

**Identifying and Removing Barriers to Quality Education for  
NYC's Homeless Children**

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This paper investigates the means by which New York City's public schools, individually and collectively, can and do support the education of growing numbers of homeless students. This paper investigates laws, policies, and individual ad-hoc practices that affect public schools, seeking to assess layers of practice against educational standards. Results are derived from surveys and interviews of NYC public school administrators, faculty, teachers, and social workers. This paper discusses problems that homeless students face and innovative solutions that schools implement. Results from this study concur with preexisting literature that transportation to school remains a critical issue, yet add that mental and emotional health are even more pressing. This research also delves into problems and solutions rising from: lack of coordination with providers of services for homeless parents and students; insufficient food, amenities, and basic facilities; and insufficient supports for homeless students with disabilities. The surveys and interviews conducted for this research yield information on ad-hoc supportive tactics, uncovering the most common and most innovative methods of minimizing educational barriers faced by homeless children.

*Keywords: homeless, homeless students, educational attainment, access to education, public school, disadvantaged, at risk, low income*

Over 105,000 students, approximately one of every 10 children in the New York City public school system, experienced homelessness during the 2016-2017 school year (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2018a).<sup>1</sup> Homeless students test well behind their housed peers: For example, in NYC in 2016, only 21% of 3-8<sup>th</sup> grade homeless students met grade-level standards in English compared to 36% of low-income housed students and 68% of non-low-income housed students (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2017). In 2017, homeless children in Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelters attended school only 84% of school days (Coalition for the Homeless 2017). Eighteen percent of homeless students dropped out compared to 9% total who dropped out in 2016 (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2016). Clearly, homeless children are poorly positioned, compared to their housed peers, to make use of their educational opportunities. Schools and policymakers must identify and diminish the educational barriers blocking homeless children from academic success.

Homeless children struggle with interlocking issues, especially with poor mental and emotional health. School transfers are well-known to be detrimental (Sparks 2016) and become common as students transfer to distant shelters with insufficient transportation. Homeless children lack numerous basic necessities. School officials are unable to adequately connect parents and students to supportive workshops, programs, and organizations. Finally, schools have particular difficulties supporting special needs students who are also homeless.

### ***Brief overview of law applied to homeless students in NYC***

This section outlines the framework of laws and policies, spanning national, state, and city levels, that support the growing population of homeless students.

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<sup>1</sup>This proportion, which is based on data from the NYC DOE, includes children in the shelter system as well as in other temporary living situations, such as students living in residential motels.

### *Federal legislation*

The primary law declaring homeless children’s educational rights in NYC is the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B, which states: “Each State educational agency shall ensure that each [homeless] child...has *equal access to the same... public education [and other services]* ...as provided to other children and youths...to ensure that [they] have an opportunity to meet the same challenging State academic standards...” (42 U.S.C. § 11431 (1,4)). Subtitle VII-B defines homeless children to be those who lack “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” The McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) requires that states and districts provide services, including transportation to a school of origin, to permit homeless students’ immediate enrollment at school and school activities. The Act provides funding that can be used for a variety of resources enabling homeless students to excel at school, including: clothing, food, school supplies, student and testing fees, medical care and documentation, counseling, outreach, and tutoring (Duffield, Julianelle and Santos 2016). The MVA also requires the appointment of liaisons who identify and connect homeless students with school faculty, shelter staff, and outside services (42 U.S.C. § 11432).

The McKinney-Vento Act (MVA) was augmented and reauthorized (U.S. Department of Education 2016) by Title IX of the ESSA §§ 9111-1112 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which took effect on October 1, 2016. The ESSA includes expanded transportation protections until the end of the school year for temporarily housed students who move into permanent housing (Title IX Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 §§ 9101-9215).

### *New York State Constitution and New York City law and policy*

New York State is obliged to provide a basic education through high school as delineated in Article XI of the New York State Constitution: “The legislature shall provide for the

maintenance and support of a system of free common schools, wherein all the children of this state may be educated” (NY. Const. art. 1, § 17).

One significant policy exists to protect the mental health of NYC’s homeless students: the 2017 Bridging the Gap Initiative. In fiscal year 2017, funding was allocated specifically to support the social and emotional needs of homeless students in the 32 NYC public elementary and middle schools with the largest number of students residing in shelters. These schools did not previously have a social worker on staff (NYC Department of Education 2017). On January 19, 2016, another significant policy change went into effect requiring busing of all K-6 homeless students to any school in a direct effort to simplify commutes by replacing subway rides with school bus rides. This policy is intended to serve roughly an additional 3,600 students with 150 new bus routes (Russo, Stulberger and Givens 2016).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Organization and contributions of this paper***

This paper focuses on solutions that are currently or that can be implemented in legislation, policies, and school initiatives to mitigate barriers to the academic success of homeless K-12 students. My research fills gaps in the existing body of knowledge regarding mental and emotional health. It begins with a literature review before moving on to a discussion of research methodology and findings, categorized into 5 primary issues that homeless students face:

- (1) Location (of shelters in relation to school) and transportation (of students to school)
- (2) Mental and emotional health
- (3) “Basic needs” (laundry facilities, sufficient food, necessary paperwork, etc.)
- (4) Connections to outside resources
- (5) Needs of students with disabilities.

This is followed by a discussion of implications of my research on policy and administration.

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<sup>2</sup> Mayor de Blasio stated that 3,600 children had been denied bus service due to route limits and would receive bus service under this new policy. This improvement has not yet been confirmed.

