

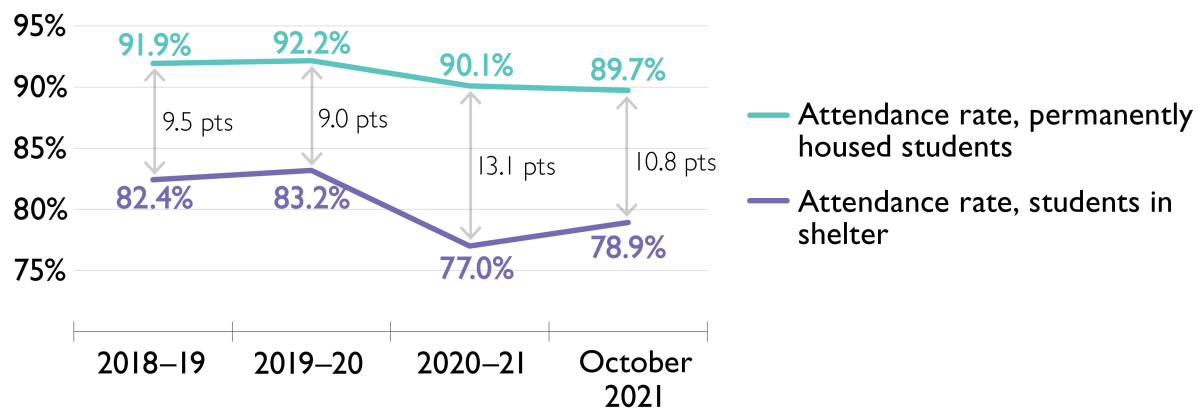


STILL DISCONNECTED: PERSISTENTLY LOW ATTENDANCE RATES FOR STUDENTS IN SHELTER

According to monthly attendance data released by the New York City Department of Education (DOE), students living in homeless shelters continued to have significantly higher rates of absenteeism than their permanently housed peers following the full reopening of schools in fall 2021, and attendance disparities remained larger than they were prior to the pandemic.

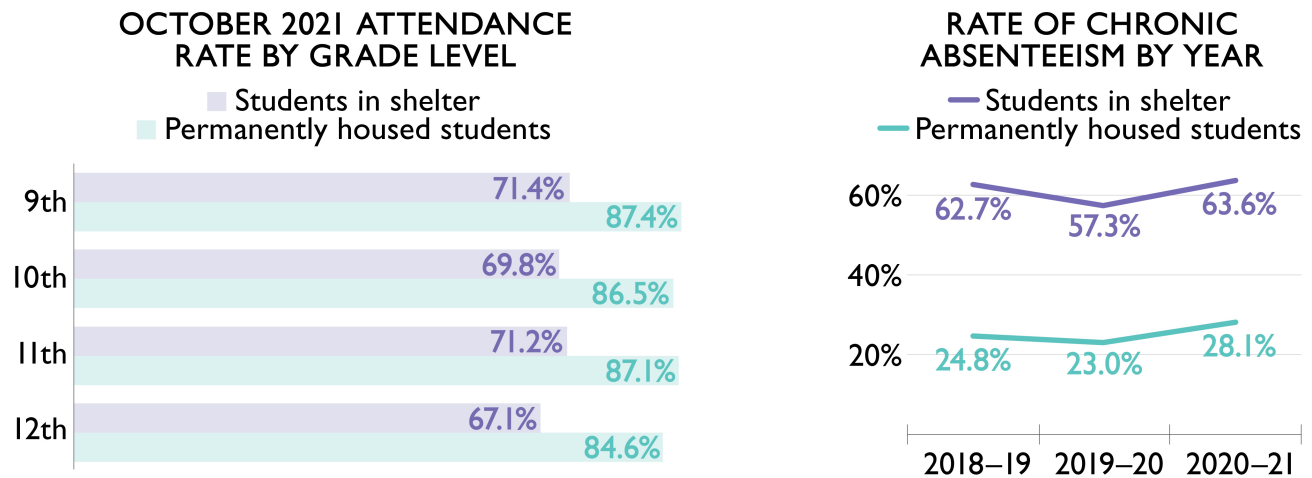
Last fall, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) released a [brief](#) showing that between January and June 2021, monthly attendance rates for students in shelter were lower than those for any other student group and trailed attendance rates for students in permanent housing by 10.6 to 14.1 percentage points, depending on the month. Subsequently released data suggest that **the resumption of full-time in-person instruction in the 2021–22 school year has not addressed the barriers to attendance facing students experiencing homelessness: in October 2021, the most recent month for which data are publicly available, students living in shelter had an overall attendance rate of 78.9%, almost 11 percentage points lower than the attendance rate for permanently housed students.**

While a modest improvement from the 2020–21 school year—when the average attendance rate for students in shelter was 77%, 13.1 percentage points lower than that for their peers with permanent housing—attendance disparities by housing status have not even returned to their already alarming pre-pandemic levels. Between September 2019 and the closure of school buildings in mid-March 2020, students in shelter had an attendance rate of 83.2%, 9 percentage points lower than the rate for permanently housed students; there was a gap of 9.5 points in the 2018–19 school year.



