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POLICY REPORT: HOMELESS STUDENTS

**Ensuring that Homeless Children
are Provided the Help and
Services They Need to be
Successful**

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Introduction

Too many of our school-age children experience the devastation of homelessness. One out of ten New York City school children in SY 2014-2015 experienced homelessness within the past five school years.ⁱ The effects of homelessness on students can be devastating. Students in precarious living situations suffer from lower grade level proficiency and lower social and emotional growth compared to their peers.

A recent analysis found that elementary students living in shelter had the highest rates of mid-year transfers to other schools and chronic absenteeism. According to the same analysis, 40 percent of these students transferred during the school year and over half missed 20 or more days of school. Living in shelter has a devastating and long-term effect on children and their families.

It is the goal of the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to place families in the same borough where their youngest child attends school; unfortunately, they are increasingly failing to do so. In 2011, the agency reported successfully placing 83 percent of families based on their youngest child's school. By 2015, that share had dropped to 53 percent. Parents who are committed to ensuring educational continuity for their children opt to stay in their zoned school despite being in a shelter in a different borough, causing travel time to be as much as two hours each way to the school. When families have to take their children long distances to school, many students tend to be absent or late.ⁱⁱ Though the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has attempted to put in place infrastructure to help support fragile families whose children have been traumatized by their displacement, many students in shelter struggle academically and have high absenteeism rates.

This report highlights some of the obstacles that stand in the way of providing a quality education to students in shelter (DHS shelters, hotels, cluster site housing). The report also offers common sense solutions to address obstacles and ensure that students, parents, teachers, and schools get the support they need to provide every child a good education.

Create a Coordinated and Accountable System to Track Chronic Absenteeism

The DOE considers a student chronically absent if the student has less than a 90 percent attendance record (missing more than 20 days, which is about 10 percent of the school year).ⁱⁱⁱ Chronic absenteeism can have a detrimental impact on educational success among children and youth. In New York City, three-quarters of students who are chronically absent in the sixth grade do not go on to graduate from high school.^{iv}

Recent reports have demonstrated high chronic absenteeism rates for students in shelters. The New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) found that over 65 percent of students in shelters were either chronically absent or severely chronically absent in SY 2013-2014.^v Another study from the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH) found that over half of elementary school students in shelters were chronically absent.^{vi} Severely chronic absenteeism (missing more than 40 days, or 20 percent of the school year) among homeless students varies by school district; the seven highest rates of chronic absenteeism among homeless students by district:

- Districts 8 (Hunts Point/Longwood) and 12 (East Tremont) in the Bronx
- District 5 (Central Harlem/Manhattanville) in Manhattan, and
- Districts 13 (Brooklyn Heights/Fort Greene), 16 (Bedford-Stuyvesant), 19 (East New York/Starrett City), and 23 (Brownsville) in Brooklyn.

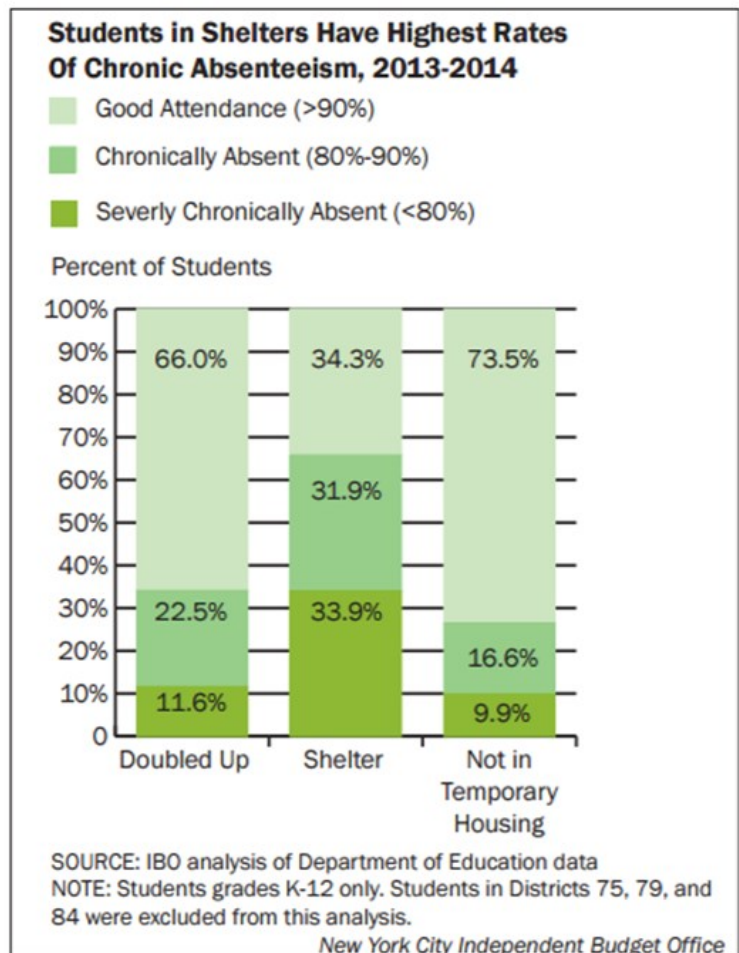
All had absentee rates greater than 43 percent. The school district with the lowest rate of chronic absenteeism among homeless students was District 20 (Bay Ridge/Dyker Heights/Borough Park) in Brooklyn (17.3%).^{vii}

