TIME TO BUILD A BETTER SHELTER-TO-SCHOOL BRIDGE:
A Retrospective on the Experiences of NYC Students and Families in Shelter during the Pandemic School Year

By Robyn Schwartz with additional reporting by Linda Bazerjian

When New York City school buildings closed in March 2020, no one anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic would persist and that September 2021 would mark the start of a third modified school year. Navigating remote and hybrid schooling over the last 18-plus months has been difficult for all families, but especially so for students experiencing homelessness in shelter, their parents, and the adults who care for them in school and out-of-school-time programs. Students in shelter demonstrated incredible resilience throughout this ordeal. They rose every morning and sat patiently in their rooms alongside their siblings and parents in order to learn or, when school buildings were reopened, traveled to class—sometimes over an hour each way. While the challenges of accessing adequate WiFi service, obtaining working tablets or laptops, and finding quiet spaces for studying in shelter have been well documented, less discussed are the coordination issues between schools and shelters that were present prior to the pandemic and that will continue without significant restructuring.

This article examines how shelter-based student communities fared during this period of upheaval. It highlights both successes and missed opportunities, noting ways that the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) can better collaborate with its shelter-based partners to meet students' needs in School Year 2021–2022 and beyond.

Background on Students Experiencing Homelessness in Shelter

Three percent (32,778) of the total New York City public school population experienced homelessness in shelter during School Year 2019–2020. Another 78,828 students met the federal educational definition of homelessness.[1] Students are identified as homeless according to criteria set by the United States Congress and implemented by the United States Department of Education.[2] A child or youth who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence

10% of all New York City public school (district and charter) students are homeless, with 29% of them living in shelter.

- Students experiencing homelessness (111,606)
- Students living in shelter (32,778)

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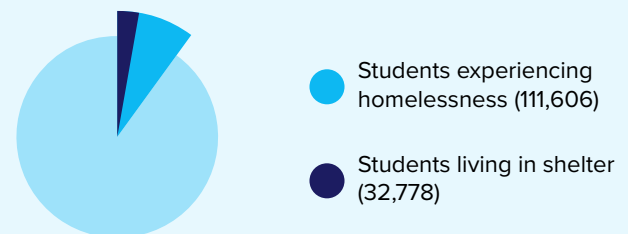
1   https://nysteachs.org/topic-resource/data-on-student-homelessness-nys/. Data for School Year 2020–2021 is not yet available and will likely come with many caveats due to the difficulties of identifying students experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.
2   https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/

and may be staying in an emergency shelter or transitional housing, at another person's home due to loss of housing or economic hardship, or sleeping in a place not regularly used for human accommodation, is considered to be experiencing homelessness. In School Year 2020-2021, nearly 42 percent (711 schools out of a total 1690) of NYC DOE-run schools had 11 percent or more of their student body living in some form of temporary housing. And nearly 7 percent of them had 11 percent or more of their student body living in shelter.[3]

The 32,000-plus students living in New York City shelters each year—over 11,000 students on any given evening[4]—exceed the entire public-school population of Buffalo, NY, the second-largest city in New York State.[5] The right to shelter[6] in New York City creates this district within a district, a distinction that the NYC DOE has long recognized by placing dedicated Students in Temporary Housing staff inside shelters to help track attendance, arrange for transportation to school, and liaise between shelter- and school-based staff. Yet even with these supports in place, the pandemic has exacerbated existing gaps on several fronts: Technological Proficiency, Shelter-School Coordination, and Family Engagement.

> 42 percent of NYC DOE-run schools have 11 percent or more of their student body living in some form of temporary housing. And nearly 7 percent of them have 11 percent or more of their student body living in shelter.

2019–2020 New York City Student Enrollment

Total Students Enrolled in New York City Public Schools	1,126,501[7]	100%
Total Students in Temporary Housing	111,606[8]	9.9%
Total Students in Shelter	32,778	2.9%
Total Students Doubled Up[9]	73,160	6.5%

Note that updated figures for overall New York City school enrollment have been released, but because New York State has not yet released SY2020–2021 data on students experiencing homelessness, NYC DOE figures from the last year that data was available (2019–2020) are used in this chart. NYC DOE is reporting a figure of 1,094,138 students enrolled (955,490 in district-run schools and 138,648 in charters), which constitutes an overall reduction of 32,363 students from SY2019–2020's enrollment—likely on account of students moving out of New York City or otherwise not enrolling—as well as a 19,646 increase in the number of students attending charter schools.

