

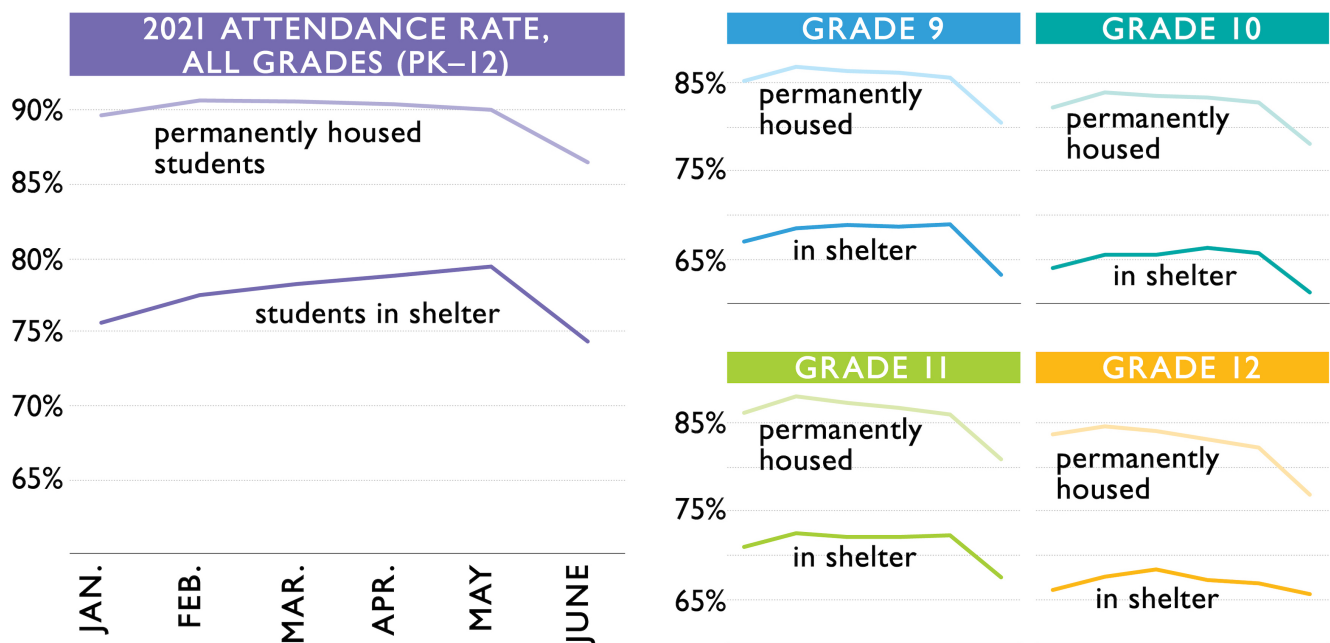


## DISCONNECTED: THE PANDEMIC'S TOLL ON ATTENDANCE FOR STUDENTS IN SHELTER

*According to monthly attendance data released by the New York City Department of Education (DOE), students living in homeless shelters had significantly more difficulty accessing an education than their permanently housed peers in winter and spring 2021.*