DOE teachers take attendance every day, but most schools rely on average daily attendance (ADA) to gauge attendance rates of their students. Note that ADA focuses on the total student body, which can lead to schools mistakenly assuming that their students have good attendance.^{viii} This method of assessing attendance is misleading and can allow students to fall through the cracks. For example, a school with 400 students could have a 95 percent ADA, and also have 30 percent (or 120 students) of its

students be chronically absent.^{ix}

Reliance on ADA can also miss absenteeism for those children who transfer to multiple schools throughout the school year. For example, schools with ADA rates higher than 97 percent have little trouble with chronic absenteeism, while those with rates below 93 percent almost always have too many students missing too many days. At schools with 95 percent ADA, chronic absenteeism rates can vary dramatically.^x

Last year, the DOE's annual progress report recorded each school's chronic absenteeism rate. Weekly reports were also provided to schools by the DOE of students who had missed 20 school days or were close to doing so. While the DOE tracks the number of students who are chronically absent, it does not use this data to rate its schools. Individual schools set individual attendance goals; this information is not made public.^{xi}



The above IBO graph exhibits rates of chronic absenteeism

Presently, schools must contact families after every absence and document how and at what time they notified the families. When students miss ten days in a row, schools are mandated to contact the family to attempt to resolve the reasons for the absences. For students in eighth grade and under, such outreach is also required when the students miss 20 days within three months. Unfortunately, attendance accountability varies by school—some schools have a full-time attendance monitor, many do not.^{xii} Schools that do not have a dedicated attendance monitor assign other staff to track attendance, such as: classroom teachers, pupil accounting secretaries, school aides/family workers, and parent coordinators. Each school also determines the makeup of its attendance committee, the body responsible for analyzing data and case studies

to identify and resolve underlying reasons for lateness and absences that is supposed to meet regularly.

According to the same IBO report, the DOE and the DHS struggle to coordinate how to best serve students that live in shelters. While school attendance reports are compiled by staff at both City agencies, the data collection and analysis from both DOE and DHS lacks coordination, causing confusion and lack of accountability.^{xiii} The lack of accountability has hindered the development and implementation attendance improvement plans and reporters. Additionally, the IBO reported the two agencies “have separate and sometimes redundant procedures and data systems that can lead to duplicative intake processes, fragmented service provision, and inefficient use of staff time.”^{xiv}

Santiago P.

Santiago P. has been living in a shelter in a hotel in Sunset Park, Brooklyn for six months. Santiago P. reached out to the DOE hoping the agency would provide mental health services for his daughter. Unfortunately, no one from the DOE came to his hotel. Overwhelmed by the trauma of homelessness and seeing his daughter suffer, Santiago P. would lock himself in the bathroom and cry.

The lack of coordination between the DOE and DHS, and the lack of an integrated data system for students in schools, can make monitoring school attendance and addressing attendance problems much more difficult—and lead to our most at-risk children not receiving the supports they need. For example, some children in shelter are not provided MetroCards in time for their first day of school, thus leading to absenteeism from the start because homeless families do not have the funds to pay for transportation.

It should be noted that after the tragic death of Zymere Perkins, a joint memorandum was written by the New York City Administration of Children’s Services (ACS) and the DOE to address unexplained absenteeism that may signal child maltreatment, including educational neglect, other forms of neglect, and child abuse.^{xv} This new protocol, called the “Tiered Response,” will identify and respond to ACS high risk cases of unexplained absences.^{xvi} This new collaborative policy is an important step forward in protecting high risk children under ACS—unfortunately it does not address children who are homeless but are not in the ACS system.