Clustered Schools for Sheltered Students

Before the onset of COVID-19, students living in homeless shelters scored lower than their housed peers on English Language Arts (ELA) and math tests, transferred schools more frequently, and were disproportionately held back.[10] Approximately one-third of students in shelter have been identified as having disabilities and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).[11] When the pandemic hit, the public became increasingly aware of the magnitude of family homelessness and how students experiencing homelessness are dependent on schools for many critical social services, such as meals, clean clothes, social–emotional supports (such as counseling), and physical security.[12]

Of the students living in shelter in School Year 2020-2021, 21 percent (5,433) were clustered in 111 schools in which 11 percent or more of the student body resided in shelter. Two of the schools are part of District 75—with one physically located in the Bronx and one in Brooklyn—and serve students with complex disabilities.[13]

In School Year 2020–2021, 11 schools had 20 percent or more of their student body living in shelter. These schools are located in 10 of New York City's 32 Community School Districts and include several neighborhoods with high rates of COVID-19. East New York in District 19 is perhaps the most notable among them: It holds the sad distinction of recording the city's highest COVID-19 death rate—1,282.42 deaths per 100,000 (zip code 11239).[14]

A Glimpse at One Shelter Provider's School Landscape

The citywide sheltered student population may be more clustered than that inside any one shelter. In March 2020, prior to the emergence of COVID-19, there were nearly as many schools represented in each shelter run by Homes for the Homeless (HFH) as there were students. At the Prospect Family Residence in the Longwood section of the Bronx—a residential neighborhood with a heavy concentration of social service agencies—there were 40 students enrolled in 32 schools, with only four students concentrated at the same school. Similarly, at the Williamsbridge Family Residence in a mixed-income, immigrant-dominated section of the East Bronx,

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3   ICPH tabulations based on figures in https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Education/2021-Students-In-Temporary-Housing/3wtp-43m9/data
4   https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dashboard/tables/FY21-DHS-Data-Dashboard-Data.pdf
5   https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2019&instid=800000052968
6   https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/shelter/shelter.page
7   https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance#:~:text=There%20are%201%2C866%20schools%20within,2019%2C%20including%20 260%20charter%20schools.
8   https://nysteachs.org/topic-resource/data-on-student-homelessness-nys/.
9   The remaining 5,668 students not tallied in the "Shelter" or "Doubled Up" rows were residing in private pay hotels/motels or living unsheltered in places not fit for human habitation
10 https://www.icphusa.org/reports/addressing-barriers-to-learning/#3-0-addressing-barriers-to-learning-early-identification-of-special-education-needs
11 https://www.icphusa.org/reports/addressing-barriers-to-learning/#3-0-addressing-barriers-to-learning-early-identification-of-special-education-needs
12 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/nyregion/nyc-schools-coronavirus.html
13 ICPH tabulations based on figures in https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Education/2021-Students-In-Temporary-Housing/3wtp-43m9/data
14 https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data-neighborhoods.page; https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/corona-virus/2021/03/10/starrett-city-grapples-with-losses-amid-covid-19-pandemic&source=gmail&ust=1642028859127000&usg=AOvVaw20FvTmZCvGiteEK-P5Mf0P6