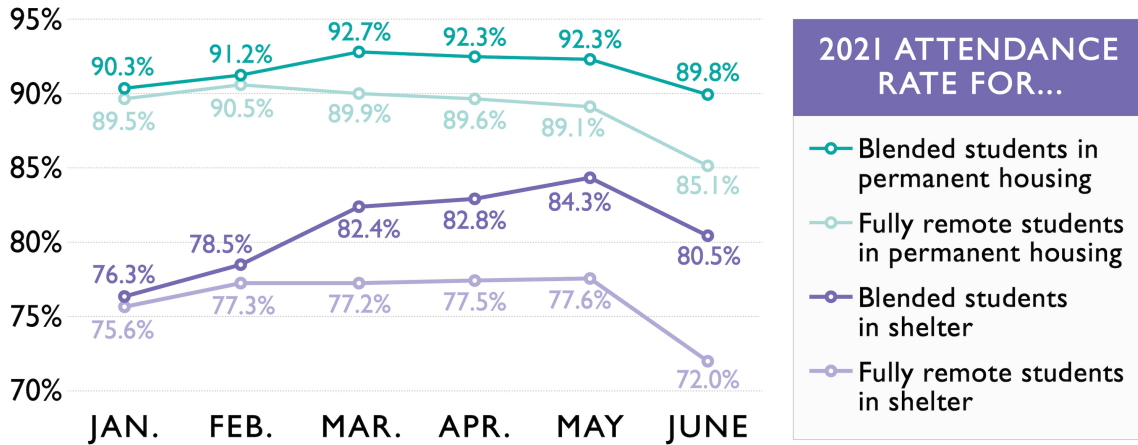
Between January and June 2021, overall monthly attendance rates<sup>1</sup> for students in shelter were lower than those for any other student group and trailed attendance rates for students in permanent housing by 10.6 to 14.1 percentage points, depending on the month. Even the *peak* attendance rate for students in shelter (79.4% in May) was still seven percentage points lower than the *lowest* monthly rate for permanently housed students (86.5% in June).

There were especially high rates of absenteeism at the high school level: monthly attendance rates for students in shelter in grades 9–12 ranged from a low of 61.3% for 10<sup>th</sup> graders in June (16.8 percentage points lower than the rate for permanently housed 10<sup>th</sup> graders that month) to a high of just 72.5% for 11<sup>th</sup> graders in February (representing a 15.5-point gap). Overall, **10<sup>th</sup> graders living in shelter missed more than one out of every three school days in winter and spring 2021, while 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in shelter were absent well over a quarter of the time.**

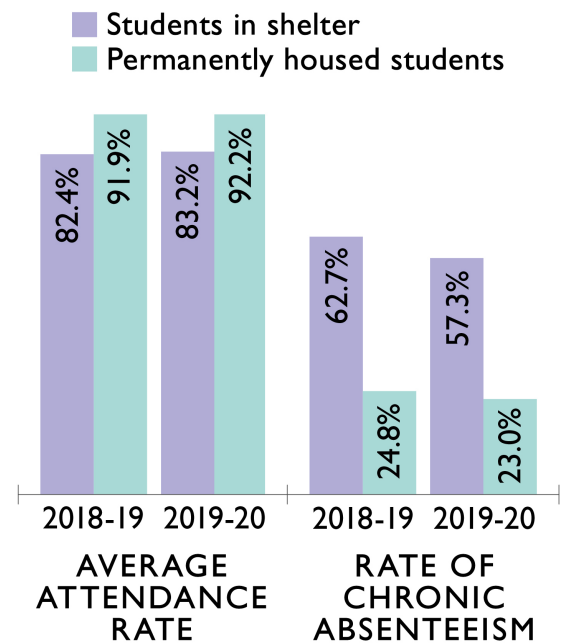


<sup>1</sup> January was the first month of the 2020-21 school year for which the DOE posted disaggregated attendance data, as required by Local Law 10 of 2021. Overall rates include both remote and in-person attendance; for remote learning, students were marked "present" if they participated in synchronous or asynchronous instruction. Students attending charter schools or pre-K programs at New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) are not included.