Recommendations

1. The DOE should provide additional support and funding for schools with low ADA scores so that they can adequately meet the needs of absentee students.
2. The DOE should create a uniform absentee tracking system across its schools. This should include a template for all schools to use to track absenteeism that lays out the number of Attendance Committee meetings to be held regarding absenteeism. Schools should designate the same titled position (e.g., the pupil accounting secretaries) to be the attendance monitor for each school to ensure accountability. All schools should be given the support and professional development needed to successfully implement the system and understand the underlying factors that contribute to absenteeism.
3. School Attendance Committees should include a nurse and representative from the family shelter in the community.
4. The City should develop mechanisms, such as data sharing, to improve data systems in order to monitor and track chronic absenteeism across City agencies (DOE, DHS, and ACS) and schools so that homeless children who transfer to multiple schools are better tracked. The system should also identify trends from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade and allow for the identification of students who need individualized chronic absenteeism prevention plans.
5. The DHS should provide MetroCards to all homeless families with school-age children under the age of 13 at time of intake so that they can take their children to and from school.

Revise Fair Student Funding for High-Need Schools

New York City budgeted \$29.2 billion for its school system during SY 2016-2017.^{xvii} Funding one of the biggest school systems in the country is complicated and expensive. Children who are homeless are faced with poverty and trauma, and many students are in need of social and emotional support, food, health care, and additional academic support in order to succeed.

For every homeless child living in shelter, two children are living in some other temporary setting—doubled up with another family or on the street.^{xviii} For many children and their families, homelessness is the culmination of years of poverty and trauma. This cycle of poverty that leads to homelessness can re-traumatize a child and their family as well as their community.^{xix} It is for this reason that supplemental resources must be allocated to support our most in need students.

Homelessness—The Effects on Children

“Homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children. They suffer twice as many ear infections, have four times the rate of asthma, and have five times more diarrhea and stomach problems.

Homeless children go hungry twice as often as non-homeless children.

More than one-fifth of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems serious enough to require professional care, but less than one-third receive any treatment.

Homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children.

Homeless children have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the emotional and behavioral problems of non-homeless children.

Half of school-age homeless children experience anxiety, depression, or withdrawal compared to 18 percent of non-homeless children.

By the time homeless children are eight years old; one in three has a major mental disorder.”^{xx}

Provide Funding for Schools with More Homeless Students Who Enroll After the October 31st Deadline

Many schools with a large number of students who are homeless struggle with lack of resources. These schools have similar student profiles: chronic absenteeism among students who frequently change their housing status, trauma and mental health issues, and basic needs that are not being met such as students that are not properly fed, clothed, and physically healthy. Homeless students also enter school at various times of the year and suffer from trauma associated with losing their homes and starting a new school.

To help support these schools, the City offers social services for many of those schools, using Federal Title I money to help level the playing field between low-income students and other students. The DOE provides this supplemental funding to local school districts to help meet the needs of at-risk and low-income students.^{xxi} While this safety net is helpful, it does not address the issue of students enrolling in schools throughout the year. Presently, schools do not receive funding for new students enrolled after October 31st, which creates a financial burden on schools with a higher proportion of students who are homeless since they are serving these students but not receiving the funding support.^{xxii}

Homeless high school students face greater health risks than their housed peers. In a recent study by ICPH, approximately 40 percent of homeless high schoolers reported having bouts of depression, compared to 29 percent of non-homeless teenagers. Homeless students are also at a higher risk of attempting suicide than their peers: 20 percent of homeless high schoolers reported having suicidal thoughts or attempting suicide compared with 6 percent of housed students. The DOE budget is comprised of three components: fair student funding, categorical funds, and programmatic allocations.

Fair Student Funding (FSF) covers basic instructional needs and is allocated to each school based on the number of students and adjusted for the need-levels of students at the school. All money allocated through FSF can be used at the principal's



discretion. All schools receiving FSF, regardless of enrollment or type, receive a base line sum of \$225,000.

Categorical Funds are restricted by the State and Federal government on how they can be distributed to and used by schools. Examples include Contracts for Excellence (C4E), Title I, "Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended (ESEA), which provides financial assistance to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards."^{xxiii} Title III, The State Education Department annually collects the number of "immigrant children and youth," as defined by Section 3301 (6) of ESEA, present in New York State. The State Education Department uses this data to annually determine the each LEA's eligibility and allocation for the Title III, Part A Immigrant Education program, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Universal Pre-K, and Attendance Improvement & Dropout Prevention.^{xxiv}

Programmatic Allocations include City funds that are often restricted and can only be spent on certain services. These initiatives fall outside of Fair Student Funding because of their unique structure or priority, such as the parent coordinator initiative, and specified use funding such as mandated speech therapy for students with special needs.