School Year 2020–2021: Schools with Shelter Clusters

Note: Percentage of school's students residing in shelter

- ● 30.0% – 39.9%
- ● 20.0% – 29.9%
- ● 15.0% – 19.9%
- ● 10.0% – 14.9%

BRONX

MANHATTAN

QUEENS

BROOKLYN

S.I.
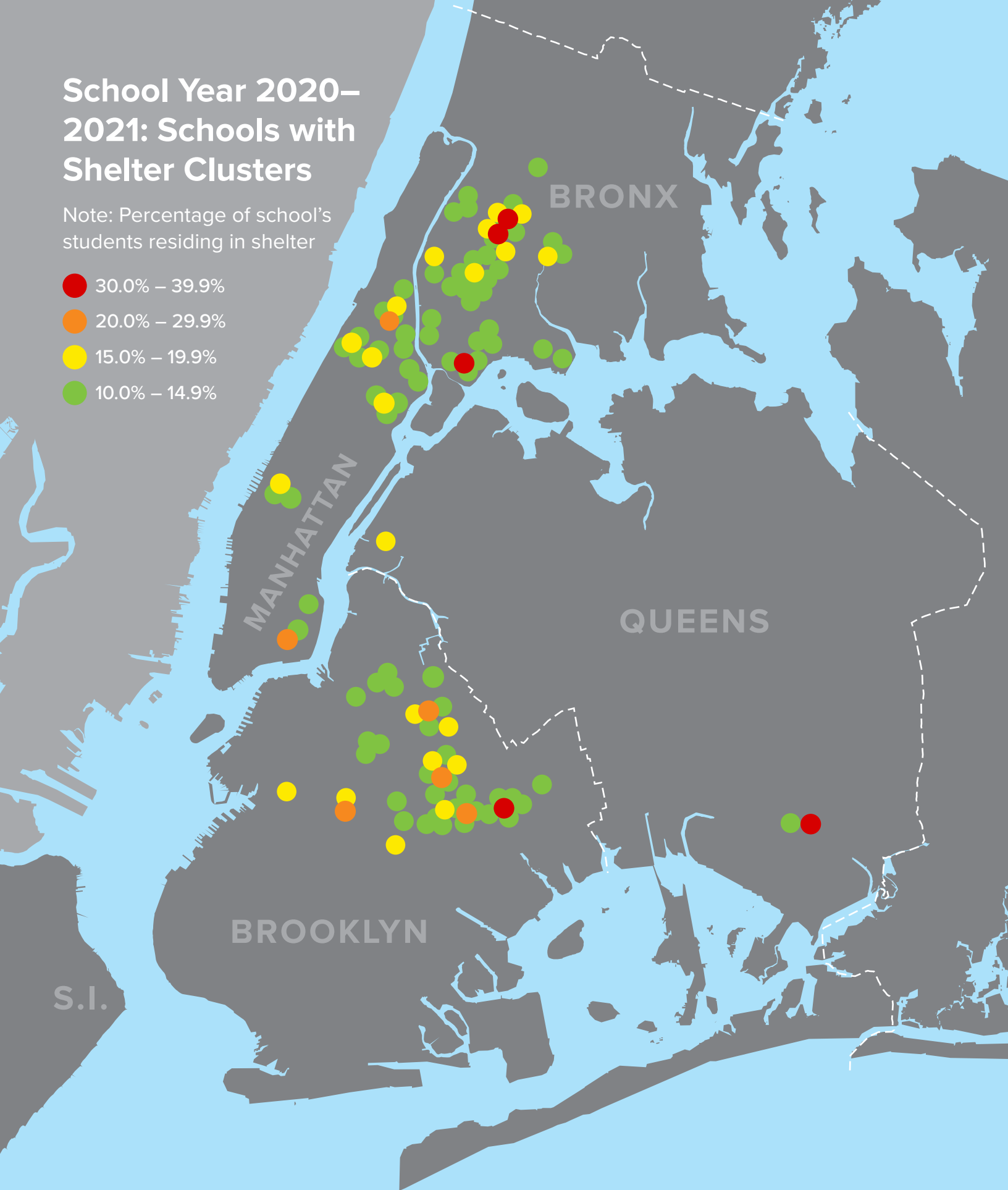
Before school buildings shut down in March 2020:

40 students at Prospect Family Residence attended **32** different schools with **4** students at the school with the greatest number of shelter's students enrolled.

166 students at Saratoga Family Residence attended **75** different schools with **51** students at the school with the greatest number of shelter's students enrolled.
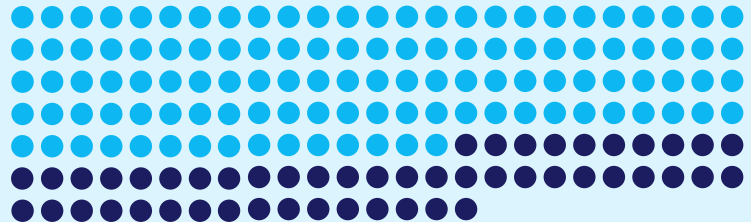
59 students at Williamsbridge Family Residence attended **47** different schools with **6** students at the school with the greatest number of shelter's students enrolled.

Calculations based on weekly attendance data maintained in internal CARES database.

there were 59 students attending 47 different schools, with only six clustered at one school. The one exception was HFH's largest site, the Saratoga Family Residence, located in an industrial area adjacent to JFK Airport in Queens, where up to 255 families reside. At this shelter 166 students were enrolled in 75 different schools, with one school enrolling 51 students.

Students living in HFH shelters likely attend such a varied number of schools due to the protections afforded by the federal McKinney-Vento Act. These regulations state that when students become homeless, they can remain enrolled at the schools they were attending when stably housed—their "schools of origin"—even if they move to temporary housing outside the school zone.[15] The educational stability this rule provides children during a time of great family upheaval is beneficial, but the abundance of assigned schools found in any one shelter can create challenges for shelter staff attempting to support students academically.

Role of Afterschool

Prior to the pandemic, Homes for the Homeless' shelter-based afterschool and recreation programs started as soon as school let out for the day. Sessions began with catch-up conversations among staff and parents and homework help for the kids. A thematic activity would follow snack, with student-driven clubs and youth development opportunities a big draw for tweens and teens. At some of the shelters the class also ate dinner together. Scattered throughout the year were workshops involving external partners, with offerings ranging from yoga and dance to cooking and nutrition to college and career readiness. The children always highly anticipated field trips.

Heidy Mendez, Education Programs Coordinator at the Prospect Family Residence, noted that everybody at the shelter stepped up to the challenge presented in Spring 2020 and aided kids in adjusting to the situation. Staff attempted to provide kids with the resources they needed, helped students message their teachers, and served as a supporting system to families.

Michael Chapman, Director of Afterschool and Recreation at the Saratoga Family Residence, says that he and his team did "a lot of knock[ing] on doors, checking up on people, anything that involves us just communicating the best way we can with the parents, as well as the students, just to find a way to help them as much as possible."

