfer schools, they have to adjust to unfamiliar peers and teachers, new schedules and routines, different curriculums and teaching styles, and varying school environments, in addition to adjusting to a new living situation. The chronic stress or trauma that many students experiencing homelessness face must be addressed in order for them to thrive academically and socially.

Two years ago, Mayor de Blasio included \$10.3 million in the Fiscal Year 2017 budget for Department of Education (DOE) support for students living in shelters. Last year, only a few months after the programs had first gotten off the ground, the Mayor omitted the \$10.3 million from his Fiscal Year 2018 Preliminary Budget, but restored the funding in his Executive Budget. Among other services, the funding is currently supporting 43 “Bridging the Gap” social workers to work with students living in shelters at schools with high numbers of these students, after-school literacy programs at shelters, and enrollment assistance for families living in shelters. The Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget once again omitted Bridging the Gap and the other programming targeted for students living in shelters.

The Bridging the Gap initiative has made a difference for students living in shelters. The social workers have provided counseling to students, connected them to academic support and mental health services, and worked to combat chronic absenteeism. As one school administrator noted: “To support families, [the Bridging the Gap social worker] does whatever is necessary to get the job done! She collaborates with families, school staff, outside caseworkers, doctors, counselors, shelter school liaisons, attendance personnel - you name it! When a family [who is homeless] comes to the school, she meets with them, truly listens to their story, and does her best to empower them with resources.”

Over the past five years, the number of students in temporary housing in NYC schools has increased by 50 percent.⁹ During this time period, the only increase in DOE staffing targeted to serving this population was the addition of the 43 Bridging the Gap social workers.

⁸ “New York City Preliminary Fiscal 2018 Mayor's Management Report – Homeless Services,” page 169, *available at* <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2018/dhs.pdf>.

⁹ See New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, “Data on Homelessness in New York State,” <http://nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html#data>.

Therefore, we were dismayed that, once again, Mayor de Blasio omitted the \$10.3 million from his Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget and did not include any other new supports for students in temporary housing. During his budget briefing, when a reporter asked him about this omission in light of the record levels of homelessness, the Mayor responded that he would include funding to support students who are homeless in his Executive Budget in the spring, but that the City was still determining “what services we will give, where, how, when, [and] how much it will cost.”¹⁰

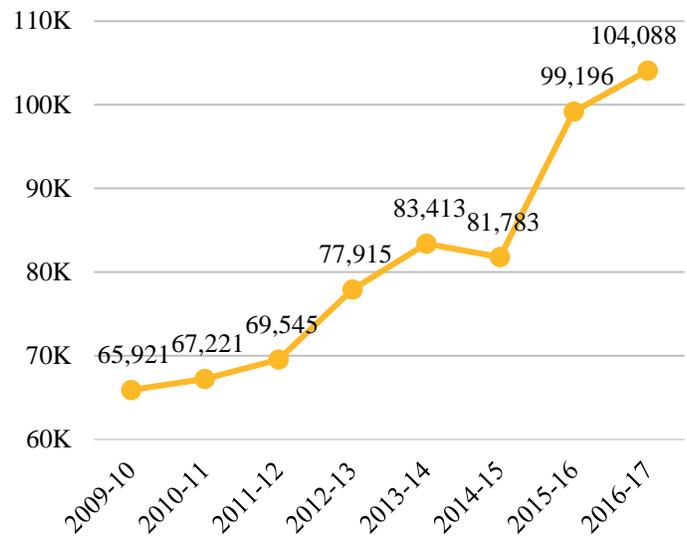
The growing number of students who are homeless is a crisis that demands significant attention and resources. High-level leadership and appropriate staffing are critical to driving and managing system-wide changes to improve attendance and educational outcomes for the growing number of students in temporary housing.

As the Mayor determines the support for students who are homeless he will include in the Executive Budget, we offer the following recommendations. In addition to continuing the current support for students living in shelters by restoring and baselining the \$10.3 million for Bridging the Gap and the related initiatives, the City should:

- 1. Establish a DOE Deputy Chancellor’s Office for Highly Mobile Students.**
- 2. Hire DOE Field Support Center Directors for Highly Mobile Students.**
- 3. Expand the DOE Bridging the Gap social worker program from 43 to 100 social workers at schools.**
- 4. Hire 50 DOE social workers to provide intensive supports at shelters to address education-related issues.**

We estimate that these initiatives would cost a total of \$30.3 million—the restoration of the \$10.3 million plus an additional \$20 million in new funding.