The goal of FSF is to fund schools equitably to improve student achievement, providing resources so students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. FSF provides schools the flexibility needed by eliminating restrictions on how money can be spent, thus giving schools the ability to make the best choices for their students. FSF also provides financial incentives for schools to enroll struggling students, and rewards schools when they succeed in improving student results by not taking away the funds that would otherwise be reduced due to student improvement. FSF, the most flexible funding stream, can provide schools that have homeless students with the financial support they need.^{xxv} Schools in District 75 (which provide citywide educational, vocational, and behavior support programs for students on the autism spectrum, with significant cognitive delays, or are severely emotionally, challenged, sensory impaired and/or are multiply disabled) and programs in District 79 (for students under 21 years old who have experienced an interruption to their studies) are not funded via FSF.

In the SY 2016-2017, FSF was funded at approximately \$5.8 billion to cover basic academic needs. Funding is allocated to each school based on the grade level and



academic needs of students enrolled at that school. Principals have the discretion to use FSF funding as they see fit.^{xxvi}

In addition to FSF money, schools receive \$100 for each student living in shelter through Categorical Funds, Title I, Part A to help support the unique needs of these students.^{xxvii} This amount is too small and does not provide the necessary resources for students with complex needs and are most likely to be academically behind.

Presently, the DOE formula weighs certain populations more heavily. This translates into more FSF funding for schools that enroll children who need academic intervention, schools with high numbers of English language learners, and Special Education and Portfolio schools (Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Transfer schools). Additional funding could also be provided through Contracts for Excellence (C4E).^{xxiii} C4E funds are discretionary and can provide schools that enroll homeless students the additional resources needed to support their many needs.^{xxix} However, the funding formula does not weigh homeless students more heavily than other students.

Recommendations

1. The DOE should create an additional category in the FSF formula to provide added weight for children who are homeless. This would give high-need schools additional resources that are necessary to support homeless students.
2. Too many children who are homeless attend schools in low-income areas where families are already struggling and living without a safety net. The City should ensure those students, their families, the communities they reside in, and their schools are properly supported. One way to achieve this is through better coordination and alignment with the DOE and other government agencies like ACS, Department of Youth and Community Development, and the Human Resources Administration. These agencies should provide and coordinate existing funds and services to contribute to and support robust community schools that provide services such as after-school funding and food banks to help students learn while living in a traumatic environment.
3. Provide schools that enroll homeless students after October 31st with per pupil funding.

Hire Additional DOE Content Specialists and Family Assistants

In 2015, the DOE Chancellor Carmen Fariña announced the opening of seven new Borough Field Support Centers (BFSCs). The new, geographically-based BFSCs provide integrated support to schools for areas of instruction; operations, including finance and human resource support; and student services, including health resources and counseling, support to English Language Learners, and support to students with disabilities. However, the needs of DOE students and families—especially those experiencing unstable housing situations—far exceed the resources and staff allocated to the seven BFSCs.

Content Specialists, who are based at the BFSCs, supervise and support 117 DOE shelter-based Family Assistants. The assistants conduct trainings for shelter and school employees and offer resources to provide services to homeless students, among other responsibilities. A 2016 report on student homelessness from the IBO found that distributing Content Specialists equally by borough has been a source of contention due to the uneven distribution of homeless families across the City.

The Bronx serves more families with students in temporary housing than any other borough, but has just two Content Specialists. Brooklyn is the most populous of the City's five boroughs with 2.6 million residents in 2015, 423 public schools, and 291,153 students.^{xxx} An ICPH report shows that School District 16 (Bedford-Stuyvesant and Northern Crown Heights) and School District 23 (Brownsville) both had a homeless student population of 15.2 percent in SY 2014-2015. More than 1,200 students in District 16 were homeless that year and 735 of those children lived in shelters. Currently, Brooklyn only has two BFSCs, one in North Brooklyn and one in South Brooklyn. However, the South Brooklyn office also covers Staten Island, (Staten Island does have its own BFSC) with only one content specialist assigned for both South Brooklyn and Staten Island to work where the need is the highest.

The DOE Family Assistants meet with families in shelter and provide support to families in the following areas:^{xxx}

- Explaining parental rights under the McKinney-Vento Act (a federal law that ensures immediate enrollment and educational stability for homeless children and youth).^{xxxii}
- Helping with the facilitation of school transportation (yellow bus or MetroCards).
- Ensuring that all health records and immunization documents are transferred from the previous school.
- Overseeing of school supplies if needed.

The 2016 IBO report found that the DOE was not adequately distributing Family Assistants to an increasing number of shelter facilities throughout the City. Family Assistants are poorly paid. The starting hourly wage is \$13.22, making it difficult to retain skilled workers. The job is demanding and many Family Assistants are asked to cover multiple shelters. In 2014, there were 173 shelters. Stretching the DOE's limited capacity even further, a single shelter facility may include multiple buildings and locations.^{xxxiii} With limited staff, the mandate for Family Assistants to reach all families is difficult. This is partic-

Yolanda S.