David Belmar, Afterschool Manager at Allie's Place Family Residence, which opened in Spring 2020 as New York City was in

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15   https://schoolhouseconnection.org/mckinney-vento-act/

the darkest days of the pandemic, says, "We were a resource for our families, provided homework help, and made ourselves available for families to meet with us because it all seemed quite overwhelming. Our goal was to walk through the process with our families especially with the challenges they were having with DOE. We did our best to be patient, kind and understanding because we were all in this unique situation together. Unknowingly, we became our families' biggest advocates and served in any capacity they needed. I'm glad we were here for them."

Staff efforts to assist families were complicated, however, by the many roadblocks they ran into while trying to communicate with the NYC DOE and individual students' schools.

The afterschool programs at each shelter adapted to a virtual afterschool model after the City determined in April 2020 that remote learning would continue throughout the remainder of the academic year. Mendez says that the pandemic made afterschool even more important to young participants. "We've definitely been a support system for them," she says. "A lot of them were home with mom for the whole day, so this was a little escape for them to interact with other people and do other activities."

However, like most people after weeks (and then months) of solely virtual engagement, the children eventually grew fatigued with spending so much time in front of a device. The shelters transitioned back to in-person activities with appropriate safety precautions in place as City and State regulations allowed in Fall 2020, but returning has been challenging for many children, a fact that school and out-of-school-time leaders throughout the country have noted with each new layer of reopening.

Fall 2020 Reopening

Given shelter staff's experiences with slow responses from the NYC DOE in Spring 2020, perhaps it shouldn't have come as a surprise that the City's reopening plans for Fall 2020 did not prioritize students in shelter. Despite the flurry of attention paid to their struggles connecting to school in March, there were just two minor references to homeless students in the NYC DOE's 109-page reopening plan

submitted to—and approved by—the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Two policies floated by New York City elected officials that were aimed at supporting students experiencing homelessness were (1) offering the option for in-person schooling five days a week to students residing in temporary housing[16] and (2) designating an interagency Director of Students in Temporary Housing within the NYC DOE who is granted the authority to work across agencies to advocate for students experiencing homelessness and housing instability.[17]

Families with children who experience homelessness in shelter interface with multiple agencies. While the Department of Homeless Services administers most of the city's family shelter units, school-age children and youth also reside in domestic violence shelters and shelters for people living with HIV/AIDS run by the Human Resources Administration (HRA), unaccompanied youth shelters run by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and emergency shelters administered by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) for families pushed from their homes due to fire or imminent threat resulting in a building vacate order.[18] With this complex system in mind, it makes sense for there to be a designated unit liaising between the schools and each arm of the city's shelter system, ensuring that students' educations are not disrupted by their housing instability.

While Mayor Bill de Blasio and then-NYC Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza did not incorporate these particular suggestions into the final reopening plan, some citywide efforts to support students experiencing homelessness have been made since school opened in September 2020. Under threat (and then initiation[19]) of legal action and continuous media coverage, the NYC DOE redoubled efforts to bring reliable internet access to city shelters or at least ensure that data hotspots to which students could connect their devices were distributed to students in shelter and were in working order. Further, NYC DOE Division of Instructional and Information Technology (DIIT) staff were required to address within 24 hours any work tickets originating from students using city-owned iPads in shelter.[20] And while there was no citywide prioritization for in-person learning for students in shelter or other temporary housing, some

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> A parent once told me, *"It's hard for a lion to go and hunt when she's worried about her cubs."* She explained that having her children in an afterschool program like ours allows her to handle some of the things that she needs to do—all the appointments, all the documents she needs to get in order to get housing, not to mention her job. She's grateful to have a place that frees her to just do what she needs to do and at the same time positively nurtures her kids' emotional, educational, and overall health.
>
> *— Michael Chapman, Director of Afterschool and Recreation, Saratoga Family Residence*
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16   https://mcusercontent.com/6fe866f4b5e485eb450be1baa/files/35529bf0-0663-47f7-ad99-08388a273a6b/School_Reopening_Proposal_CM_Treyger_07242020.pdf

17   https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/9.16.20-Students-in-Temporary-Housing-Letter.docx.pdf

18   Summarized by Jennifer Pringle on https://anchor.fm/nyc-hearourvoices/episodes/Impact-of-Homelessness-on-Education-e11j05b

19   https://www.legalaidnyc.org/news/lawsuit-nyc-failing-students-homeless-shelters-internet-access/

20   https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/28/21539277/nyc-vows-to-equip-family-shelters-with-wi-fi-homeless-advocates-say-the-investment-is-overdue

District 75 (D75) schools for students with complex disabilities had the capacity to offer students five days a week of in-person instruction upon their return on September 21, 2020. Given that nearly 9 percent (2,386) of students enrolled in D75 schools are experiencing homelessness, with 53 percent of those (1,269) living in shelter, it is likely that at least some students residing in shelters benefited from a full year of in-person instruction.[21]

