



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

GAPS IN SOCIAL WORKERS FOR STUDENTS LIVING IN SHELTERS

May 2018

During the 2016-2017 school year, more than 100,000 New York City students were identified as homeless,¹ 38,000 of whom lived in shelter.² Students living in shelter are more likely to be chronically absent,³ to be suspended,⁴ and to have lower literacy levels than their peers.⁵ 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 currently the primary driver of homelessness in New York City.⁶ In recent years, the City has placed increasing numbers of children in commercial hotels, which do not have social services on site to address their needs.

Furthermore, the City places most families in shelters far outside their neighborhoods,⁷ forcing families to decide between long commutes to school and transferring schools. When students transfer schools mid-year to enroll in a school closer to their shelter, 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.

When there are clusters of students living in shelter attending one school, it is vital for the school to have additional targeted support, as the needs of these students can easily exceed the capacity of existing school staff. Social workers are well positioned to impact the education and lives of students living in shelters by providing much-needed counseling to these students, connecting them to academic support and mental health services, and working to ensure they attend school

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

³ Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, "On the Map: The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2017" (August 2017) (hereinafter ICPH On the Map) at 32, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section2_HousingInstabilityUnderminesSchoolStability.pdf.

⁴ ICPH On the Map at 77, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section5_BehavioralChallengesandDisciplineofHomelessStudents.pdf.

⁵ ICPH On the Map at 61, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section4_EducationalAchievementofHomelessStudents.pdf.

⁶ See Nikita Stewart, "New York Adding Shelter Options for Homeless Victims of Domestic Abuse," *New York Times*, June 14, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/nyregion/new-york-domestic-violence-homeless-shelters.html>.

⁷ See "New York City Preliminary Fiscal 2018 Mayor's Management Report – Homeless Services" at 189, available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2018/dhs.pdf>.

on a consistent basis. They are trained to address the underlying stress and trauma that hold back students from thriving academically and socially and have the skillset to help families negotiate the overlapping systems that can pose barriers to regular school attendance.

Last year, the City took an important step by placing 33 Department of Education (DOE) “Bridging the Gap” social workers in schools with high populations of students living in shelters to focus on serving students living in shelters. This year, the City has funded 43 Bridging the Gap social workers.

Despite a push by elected officials and advocates to expand this program significantly, Mayor de Blasio’s Executive Budget proposal would add only 10 Bridging the Gap social workers, for a total of 53 DOE social workers to focus on students living in shelters throughout the City. Furthermore, the Mayor proposed only one year of funding for the 53 social workers, subjecting this program to the annual budget dance and putting the long-term continuity of the program in jeopardy.

We analyzed city data to assess the number of schools that have high populations of students living in shelters that do not yet have a Bridging the Gap social worker. Our findings show that the modest increase proposed by Mayor de Blasio will fall far short of meeting the need.

In New York City:

- » More than **125 schools** have 50 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **9,800 students** living in shelter.
- » More than **375 schools** have 25 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **18,200 students** living in shelter.

No child in New York City should be homeless. But while the City works to address the overwhelming problem of homelessness, the City must do more to mitigate the impact of homelessness on children, ensuring they get to school on a regular basis and get the academic and social-emotional support they need to succeed in school. If we want to break the cycle of homelessness, the City must focus more attention and resources on the education of students living in shelter, starting with increasing the number of DOE social workers at schools and at shelters focused on these students.

Sixteen education, child advocacy, and housing organizations and 33 New York City Council Members and the Progressive Caucus have called on the Mayor to expand the Bridging the Gap social worker program to 100 social workers at schools and to hire at least 50 DOE social workers to provide intensive supports at shelters to address education-related issues.⁸ Mayor de Blasio and the City Council should negotiate a final budget that includes these recommendations.