Students in Temporary Housing in NYC Public Schools (Excluding Charter Schools) 2009-10 through 2016-17



Data Source: New York State Education Department’s Student Information Repository System (<http://nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html>)

¹⁰ See Mayor de Blasio Presents Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMrDoHErBd4> (Feb. 1, 2018) at 1:29:10.

RECOMMENDATIONS

High-Level Leadership and Targeted Staffing

While the City has taken some positive steps, more work must be done to address gaps in service and spearhead a comprehensive initiative to improve school access and school success for students who are homeless. The City must continue the \$10.3 million investment to fund supports for students living in shelters, including 43 Bridging the Gap social workers and one supervising social worker, after-school literacy programs at shelters, and enrollment assistance at shelters. However, merely continuing this investment is not sufficient to address the growing and tremendous need to support the thousands of students who are homeless. As the City considers how to address the needs of students who are homeless, we offer the following recommendations.

1. Establish a DOE Deputy Chancellor's Office for Highly Mobile Students.

Currently, the DOE's Students in Temporary Housing Program is buried under the vast and varied portfolio of the Deputy Chancellor for Operations. This arrangement makes it unlikely that students in temporary housing will get the attention or support they need. Given the size of the population of students in temporary housing and the tremendous need for support, the DOE should appoint a Deputy Chancellor for Highly Mobile Students. The Deputy Chancellor would be responsible for the education of students in temporary housing, as well as students in foster care. With respect to students in temporary housing, the responsibilities should include:

- » Developing a strategic plan to better serve students in temporary housing and improve educational outcomes.
- » Coordinating with the Department of Social Services and other agencies outside the DOE, such as the Department of Youth and Community Development and the Administration for Children's Services, to better support students in temporary housing.
- » Coordinating with the various divisions within the DOE to support students in temporary housing.
- » Working across agencies and DOE divisions to develop and implement policies and plans to better serve students in temporary housing including:
 - Increasing attendance using a targeted, data-driven, strengths-based approach.
 - Creating a menu of academic interventions and social-emotional support accessible to students in temporary housing and a plan for identifying students in need of additional support and connecting them with these resources.
 - Streamlining transportation to ensure students can get to school as quickly as possible when they become homeless or change temporary housing locations.
 - Strengthening access to timely special education evaluations and services and support for English Language Learners.
 - Strengthening access to gifted and talented programs, specialized programs, and high-performing schools.
 - Increasing participation in after-school and summer programs.
 - Increasing participation in early childhood education programs.
 - Strengthening access to post-secondary options, including college and career opportunities.

- » Evaluating programs for students in temporary housing and setting and measuring key metrics including attendance, school stability/school transfers, reading and math proficiency, grade retention, graduation rates, suspensions, rate of completion of the special education evaluation process, receipt of mandated special education services, early childhood education participation, and college enrollment.
- » Overseeing the DOE’s Students in Temporary Housing program, including DOE staff focused on serving students in temporary housing at Field Support Centers, schools, and shelters.

The Deputy Chancellor’s office should be sufficiently staffed to ensure capacity for these responsibilities and, at a minimum, should include dedicated staff for policy, data analysis, and program development and evaluation.

2. Hire Field Support Center Directors for Highly Mobile Students.

DOE Field Support Centers (FSCs) are responsible for supporting schools by providing strategic and policy guidance and professional development. While each DOE Field Support Center has a Director for Special Education and a Director for English Language Learners, as well as a team of staff members focused on special education and a team of staff members focused on English Language Learners, the Field Support Centers currently have no staff focused on students in temporary housing or students in foster care. Given the particular laws and policies that apply to these students and the barriers they face, each Field Support Center should have a Director for Highly Mobile Students and a team of professionals focused on these students, including social work supervisors to supervise the school-based and shelter-based social workers. With respect to students in temporary housing, the responsibilities of the Field Support Center staff should include:

- » Supporting schools in serving students in temporary housing.
- » Supervising the school-based and shelter-based DOE social workers.
- » Developing and delivering professional development for DOE social workers and other DOE staff.
- » Communicating policies and procedures related to students in temporary housing to their schools.
- » Resolving cases where students in temporary housing have experienced barriers related to enrollment, transportation, and full participation in school.
- » Tracking data related to students in temporary housing and using such data to ensure that school-based and shelter-based staff better target services and to help enhance the effectiveness of those services.