On November 18, 2020, Mayor de Blasio announced that schools would shut down less than two months after they had opened because the seven-day citywide case positivity average had reached the 3 percent threshold for systemwide closure established by the NYC DOE when schools reopened in Fall 2020. School buildings were shut citywide beginning November 19, and all students were assigned to remote instruction through December 4. On Monday, December 7, schools reopened for grades PreK–5 and welcomed back students who had started the year learning remotely and now decided to opt into hybrid learning. Hybrid or blended learning—the only option for in-person schooling available to the majority of New York City public school students last school year— is a combination of in-person and remote learning in which students spend a portion of the week in the school building (the number of days determined by space and staffing capacity) and the other days learning at home or another community space. District 75 special education schools for grades K–12 returned on December 10, but all other middle and high schoolers citywide were kept remote until February 25, 2021[22] and March 22, 2021[23], respectively. The NYC DOE required that all students returning to school buildings consent to in-school COVID-19 testing unless they had 1) a documented medical exemption or 2) a waiver based on the nature of their disability making testing in the school setting unsafe.[24]

> Parents in shelter likely made the same calculations as parents not in shelter. They weighed perceptions of safety, assessment of the need for in-person learning based on their experiences with remote learning in Spring 2020, parental obligations, childcare options, and, perhaps, child preferences around peer socializing.

Learning Preferences and Students in Shelter

The learning preference data that the City released in January 2021 did not break down preference for hybrid or remote learning based on student residence. The Community School Districts in which the schools that enroll the largest number of HFH residents from each shelter are located had a fully remote election of 71.6 percent (Bronx District 8), 67.8 percent (Bronx District 11), and 72.1 percent (Queens District 29).[25] These figures are all at or above the January 2021 city average of 67.7 percent of students opting for fully remote. A small non-representative sample (n=59) from two shelters in the Bronx[26] taken in Fall 2020, which cannot be generalized to the full family shelter population but provides only a snapshot, indicated that resident students selected the hybrid (41 percent) and remote (59 percent) models at a rate not far from the citywide average in October 2020 of 48 percent hybrid and 52 percent remote.[27] Families living in the same shelters and attending the same neighborhood schools made different decisions for their children. Even in cases where the school is less than 0.5 miles from the shelter, half of the families opted for fully remote learning while the other half opted for hybrid. Some continued to travel lengthy distances to experience in-person learning, and some who otherwise would have school bus or public transit commutes of an hour or longer opted to stay remote.

The mother of a 10-year-old says that on one hand she liked virtual learning because she and her child could avoid the commute to school. However, she also observed how difficult remote school was on her child. Certain teachers didn't allow noise in the background of a lesson, a goal sometimes hard to achieve in a shelter. The parent says that the school wanted to make sure that "everything was perfect," which put additional pressure on her family. She says that her child has an IEP for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) so sitting still and looking at a screen all day is a challenge. Additionally, all of that screentime resulted in her child experiencing headaches and migraines.

The reasons all the families in the sample made the learning model selection that they did are uncertain, but data snippets and personal statements like this illustrate that parents in shelter likely made the same calculations as parents not in shelter. They weighed perceptions of safety, assessment of the need for in-person learning based on their experiences with remote learning in Spring 2020, parental obligations, childcare options, and, perhaps, child preferences around peer socializing. The majority of families with children living in shelter are Black (53 percent) and Hispanic (41 percent), and their intersecting racial, ethnic, and economic identities may have influenced their decisions.[28] In a poll conducted by the Education Trust–New York, 50 percent of parents in low-income households and 44 percent of parents of color stated that they were not considering having their children participate in in-person learning in School Year 2020–2021, and parents from low-income households (73 percent) and parents of color (62 percent) were much more likely than white parents (38 percent) and parents from higher-income households (46 percent) to report that their child was enrolled in 100 percent remote learning.[29]