⁸ See Letter to Mayor de Blasio from Advocates, March 15, 2018, [available at](http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/sign_on_letter_sth_31518.pdf) http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/sign_on_letter_sth_31518.pdf; Letter to Mayor de Blasio from Council Members, April 16, 2018, [available at](http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/council_letter_support_for_homeless_students_41618.pdf) http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/council_letter_support_for_homeless_students_41618.pdf; Ben Chapman, “Pols, Activists Call for City Hall to Fund Homeless-Student Aid,” *New York Daily News*, April 18, 2018, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/pols-activists-call-city-hall-fund-homeless-student-aid-article-1.3940115>.

IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON EDUCATION

During the 2016-2017 school year, more than 100,000 New York City students were identified as homeless,⁹ 38,000 of whom lived in shelter.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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. Teachers report that students in shelters require more emotional support than their housed peers, and this need often takes precedence over academics.¹²

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.¹³ 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. As such, school transfers can lead to additional stress for students who are homeless. The chronic stress or trauma that many students experiencing homelessness face must be addressed in order for them to thrive academically and socially.

Students living in shelters are currently missing a substantial amount of school. During the 2015-16 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.¹⁴ A number of environmental factors contribute to students missing school, including transportation hurdles, mandatory social services appointments that conflict with school drop off or pick up times, lack of access to clean clothing or school uniforms, and lack of child care arrangements that can make it hard for parents to meet the demands of both work and their children's school, particularly when

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ See New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students, 2016-17 Data, http://nysteachs.org/media/SED_SIRS2016_17x.xlsx.

¹¹ See Nikita Stewart, "New York Adding Shelter Options for Homeless Victims of Domestic Abuse," *New York Times*, June 14, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/nyregion/new-york-domestic-violence-homeless-shelters.html>.

¹² New York City Independent Budget Office, "Not Reaching the Door: Homeless Students Face Many Hurdles on the Way to School" (October 2016) (hereinafter IBO Report) at 20, available at <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/not-reaching-the-door-homeless-students-face-many-hurdles-on-the-way-to-school.pdf>.

¹³ "New York City Preliminary Fiscal 2018 Mayor's Management Report – Homeless Services" at 189, available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2018/dhs.pdf>.

¹⁴ ICPH On the Map at 32, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section2_HousingInstabilityUnderminesSchoolStability.pdf.

families are placed in shelters far away from their networks of care that had assisted with getting children to school.¹⁵

The stressors that students living in shelter experience can also cause students to exhibit behavioral challenges in school and can lead to school suspensions. In fact, during the 2015-16 school year, one out of every ten middle and high school students living in shelter was suspended from school.¹⁶ Suspensions compound the problem of students who are homeless missing school and often cause students to miss six weeks of instruction in a single school year between absences and suspensions.¹⁷ Furthermore, four out of ten students who are homeless who are suspended will likely drop out of school.¹⁸

When students are out of school, they miss critical instructional time, leading to poor educational outcomes. Only 15 percent of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently in reading,¹⁹ and only 12 percent of third through eighth grade students living in shelters scored proficiently in math.²⁰

Education can mitigate the impact of homelessness, giving students a stable, safe, supportive place to be during the day and preparing students to overcome barriers and move on to college and careers. However, schools with high populations of students living in shelter need additional, targeted resources to address the barriers these students face and help ensure they get to school every day and receive the academic and social-emotional support they need.

BRIDGING THE GAP SOCIAL WORKERS

Last year, the City took an important step by placing 33 DOE “Bridging the Gap” social workers in schools with high populations of students living in shelters to focus on supporting the students living in shelters enrolled in those schools. This year, the City has funded 43 Bridging the Gap social workers.

Social workers are well positioned to impact the education and lives of students living in shelters by providing much-needed counseling to these students, connecting them to academic support and mental health services, and working to ensure they attend school on a consistent basis. They are trained to address the underlying stress and trauma that hold back students from thriving academically and socially and have the skillset to help families negotiate the overlapping systems that can pose barriers to regular school attendance.

¹⁵ IBO Report at 17-26.

¹⁶ ICPH On the Map, page 77, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section5_BehavioralChallengesandDisciplineofHomelessStudents.pdf.