Yolanda's daughter uses a wheelchair. Yolanda has had two strokes and has a pacemaker. Though her daughter's school was only six blocks away, due to Yolanda's poor health, pushing her daughter's wheelchair was difficult. Due to the close proximity to school, bus service was not provided. The DOE never contacted the family or offered assistance.

ularly true for families placed in apartments in privately owned buildings, also known as cluster sites, and families placed in commercial hotels, because these sites have no central offices or dedicated staff as is the case with shelters.

Family Assistants may be assigned to multiple shelter sites, based on how many school-aged children are at each shelter. The number of families with children in specific shelters constantly changes so caseloads fluctuate constantly.^{xxxiv} With families constantly on the move, Family Assistants have a hard time building relationships with families and school staff.



This leaves many families without the resources and guidance needed to help address obstacles for their children to attend school.

At a City Council joint General Welfare Committee and Education Committee hearing in 2016, Giselle Routhier, Policy Director at the Coalition for the Homeless, testified that “We definitely need additional DOE staff at PATH. These additional staff members should provide families and could provide families with the information on school selections, school transportation options, and the right to students with special needs.”

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Recommendations

1. Hire additional Content Specialists in all the boroughs to sufficiently meet the need.
2. Maintain and increase funding to Station Attendance Specialists in shelters.
3. Hire more Family Assistants at a higher wage to ensure retention (presently the starting hourly wage is \$13.22) and to work with all children and their families, whether in shelter, hotels, or cluster site housing.
4. Create a five borough DOE and DHS reporting system for Family Assistants and Content Specialists to share information and strategize on problem solving systemic issues that face homeless families.

Provide Educational Continuity and Resources

For many children in shelter, school is a safe haven where they might eat the most nutritious meal of the day and interact with teachers and staff who become their extended family. But many students in shelter leave their schools abruptly without being able to say goodbye. This kind of impermanence is profound and has academic ramifications, especially for students that are already academically behind.

Too often when families relocate, schools have no recourse to follow up on their well-being. Schools are not given a new address or phone number and students are not officially discharged from the school roster. It was noted in the IBO study that principals, teachers, and students lack closure when students do not return to a school due to homelessness. Many teachers would like to contact the student and the new school to achieve education, social, and emotional continuity, but it was reported that DOE staff lack access to the DHS data system, CARES.^{xxxvi}

In February 2017, Mayor de Blasio announced that he would open about 90 new homeless shelters in the next five years—with the intention of eliminating the use of hotels and cluster site apartments as shelter for homeless families and individuals. Many of these new shelters will house homeless families with school-age children. While it has not been announced where all of these shelters will be placed, the City should ensure that it has plans to support the communities that the shelters are placed in and the shelter residents. With the influx of new, high-need students, services must follow to ensure academic success. For students in shelter, their needs are numerous and must be addressed regardless of what school they attend. While the Mayor announced (through the ThriveNYC initiative) \$10 million for FY18 to hire social workers at public schools with large homeless populations, this funding is for one year only and is not baselined. It is incumbent upon the DOE and the City to plan accordingly to support the teachers and principals in the schools where the new shelters will be opened.

Recommendations

1. Create a DOE and DHS student tracking system that works with the DHS CARES data system that can be accessible to teachers and their principals.
2. The DOE and DHS should plan with, and provide additional resources to, schools in communities that will receive the new family shelters.
3. The Instructional Footprint, an instructional translation of the information in the Blue Book, ("the Blue Book is the DOE's annual report on enrollment and capacity used to assess utilization for all buildings", and is meant to assist school managers and staff in efficient programming of space) should be used as a tool to ensure schools have enough space for incoming students without class size increasing.^{xxxvii}
4. The DOE Office of District Planning should work with local communities to assess the needs of incoming students to ensure that students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and English Language Learners (ELLs) are provided with their mandated services.
5. Schools in districts with high numbers of children who live in shelter should become community schools where they will receive increased supports including from non-profit partners.

Conclusion

Ensuring that the students affected by homelessness in our City are provided with the education and support needed to be successful are a shared goal of parents, teachers, schools, and City agencies. In order to do this effectively, the City must ensure that adequate funding exists to meet the higher needs and living situations of these students. This also requires better coordination among the City agencies, as well as data sharing and tracking. New York City needs to be moving forward on our commitment to these children, especially with the increasing rates of homelessness and the Mayor's new homeless shelter plan.

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