3. Expand the DOE Bridging the Gap school-based social worker program from 43 to 100 social workers at schools.

The City should strengthen and expand the “Bridging the Gap” program, which places social workers at schools with high populations of students living in shelters. The City has taken an important step by funding 43 social workers to work with students living in shelters at schools with high numbers of these students. These social workers have provided much-needed counseling to students living in

shelters; have connected students with academic support, mental health services, and other resources; and have helped combat chronic absenteeism.

However, the Mayor’s Fiscal Year 2019 Preliminary Budget did not include funding for these social workers, putting the continuation of the program in jeopardy. Furthermore, more than 150 schools serve a population in which 10 percent or more of the students live in shelter, and most of these schools do not yet have a Bridging the Gap social worker.

The City should provide long-term funding for at least 100 Bridging the Gap social workers to serve these schools and at least five Bridging the Gap social worker supervisors. The DOE should set clear expectations for these social workers and provide professional development and high-quality supervision. These social workers should:

- » Track the school’s students living in shelters and identify students who need additional support.
- » Use strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches to address the needs of students and their families to combat chronic absenteeism and improve student performance.
- » Provide counseling to students who need this support.
- » Connect students with supports such as academic intervention services and mental health services.
- » Help students and families navigate the school system, including school enrollment, attendance, transportation, school applications, special education services, school suspensions, after-school and summer programs, and early childhood education.

“Since I’ve been working with the Bridging the Gap social worker at [an elementary school] in the Bronx, I have seen a great improvement in the students’ attendance.”

...

“[The Bridging the Gap social worker] has reached out to both students and their parents in temporary housing to provide a greater sense of security and belonging at our school. She is currently working with the attendance committee, guidance counselors, and teachers to bridge the gaps of communication and offer solutions to improve the quality of life for these families.”

...

“The Bridging the Gap program has had a tremendous impact on our students. We are able to track student data more efficiently with the goal of having all students both physically and mentally present for learning. Our social worker has helped to increase parental involvement and improve the resilience of the students by ensuring that they have what they need to be successful.”

4. Hire 50 DOE social workers to provide intensive supports at shelters to address education-related issues.

In addition to placing social workers in schools with high concentrations of students living in shelters, it is important to have qualified, trained professionals on the ground at the City’s shelters who can address barriers to school access and school success. Many children will attend schools that do not have a Bridging the Gap social worker, and social workers based at shelters can work more closely with parents. Currently, there are approximately 117 DOE Family Assistants who work in shelters and are primarily responsible for conducting intakes with families, giving basic information about education, and distributing MetroCards. The Family Assistants are not required to have a college degree or any formal training in social work or education. They are not a substitute for trained social workers who could provide the social-emotional support and advocacy that this

population needs. Furthermore, as the number of family shelters, cluster sites, and commercial hotels has grown, the number of Family Assistants has not kept pace, leaving many students and families in shelters without access to shelter-based DOE staff.

Given all of the challenges faced by students living in shelters, **the DOE should hire shelter-based social workers to provide intensive supports focused on children's education.** At a minimum, as Family Assistants leave their positions, the DOE should replace them with social workers and, as new shelters open, the DOE should hire social workers instead of Family Assistants to work there. Using a strengths-based, family-centered, trauma-informed approach, these social workers should help students and families address barriers to education and navigate the school system, including enrollment, attendance, transportation, school applications, special education services, school suspensions, after-school and summer programs, and early childhood education.