Access to in-person instruction appears to have had a greater impact on the attendance of students in shelter than on that of their peers in permanent housing—though disparities remained vast. The overall attendance rate for students in shelter participating in blended learning climbed 4.3 percentage points from February to April, a time period during which middle and high schools reopened for in-person learning for the first time since November and more schools brought some students back five days a week. While the attendance rate for blended students in permanent housing went up just 1.1 percentage points during this time frame, it was nevertheless still more than 9 percentage points higher than the rate for blended students in shelter in April.<sup>2</sup>



High rates of absenteeism in winter and spring 2021 point to a particular need for support for students living in shelter as schools reopen this year. However, barriers to attendance are not unique to the pandemic. Prior to the closure of school buildings in March 2020, the average attendance rate for New York City students living in shelter in 2019-20 was only 83.2%, compared to 92.2% for permanently housed students, and well over half (57.3%) of students in shelter were already chronically absent, missing at least one out of every ten school days.<sup>3</sup> **In both 2018-19 and 2019-20, 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 2.5 times that of permanently housed students.**



When students miss school, it is difficult to keep up academically, and the consequences can be significant. For example, the four-year high school graduation rate for students living in shelter was only 52% in 2019 and 2020.

<sup>2</sup> While the lack of internet access in some City shelters undoubtedly had an impact on remote attendance, it is worth noting that the attendance rate for blended students living in shelter was just 2.3 to 4.3 percentage points higher on their in-person days than on their days of remote learning. In other words, the return to full-time in-person instruction and the installation of wi-fi in shelters, while critical, will not fully address chronic absenteeism among this population.

<sup>3</sup> Historical data on attendance and chronic absenteeism, as well as demographic data on students in shelter, were obtained via a Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request. Students enrolled in charter schools, NYCEECs, District Pre-K Centers, Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs), and District 79 programs are not included.

*Given the abysmal attendance rates for students living in shelter, the Department of Education should ensure that there are qualified, trained professionals on the ground in the City’s shelters who can help students reconnect with school and access the academic and social-emotional supports they need following a year and a half of educational disruption.*

**Roughly 30,000 students spend time in shelter each year, but there are very few staff in shelters who are focused on addressing their educational needs.** Currently, there are just 117 shelter-based DOE Family Assistants tasked with helping families navigate the public schools, a number that has not grown over the past decade even though thousands more students are now spending time in the shelter system than in years past. As there are more than twice as many shelters as there are Family Assistants, these staff must divide their time among multiple shelter sites and are stretched very thin. Furthermore, the Family Assistant position is very low paid (\$28,000 for 10 months), making it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff, and since the Family Assistants do not work over the summer, students and families have very limited support obtaining school placements, arranging transportation, and ensuring everything is in place for the first day of school each September.

Over the past few years, the City has taken a number of positive steps to better support students who are homeless, including placing “Bridging the Gap” social workers and Community Coordinators in schools with high numbers of students who are homeless. These staff are providing counseling and advocacy to students experiencing homelessness, helping connect students and their families to much-needed resources, and working to address the obstacles that prevent regular school attendance. However, three out of four students in shelter attend a school that does not have a Bridging the Gap social worker or Community Coordinator—meaning about 25,000 students in shelter lack this school-based support. Furthermore, since students have the right to stay in their original schools when they become homeless, students residing at any given shelter may attend many different schools, making coordination between shelters and schools complex.

Fortunately, **the DOE is poised to receive tens of millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief funding specifically to support students experiencing homelessness.** The City has not yet decided how to allocate these funds. To ensure students in shelter can attend school every day and access a high-quality education, especially following 18 months of disrupted education, the DOE should use this funding to hire additional staff to work on the ground in shelters. **The DOE should build a corps of adequately compensated professionals with the skills to effectively help families navigate NYC’s school system.** These staff members should be charged with:

- » Proactively assisting families with getting school placements, bus service, and special education services in place as quickly as possible upon entering shelter and for the start of each school year;
- » Ensuring that students in their assigned shelter are attending school regularly and helping to address barriers when students are not getting to school, including helping families get shelter transfers to avoid long commutes; and
- » Connecting students to after-school programs, tutoring, counseling, or other support.

*More than ever, children and families in shelter need support from dedicated, knowledgeable DOE staff who can help address barriers to school attendance and connect them with educational supports. The DOE should direct federal COVID-19 relief dollars to overhaul the education support system in shelters, starting with hiring 150 shelter-based DOE community coordinators.*