Data for October 2021 are available [online](#) pursuant to Local Law 10 of 2021. As monthly attendance rates for students in shelter are not publicly available prior to January 2021, we have used yearly attendance rates, obtained via a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request, for purposes of comparison. The rate for the 2019–20 school year only reflects attendance through March 13, 2020; rates for 2020–21 and October 2021 include both in-person and remote attendance. Students attending charter schools, District 79 programs, and some 3-K and pre-K programs are not included.

As was the case in winter and spring 2021, there were particularly high rates of absenteeism at the high school level at the beginning of the 2021–22 school year. **Tenth and twelfth graders living in shelter had attendance rates below 70% in October 2021, meaning they missed the equivalent of more than a week of school in that month alone.** The October attendance rate for twelfth graders in shelter was 17.5 percentage points lower than that for twelfth graders living in permanent housing, a larger gap than existed for that grade level in February, March, April, May, or June (when there was a difference of 11.3 to 17.0 percentage points, depending on the month). The 15.9-point difference for students in grade 11 in October 2021 was likewise a greater disparity than was present for eleventh graders in the preceding winter and spring (between January and June 2021, the gap in attendance rates for eleventh graders ranged from 13.4 to 15.5 percentage points).



While the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities, barriers to attendance are not new: in each of the last three school years (2018–19, 2019–20, and 2020–21), **the rate of chronic absenteeism among students in shelter—94% of whom are Black or Hispanic and 30% of whom receive special education services—was more than twice that of permanently housed students.** When students do not attend school regularly, it is difficult to keep up academically, and the consequences can be significant. For example, three out of four 3rd through 8th graders living in shelters were not reading proficiently as of 2019, the last time the state reading exams were widely administered, and the four-year high school graduation rate for DOE students in shelter was 59.9% in 2021, compared to 82.4% for students not experiencing homelessness, while **students in shelter dropped out of high school at more than three times the rate of their permanently housed peers** (14.1% versus 4.0%). And young adults who do not have a high school diploma are [4.5 times more likely](#) to experience homelessness than their peers who do graduate.

ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

The DOE is receiving \$33 million in American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funds specifically to support students in temporary housing and has committed to using part of this funding to hire 50 shelter-based DOE Community Coordinators to help families navigate the school system and resolve barriers to attendance—a promising first step. However, **50 staff are not nearly enough to ensure that the 28,000 students who spend time in the City’s more than 200 shelters each year can get to school every day and access the educational supports they need to be successful.**

Partnering with two shelters this year, we have seen the glaring need to have staff on the ground who are focused on the education of the students living there and tasked with proactively tackling barriers to school attendance and school success. AFC uses attendance data from our two shelter provider partners to identify students struggling with attendance, and we convene weekly attendance team meetings with DOE and shelter staff to collaborate on concrete next steps to support those students. For example:

- » We identified a first grader who was not regularly attending school because her parent, who uses a manual wheelchair, was having difficulty getting her daughter to the bus stop several blocks away on a steep hill, especially in bad weather. We requested that the DOE move the bus stop closer to the shelter, which the DOE did, and now the student is regularly attending school.
- » In the late fall, a second grader at one shelter had a 4-week attendance rate of only 58%. We partnered with shelter staff to ensure they would prioritize regularly checking in with the child's parent, who was having a high-risk pregnancy, and provide support, encouragement, and positive feedback as the student's attendance improved. In April 2022, the student's 4-week attendance rate was 100%.
- » We identified a kindergartener whose bus had stopped coming following the child's recent psychiatric hospitalization; as a result, the student had a 4-week attendance rate of only 74%. We advocated on behalf of the parent for expedited busing and special education evaluations and services. Now the student is in a more therapeutic and supportive setting, and his 4-week attendance rate is 93%.

In the cases described above, AFC brought the additional skills and resources needed to analyze data and then partner with shelter-based staff and families to determine and resolve the specific barriers to school attendance. Unfortunately, **without more support, the existing shelter-based staff do not have the capacity to take on this extra, sometimes painstaking work, which requires using data to proactively troubleshoot educational issues, facilitating discussions with families and shelter- and school-based staff, and helping implement solutions.**

The City will be submitting a plan for its next round of federal funding this month. More than [30 organizations](#) and the [City Council](#) have called on the DOE to hire 100 additional shelter-based community coordinators, for a total of 150. Unfortunately, instead of investing in additional knowledgeable, skilled staff to work on the ground in shelters and help students get to school every day, **the DOE is currently proposing to spend millions of dollars to extend a more sophisticated data portal to all shelters and develop new online tools—without investing in the staff needed to use the enhanced data** to identify and resolve barriers in partnership with schools and families. Through our decades of work helping resolve barriers for students living in shelter, we know that a lack of data is not the primary roadblock when it comes to addressing chronic absenteeism, and better data alone is not a solution. While the DOE is also proposing to spend ARP-HCY funding on a slew of new programs, none of them—beyond the 50 community coordinators—is targeted at tackling the abysmal attendance rates of students in shelter.

The federal funding provides the City with an opportunity to substantially improve the way it provides support to students in shelter and ensure students can get to school on a regular basis. Hiring 150 community coordinators would make the most of this opportunity.