21   ICPH tabulations based on figures in https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Education/2021-Students-In-Temporary-Housing/3wtp-43m9/data
22   https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/coronavirus/nyc-middle-schools-reopen-in-person-for-1st-time-since-nov-mayor-hopeful-for-high-school-announcement-in-weeks/2909251/
23   https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/22/new-york-city-high-schools-reopen-477569
24   https://gothamist.com/news/city-forces-12000-students-back-remote-learning-failing-submit-covid-testing-consent-forms; https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/family-letters/d75-covid-testing-family-letter-december-3-2020
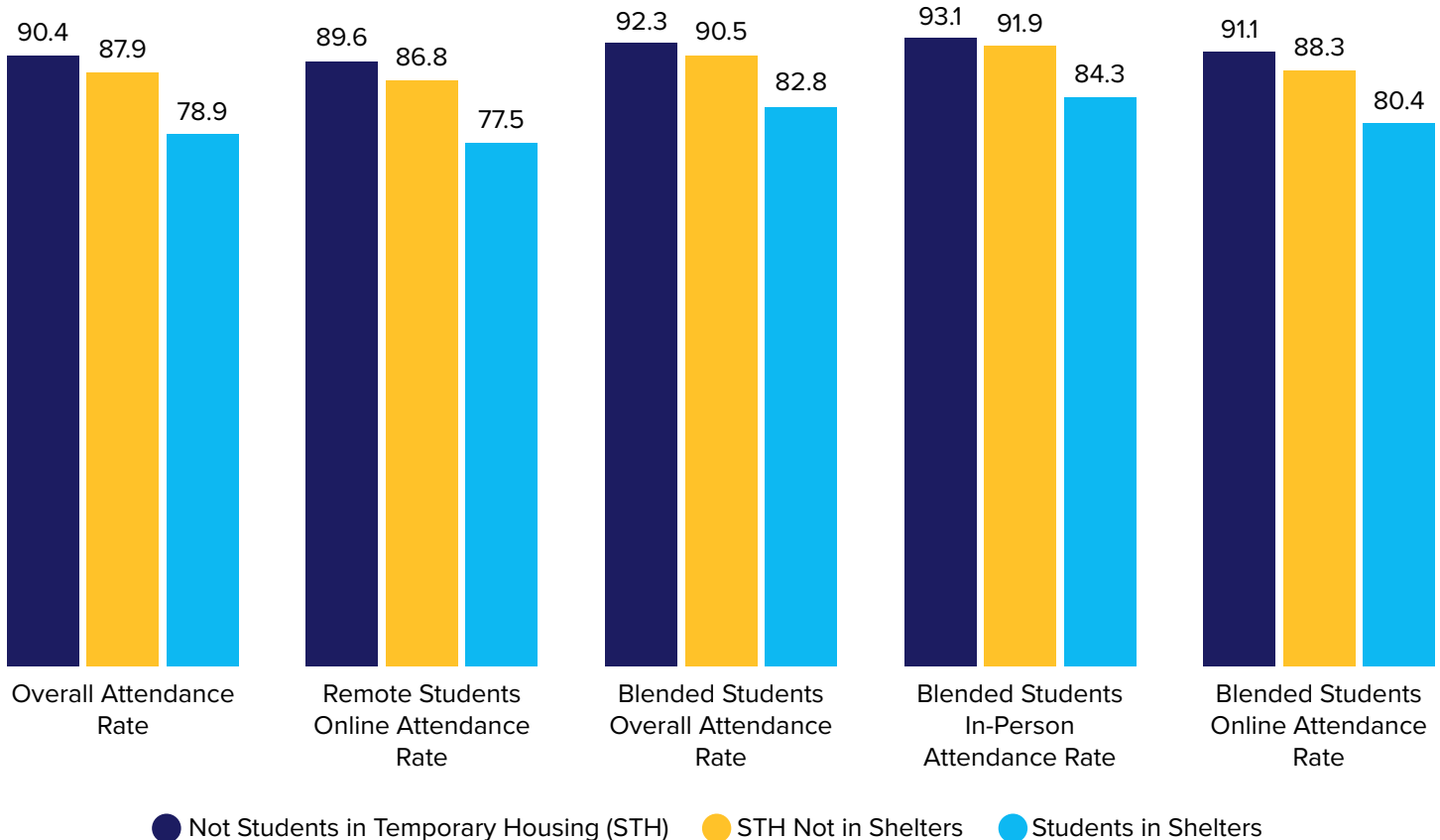25   https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Education/Learning-Preference-City-Remote-Learning-as-of-Jan/k5d2-tkrr
26   Internal data
27   https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/13/21515236/more-than-half-of-nycs-public-school-families-have-opted-for-online-only-learning
28   https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dashboard/tables/FY21-DHS-Data-Dashboard-Data.pdf
29   https://newyork.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NYC-Public-School-Parents-Memo_October.pdf

Student Attendance Rates by Residence and Learning Modality

	Overall Attendance Rate	Remote Students Online Attendance Rate	Blended Students Overall Attendance Rate	Blended Students In-Person Attendance Rate	Blended Students Online Attendance Rate
Not Students in Temporary Housing (STH)	90.4	89.6	92.3	93.1	91.1
STH Not in Shelters	87.9	86.8	90.5	91.9	88.3
Students in Shelters	78.9	77.5	82.8	84.3	80.4

● Not Students in Temporary Housing (STH)   ● STH Not in Shelters   ● Students in Shelters

Source: "2021 April City Council Attendance," https://data.cityofnewyork.us/Education/2021-City-Council-April-Attendance/rrfc-w3w8

Additionally, there were some indications late last fall that some students in shelter were avoiding in-person learning due to fears around mandatory in-school COVID-19 testing.[30]

The NYC DOE began releasing disaggregated attendance data in late Spring 2021 in order to comply with Local Law 10 of 2021.[31] This law, enacted in January 2021, was sponsored by Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and requires the NYC DOE to post student attendance data every month of remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill called for the data to be disaggregated at the school, district, and grade level and report on other demographic factors, including whether a student is living in temporary housing other than shelter ("doubled up") or living in shelter.[32] Student attendance rates for April (the most recent month available on NYC Open Data), show a clear difference in overall attendance rates and rates for each learning modality for students in shelter compared to students living in permanent housing and non-shelter temporary housing. Students learning remotely in shelters had the lowest attendance rates of all groups. Yet while this data compilation was eventually made publicly available, the NYC DOE attendance tracker shared with shelter case managers

and education staff was not updated in real time to reflect whether students were attending school in-person, remotely, or in a hybrid/ blended manner, leaving the gathering of this information—which the schools and NYC DOE had at their fingertips—to shelter staff.