High-level leadership, including a DOE Deputy Chancellor and DOE Field Support Center Directors for Highly Mobile Students, and social workers at schools and shelters focused on students living in shelters would allow the DOE to tackle a number of barriers faced by students living in shelters. With this infrastructure in place, the City should:

1. Spearhead a coordinated attendance effort.

Given the rates of chronic absenteeism among students living in shelters, the Deputy Chancellor should spearhead a coordinated, interagency effort to increase attendance. The City should use a data-driven approach that tasks key staff with generating and disseminating regular attendance reports and tasks key staff at schools and shelters with monitoring the attendance of students living in shelters and supporting students and their families to improve school attendance. Schools and shelters should use a strengths-based approach that rewards success (e.g., ice cream parties for children with perfect attendance for the month) and borrows from other successful initiatives to improve attendance, such as those being used in community schools.

2. Integrate education information into the PATH intake process.

The Deputy Chancellor should work with the Department of Social Services to ensure that all families receive information about their options regarding education when they apply for shelter at PATH. When families enter shelter, they need information about their options to keep their children in their original school or transfer them to a school in their new neighborhood and information about transportation services. Furthermore, New York State law requires local social service districts to assist parents in choosing a school within two business days of shelter entry. Given the number of families who are being placed in hotels or other facilities with no DOE staff on site, it is imperative to incorporate this discussion into the PATH intake process. Recently, more than 100 families per day have applied for shelter at PATH. However, currently, only three DOE staff members work at PATH, and they are not there late at night or on weekends. Furthermore, no other PATH staff is tasked with sharing school selection and school transportation information with families. As a result, for most families, education is not addressed at PATH. Not knowing where their children can go to

school the next day or how to get there can be extremely stressful for families and can lead to a gap in school attendance, especially because it may take 3-5 weeks to get busing arranged.

This past year, the City enacted a law to require the Department of Homeless Services to provide informational materials at PATH to families regarding education starting in July 2018. The Deputy Chancellor's office should help prepare these resources and develop protocols for families who have questions or need additional assistance.

Furthermore, the Deputy Chancellor should develop a plan to better support families at PATH with respect to education. In addition to receiving printed materials, every family who participates in the shelter intake process at PATH should meet with a staff member trained in education who can share information about school selection options and transportation. The staff member should also help to identify, triage, and address cases in which there will be barriers to school attendance (e.g., a parent with a disability who will not be able to transport her young child to school before bus service begins).

3. Improve access to special education services.

Students who are homeless often experience barriers to getting timely special education evaluations and services. Research shows that students who are homeless receive Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) later than permanently housed students, missing out on services during the early years when they could be most beneficial. Furthermore, in the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, only 35 NYC children identified as homeless were receiving preschool special education services. The Deputy Chancellor should launch a plan and build upon initial efforts at the DOE to develop protocols to address these barriers.

4. Enhance efforts to increase access to early childhood education.

The City has made impressive efforts to increase pre-K enrollment among children living in shelters, using a data-driven, interagency, targeted approach. The City should build on these efforts to increase participation in early childhood education programs among children living in shelters by:

- » Continuing its efforts to increase enrollment in Pre-K for All since around 35 percent of four-year-old children living in shelters are not yet enrolled.
- » Replicating the City's successful pre-K outreach efforts to increase access to other high-quality early childhood education programs, such as 3-K, Head Start, and EarlyLearn for children younger than four years old. We are pleased that the City has started this work.
- » Changing the eligibility rules to make all children who are homeless eligible for child care. Currently, not all children who are in shelters are eligible for subsidized child care. As a result, they may be unable to participate in EarlyLearn or other early childhood education programs.
- » Ensuring that shelter-based social workers receive training in how to conduct developmental screenings of young children, the requirements to refer young infants and toddlers suspected of having developmental delays or disabilities to the Early Intervention program, the preschool special education process, and best practices for supporting families in applying to and enrolling their children in high-quality early childhood education programs.