¹⁷ Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, “Suspension Hubs: The Rise in Suspensions Among Homeless Students,” (April 2018) at 2, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ICPH_Suspensions_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ ICPH On the Map, page 61, available at http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ICPH_StudentAtlas2017_Section4_EducationalAchievementofHomelessStudents.pdf.

²⁰ *Id.* at 69.

For example, if a student is out of school because of a transportation challenge, a social worker can navigate the DOE's various offices to secure busing; if a student is not getting to school because of competing appointments, a social worker can help advocate for the family with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA); or if the trauma the parent has experienced is interfering with the parent's ability to get the student to school in the morning, a social worker can meet with the family, coordinate with other staff at the shelter and the school, and connect the family to appropriate resources.

For children who are experiencing behavioral challenges, a social worker can assess the situation and connect the student to appropriate resources. The social worker can provide counseling directly, can spearhead the development of a Behavioral Intervention Plan, can connect the student to mental health services outside of school, and can provide the child's teacher with effective strategies for preventing and addressing a student's behaviors.

Moreover, experience has borne out the effectiveness of the Bridging the Gap social workers. 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."

BRIDGING THE GAP SOCIAL WORKERS IN ACTION

Adam*, an elementary school student living in shelter, had low self-esteem and was often getting into trouble. He would stop doing his work, walk out of class, and wander the halls. As a result, his academic performance was suffering.

The Bridging the Gap social worker began to meet with Adam on a regular basis, working to help him address the stress he was experiencing.

With ongoing individual and group counseling, Adam's self-esteem improved, he began staying in class, and his academic performance flourished.

*All names have been changed.

BUDGET DANCE FOR BRIDGING THE GAP SOCIAL WORKERS

Mayor de Blasio deserves credit for initiating the Bridging the Gap social worker program two years ago. Unfortunately, however, for the third year in a row, the Mayor included this funding in the Executive Budget for one year only, rather than including long-term funding. By failing to baseline the funding, the Mayor has subjected this funding to the annual budget dance. Schools want to know that they will be able to keep their Bridging the Gap social workers as long as the need exists and do not want to wait in suspense each year to find out whether or not the City will extend the funding for another year.

THE GAP IN SOCIAL WORKERS FOR STUDENTS LIVING IN SHELTERS

Over the past five years, the number of NYC students living in shelters has increased by 11,000 students.²¹ 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.

Mayor de Blasio's Executive Budget proposal would add 10 Bridging the Gap social workers, for a total of 53 DOE social workers to focus on students living in shelters. This modest increase falls far short of meeting the need.

In New York City:

- » More than **125 schools** have 50 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **9,800 students** living in shelter.²²
- » More than **375 schools** have 25 or more students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker. Together, these schools serve more than **18,200 students** living in shelter.

While it is important for schools with high populations of students living in shelter to have social workers focused on serving these students,²³ it is worth noting that many schools with high populations of students living in shelter have no DOE social worker.

- » More than **20 schools** serve 50 or more students living in shelter and have no DOE social worker (no Bridging the Gap social worker or other DOE social worker).²⁴ Together, these schools serve more than **1,300 students** living in shelter.
- » More than **95 schools** serve 25 or more students living in shelter and have no DOE social worker (no Bridging the Gap social worker or other DOE social worker). Together, these schools serve more than **3,700 students** living in shelter.

The Mayor's Executive Budget proposal includes \$125 million in additional funding for Fair Student Funding for schools. Because the City is distributing this funding only to schools that currently receive less than 90 percent of Fair Student Funding, nearly half of the schools with

²¹ 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>.

²² The analysis in this report relies on school enrollment data of students living in shelter from the 2015-2016 school year. Given the growth in the total number of New York City students living in shelter (an increase of 2,000 students living in shelter between the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years), the number of schools with high concentrations of students living in shelter and the number of students living in shelter attending these schools have likely increased.