It Takes a Network

Throughout the 2020–2021 school year, the wide range of schools that children living in each HFH shelter attended persisted. This trend continued even as the overall number of students in HFH shelter dipped slightly alongside the overall decreasing number of families with children in shelter citywide. By May 2021, Allie's Place had 53 students enrolled in 39 schools and only 7 clustered in the same school. Prospect and Williamsbridge each had 5 students at the most frequented school. Saratoga had 131 students enrolled in 83 schools but now only 26 students—down from 51 in March 2020—attending the most frequented school.

Given the large number of schools children at each shelter attended, it is unsurprising that communication with the NYC DOE was difficult. Many voicemails were left, and it was unclear who to call at particular schools. Michael Chapman at Saratoga

30   Community Education Council 2 meeting of the Students in Temporary Housing Committee, December 9, 2020.
31   https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/node/1761
32   https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4624883&GUID=69F6CEA9-90FA-499D-A163-D4A44C9CCEF0

recounted the day when a call finally came in from the NYC DOE. He expressed to the voice on the other line how relieved he was, because he had been trying to reach someone for such a long time. However, Chapman's enthusiasm dropped when it turned out that the call was related to a singular concern about a child—one who had ultimately moved out of the shelter some time ago—who had not logged into class. Chapman tried to shift the conversation to the broader technological and instructional needs of the hundred-plus students living at Saratoga, but when he tried to ask about additional support, the caller replied, "Oh, well, I don't handle that; you'd have to call so and so." Chapman lamented the quick divide following an initial connection.

Communication challenges likely also arose from DOE staff working outside their usual locations. Citywide, many shelter-based family assistants and in-school attendance teachers charged with monitoring individual students' absences[33] received medical accommodations to work remotely. Additionally, some shelters had limited space and needed to prioritize shelter operations staff for in-person work, forcing their DOE family assistants to work offsite.[34] Face-to-face interactions may be a family assistant's most powerful tool in connecting with a family. Limited opportunities for in-person dialogue may make it difficult for the family assistant to fully convey learning options and best support each child's access to education.

The NYC DOE's Students in Temporary Housing staff were stretched thin prior to the pandemic. The number of NYC DOE shelter-based family assistants has not increased in the last decade, despite a large growth in the number of school-age children living in shelter. There are currently only 117 family assistants, resulting in a ratio of one family assistant for every 76 students in shelter, according to the latest available (June 2021) DHS population-by-age census.[35] And those 76 students could very well attend at least 50 different schools. This is why Advocates for Children implored the Mayor and Chancellor to add 150 shelter-based Students in Temporary Housing Community Coordinators to the SY2021–22 budget.[36] The request didn't make the final cut.

Raising Technological Proficiency for Staff, Parents, and Students

While parents throughout the city with varying degrees of technological acumen struggled with navigating remote learning, doing so was a particularly difficult hurdle for families living in shelter. Chapman at the Saratoga Family Residence says that the schools could have done a better job orienting parents to the various technologies. Parents wanted to help their children, but they were overwhelmed and needed support. Many parents experiencing homelessness are coping with the barriers that contributed to their living in shelter and are either new English speakers or did not graduate high school themselves and may not feel confident in their ability to directly support their children's schoolwork.[37] They need meaningful, targeted, and culturally competent assistance that builds on the existing network of shelter staff, shelter-based DOE staff, and school staff.

The City's current operational efforts concerning access to technology are important and will prevent students from exclusion when school must operate remotely, whether due to safety concerns or inclement weather, in the future. Students learning in the 21st century need consistent access to internet-enabled devices in order to achieve academic proficiency and prepare for careers and civic engagement in a world that will require technological fluency.[38]

> **"**
> Every parent in the world needs their own time and needs their own break. It took a toll on us too. We got stressed out; we need a reliever. We need a break.
>
> **— Mother of a 10-year-old**
> **"**

Shelter-School Coordination

Dedicated on-site staff worked exceptionally hard to help children and families through the crisis, navigating changing rules and regulations from the City and State. However valiant their efforts, it is impossible for a small staff to master all learning formats, tools, and grade-level requirements while concurrently navigating the idiosyncrasies of each school.

Chapman believes that a better bridge must be built between the NYC DOE and individual shelters. The NYC DOE can do much more to reach out to shelters with comprehensive guidance and solutions. Each HFH shelter has existing relationships with several of the schools that resident children attend, but it's difficult to forge deep connections when new schools and students are constantly coming into or moving out of the picture.