5. Expand opportunities for school-age children who are homeless to participate in after-school and summer programs.

Despite the social and academic benefits participating in after-school and summer programs would have for children living in shelters where there may be no space for social interactions, as well as the benefits to working parents who would have a safe place for their children to be while they are at work, looking for work, and/or looking for housing, students in temporary housing face many barriers to participating in these programs. Children have priority for after-school programs where they attend school; children being bused cannot stay for the programming. In addition, if children enter the shelter mid-school year or during the summer months, many programs are already fully subscribed. Finally, children who are in the after-school programming have priority for the summer programs, so if these children cannot participate during the school year, they likely miss out during the summer too. The City should take steps to increase access to after-school programs for students who are homeless by:

- » Deliberately recruiting and enrolling children living in shelters, with a particular priority on enrolling children whose shelter placement is a commercial hotel.
- » Creating additional after-school and summer capacity to serve more children who are homeless.
- » Expanding on-site after-school and summer programming at shelters, including the newly constructed shelters.
- » Ensuring that younger children living in shelters have access to busing to take them back to their shelters when the after-school programming ends.

6. Continue to improve transportation.

The City should continue to improve transportation for students living in shelters. In January 2016, the City made a landmark improvement for students living in shelters when it began offering yellow bus service to kindergarten through sixth grade students, as well as seventh and eighth grade students with IEPs, living in shelters, removing a significant barrier to school stability for these students. This important policy should be codified through Chancellor's Regulations. In addition, the Deputy Chancellor should work with the City to explore ways of continuing to improve transportation for students living in shelters, including the following recommendations:

- » Provide busing for students in conditional shelter placements: When families go to PATH, they are first placed in conditional shelter placements while a shelter eligibility determination is pending. They often have to apply multiple times for shelter. Under the City's current policy, students living in shelters are not routed for yellow bus transportation until the family has been found eligible for shelter, which often takes 3-5 weeks. During this time, children are frequently absent from school. The City can minimize such absences by providing yellow bus service during these conditional shelter placements. When families are found eligible for shelter, they typically remain in the same shelter where they had already been placed conditionally. Therefore, there would be no need to re-route these students.
- » Ensure that there are clear written protocols for arranging busing for students in temporary housing that detail: 1) the process for arranging busing for students in Department of Homeless Services shelters, Domestic Violence shelters, and Housing Preservation and Development shelters; 2) the roles and expectations for school-based and shelter-based staff with regard to arranging busing; and 3) how to troubleshoot cases where busing is not promptly arranged. These

protocols should be discussed with the agencies overseeing the various shelter systems, and staff at the shelters should be trained on these protocols.

- » Provide busing for Pre-K/3-K students: The City should make yellow bus service available to 3-K and Pre-K for All students living in shelters to help ensure they can stay in their early childhood education programs when they enter or transfer shelters. At a minimum, the City should start by allowing 3-K and Pre-K for All students to take a yellow bus when there is an existing route from the shelter to the school.
- » Provide monthly MetroCards to parents: The City should provide monthly MetroCards, instead of weekly MetroCards, to parents accompanying their children in temporary housing to and from school so that families do not have to travel to DOE offices each week to get MetroCards.

7. Target expansion of community schools to schools with disproportionate numbers of students in shelters.

Given that community schools offer an array of services that can be particularly beneficial to students and families living in shelters, the DOE should target any expansion of community schools to schools with disproportionate populations of these students.

8. Place children in shelters in their communities.

The DOE, under the leadership of the proposed Deputy Chancellor, and the Department of Social Services should work collaboratively to:

- » Develop a plan to increase the percentage of children placed in shelters within their community school district of origin so that they can stay in their schools without long commutes.
- » Develop a plan to avoid placing children in hotels, which lack the support services children need, are not designed to accommodate children who stay for long periods of time, and often require students to endure long commutes to school.
- » Implement a transparent process where parents can request and receive shelter transfers to facilities closer to their children's schools, subject to availability of appropriate shelter placements, in situations where initial shelter placements in the community school district of origin are not possible. Such shelter transfers should be made available for families in conditional shelter placements as well as for families who have been found eligible for shelter.

CONCLUSION

As the budget process moves forward, we stand ready to work with the City to make these recommendations a reality. The 100,000 students in temporary housing in NYC schools are counting on Mayor de Blasio to announce a significant investment in his Fiscal Year 2019 Executive Budget to provide the high-level leadership and staffing needed to finally give these students the attention and resources they deserve.