²³ Only Bridging the Gap social workers focus on students living in shelter. DOE social workers other than Bridging the Gap social workers are required to spend their time conducting social history intakes with families of children referred for special education evaluations, scheduling and participating in IEP meetings, and providing counseling as mandated by students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Indeed, they are contractually obligated to prioritize responsibilities related to completing assessments and IEPs for students with disabilities. See *2009-2018 School Psychologists & School Social Workers Contract*, pages 94-95, available at http://www.uft.org/files/attachments/social_worker_school_psychologist_2009-2018.pdf. Therefore, even schools that have DOE social workers other than Bridging the Gap social workers may not be meeting the needs of students living in shelters attending their schools.

²⁴ For school-level data regarding DOE social workers, see DOE Data Pursuant to Reporting Requirements in Local Law 56 of 2014 (February 2018), at http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/A3D1BE48-4ABC-496C-88CC-AB250639DD3B/0/CopyofGuidance_Bill_Reporting_as_of_020918FINAL.xlsx.

BRIDGING THE GAP SOCIAL WORKERS IN ACTION

One Bridging the Gap social worker worked with a set of siblings who transferred to her school from another school in the middle of the school year.

At their previous school, the siblings had missed more than 60 days of school. After enrolling in their new school, they were absent for multiple days. The Bridging the Gap social worker worked to understand why the students were not showing up for school. First, the family told the social worker that the absences were due to a health concern. The social worker connected the family to a health clinic and continued to follow up with the family.

When the absences continued, the social worker worked tirelessly with the family and the shelter staff to develop a plan to ensure the students would attend school. As a result of persistent family engagement by the social worker, the siblings began attending school consistently.

high populations of students living in shelter and no Bridging the Gap social worker will not receive any portion of the \$125 million.²⁵

- » More than **55 schools** have 50 or more students living in shelter enrolled, have no Bridging the Gap social worker, and will not receive any additional funding through the \$125 million increase in Fair Student Funding. Together, these schools serve more than **4,400 students** living in shelter.
- » More than **165 schools** have 25 or more students living in shelter enrolled, have no Bridging the Gap social worker, and will not receive any additional funding through the \$125 million increase in Fair Student Funding. Together, these schools serve more than **8,000 students** living in shelter.

Students living in shelter also do not have DOE social workers at their shelters. Given the number of students who attend schools without a Bridging the Gap social worker, 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. 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.

²⁵ Each school that receives a portion of the increased Fair Student Funding can decide how to use this much-needed additional funding, and most schools will receive only enough money to fund one additional position. As such, there is no guarantee that any school that receives an increase in Fair Student Funding will use the funding to hire a Bridging the Gap social worker.

BRIDGING THE GAP SOCIAL WORKERS IN ACTION

A teacher noticed that Isaiah was exhibiting problematic behaviors in class. The teacher alerted the Bridging the Gap social worker, who discovered that the student and his mother were living in a car. The Bridging the Gap social worker helped the family enter the shelter system and supported them throughout the process.

Due to the stress the student had experienced, the Bridging the Gap social worker began providing counseling to the student and connected him to a therapist outside of school, coordinating with the outside therapist to ensure they were supporting the student in a consistent manner. With these supports in place, the student's behavior began to improve.

In addition to increasing the number of school-based DOE Bridging the Gap social workers, 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Far too many students in shelters do not have access to a Department of Education social worker in their schools or shelters. While the City has taken a positive step by proposing to increase the number of Bridging the Gap social workers from 43 to 53 next year, this modest increase falls far short of meeting the need. The City should significantly increase the number of DOE social workers at schools and shelters focused on serving students living in shelters. In addition, the City should appoint a senior-level leader to coordinate the efforts of the DOE Bridging the Gap social workers and to work across agencies and DOE divisions to develop and implement policies to better serve highly mobile students, including students who are homeless and students in foster care.

The City should:

- » Establish a Deputy Chancellor's Office for Highly Mobile Students (\$1 million)
- » Increase the number of DOE Bridging the Gap school-based social workers for students in shelters from 53 to 100 and hire additional supervisory staff (\$7 million)
- » Hire 50 DOE social workers to provide intensive supports at shelters to address education-related issues (\$6.5 million)
- » Baseline the funding for DOE support for students living in shelter to ensure its continuity.