Belmar at Allie's Place thought that not enough attention was given to the struggles of parents during this difficult time. "I understand the concerns for kids not doing the work and participating virtually in school. However, I'm not sure if the DOE paid attention to how the pandemic impacted parents and whether they had the tools needed to ensure that their child/children were able to do the work. In my opinion the mental health of families should have been given more of a priority."

33   https://www.uft.org/chapters/doe-chapters/attendance-teachers
34   Community Education Council 2 meeting of the Students in Temporary Housing Committee, December 9, 2020.
35   https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/dashboard/tables/FY21-DHS-Data-Dashboard-Data.pdf. As DHS data does not disaggregate by age year and breaks age groups into 0–5, 6–13, 14–17, and 18–20 brackets, the family assistant-to-student ratio is likely even higher due to 5-year-olds and 18-year-olds falling outside the core school-age-child brackets. Additionally, students enrolled in DOE-funded 3K and 4K are also mandated to receive McKinney-Vento services.
36   https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/sign-on_letter_shelter-based_comm_coordinators_6.2021.pdf?pt=1
37   https://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Trends-in-Student-and-Family-Homelessness.pdf
38   https://citylimits.org/2021/09/16/opinion-as-a-new-pandemic-school-year-begins-in-nyc-digital-learning-is-key/

Family Engagement

HFH's Education Programs staff prioritizes relationship building. When Heidy Mendez at Prospect initially meets a family, the first thing she tells parents is that they should be comfortable coming to her for support, whether they need help navigating issues at school or translating forms, or just want a friendly person to actively listen as they share their daily wins and worries. "I show them that I care about their children and family, that they're safe, that they are loved, and that they're treated well," she says. "This way we build trust and form these relationships."

Chapman notes that as much as shelter staff try to make personal, authentic connections, many families enter shelter with some level of trauma and "come here in a guarded situation, where they do not trust the quote unquote, institutional environment." He asserts that this mistrust—particularly the fear of potential Administration for Children's Services (ACS) involvement—sometimes precludes families from taking advantage of positive programmatic offerings.

Starting from Today, Looking Forward

As the grim one-year mark of the first school closures passed, glimmers of hope emerged. There was excitement in Spring 2021 over five days of in-person learning being made available to elementary school classrooms with adequate space for distancing,[39] another opt-in window for students to shift from remote to in-person learning, and the increasing availability and effectiveness of vaccines for youth ages 12–17.

Like New York City families living in permanent housing, families living in shelter have similar concerns and hopes for the 2021–2022 school year now underway. The mother of a seven-year-old expressed few concerns for the start of the academic year because her child's school has taken great precautions "in making sure everything is nice and clean. The children are safe. And so far, so good. I have no complaints … They're able to keep six feet apart."

The mother of a nine-year-old has noticed an increase in conflict as children interact with each other less frequently. She is concerned that kids have forgotten how to talk to each other and how to treat each other. "The more interaction [they have], the less conflict," she explains.

Belmar says parents are wondering how the situation is going to affect children this year and if children will be able to catch up. What support are schools going to provide children who have fallen behind academically, he asks, so they can work toward grade-level standards? The mother of a ten-year-old concurred. In Summer 2021 she related that her child would be entering middle school in September and would need to adjust to a new way of learning. She had become accustomed to remote learning in fifth grade, but because of COVID-19, "her mindset is back at fourth grade again. So, I don't know if she's gonna understand this big topic of sixth grade [after being] stuck in front of the screen for the last year. Might be difficult."

Students in shelter are already dealing with enough twists and turns, and the educational and social-emotional stakes for them are high with two—going on three—academic years now disrupted by this pandemic.

Much has been made of the loss in NYC schools' enrollment. Data will eventually reveal if that reduction is permanent. It is striking that the loss in the overall student census is nearly equal to the number of students who lived in shelter during the last year for which data is available. As a sum on a spreadsheet, students living in shelter are a small portion of the overall student body. However, every single one of those students should be a signal to the DOE's leaders that they cannot make good on their vision and mission, "to provid[e] every single child, in every classroom, in every New York City public school, with a rigorous, inspiring, and nurturing learning experience," unless they proactively work to elevate the needs of students in shelter.[40] Data on students in shelter must be deliberately collected and disaggregated throughout this school year and during every academic catch-up program[41] so tailored solutions can be crafted with input from all stakeholders, including, importantly, shelter staff in direct relationship with students and their parents. To ensure an equitable education for students in shelter as New York City rebounds, everyone who works with children experiencing homelessness must collaborate to build sturdier bridges of support. Homeless children should be able to learn free from interruptions, in environments primed to help them succeed, with access to all learning tools, academic assistance, and robust social-emotional supports.

> " A lot of schools, they really don't pay attention to the students' backgrounds, they're not really focused on what's going on in our children's lives.
>
> *— Mother of a 10-year-old*
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> "

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40   https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/equity-and-excellence
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