## *Literature review*

Lafavor (2016) and the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (2017) find that homeless children enter school later than others and suffer math and language skill impairment. Students' performance is affected by stress due to sleep deprivation, emotional distress, social isolation, and exposure to dangerous situations. Ingram, et al. (2017) found that 72% of homeless students state that being homeless has a big impact on their ability to feel safe, 71% on their mental and emotional health, and 69% on their self-confidence. Homeless children's parents may be ill or overburdened with work, leaving young children with adult responsibilities (Elliott 2013). In 2015, homeless students attempted suicide at 3.5 times the rate of housed students in NYC (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2018b).

Food insecurity plagues children and influences their ability to do homework and excel in school (NYC Independent Budget Office 2016). Food is low-quality and difficult to access in many shelters (NYC Independent Budget Office 2016, 18). Even when children receive free school meals, they remain hungry over summer months and at dinnertime (Huang, Barnidge and Kim 2015), leading to long-term health issues, and to impaired academic performance.

Rumberger and Larson (1998) and Julianelle and Foscarinis (2003) identify major detriments of switching schools and suggest that the pros of remaining in the school of origin make most commutes worthwhile.<sup>3</sup> Homeless students change schools 10 times more often than housed peers in NYC (NYC Independent Budget Office 2016). School mobility leads to absences, general stress, loss of social capital, loss of paperwork, and new curricula that do not begin where students left off in the previous schools' curricula (Rumberger and Larson 1998;

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Rumberger and Larsen (1998) examined connections of "non-promotional school mobility" (changing schools when not graduating) between the 8th and 12th grades on dropout rates, finding that students who changed high schools two or more times were twice as likely as students who did not change schools to drop out.

Sparks 2016). Ensuing chaos increases grade retention and increases dropout rates and is directly associated with lower grades (Rumberger and Larson 1998; Sparks 2016).

Transportation and location clearly exacerbate school absences and transfers (e.g., Russo, Stulberger, and Givens 2016; NYC Independent Budget Office 2016). Russo and Stulberger (2015) found that schools have primarily complied with McKinney-Vento transportation demands by distributing subway vouchers instead of altering school bus routes.<sup>4</sup> Long and complicated commutes by public transport can be unsafe, stressful, and exhausting (NYC Independent Budget Office 2016). Due to the complexities of transportation, school attendance correlates with shelter proximity to children's schools (Coalition for the Homeless 2017; NYC Independent Budget Office 2016). During the 2014-15 school year, only about half of homeless families were placed in housing located in the same borough as their youngest child's school.

Despite educational barriers, many homeless children can and do succeed in school. Masten et al. (2015) identify helpful resources to mitigate disparities, including early childhood education, screening, and access to quality programs.<sup>5</sup> Masten et al.'s emphasis on resilience offers clues into practices already implemented by and for high-achieving homeless students; this paper extends such research.

## **Method**

This research employs interviews and surveys designed to extend extant results through structured queries and to obtain innovative, unexpected solutions through open-ended questions.

### ***Survey and interview designs***

My survey asked respondents to identify and expand upon: barriers homeless students face and the measures schools take to support homeless students, policies that support their

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<sup>4</sup> NYC Department of Education officials say that they offered buses to 2/3rds of eligible children living in shelters (Russo and Stulberger, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See Miller (2011) and Masten, A., Fiat, A.E., and Labella, M.H. (2015), 315-17

students, and resulting impact on student achievement. Many questions are open-ended, and all include an “other” option for elaboration. I include the MVA’s definition of homelessness in my e-mail solicitation and at the start of my survey. I e-mailed my survey to the school principals and “survey coordinators” of all 1,555 New York City public schools.

In a second step, I followed up with requests for interviews with principals, survey coordinators, and other administrators who took my survey and affirmed that I may contact them. These were semi-structured, open-ended informational interviews. I personalized my interviews to follow up on survey responses to identify how critical issues impact students, to learn more about unique practices mentioned in surveys, to assess whether these initiatives could be implemented in more widespread NYC Department of Education (DOE) policy, and to inquire after tangible evidence that tactics are improving students’ educational experiences.

### ***Descriptive statistics***

I obtained 63 survey responses from principals and “survey coordinators,” 49 of which were complete and 14 nearly complete. Some of my e-mails solicitations were sent to individuals who departed and referred me to their replacement. Some principals and survey coordinators forwarded my survey to other administrators to complete on their behalf. Thus, I received between 5 and 15 survey responses, from administrators and social workers, who were not the initial targets of my survey. I interviewed 4 principals, one assistant principal, one survey coordinator, two social workers, two teachers, and one administrator whose exact position was unclear. Most interviews were conducted over the phone; one was conducted in-person.<sup>6</sup>

## **Results**

In the tables that follow, some numbers point very clearly to the most pressing issues: 82% of respondents identified difficult commutes, 79.37% poor emotional health, and an

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<sup>6</sup> One participant was involved in a scandal, the nature of which compelled excluding his responses from my results.



additional 41.27% mental illness as “major issues” faced by homeless students at their schools (Table 1). These numbers echo the most significant findings of my interviews and short answer spaces: Mental and emotional health are far greater barriers than most academic literature suggests, and are disproportionately significant considering the minimal attention they are given in laws and policies. For this reason, my respondents have innovated a number of thoughtful actions to foster resilience, many of which center on community building and stress reduction.

**Insert Table 1 Approximately Here**

***Mental and emotional health***

*Emotional Health: Chronic fatigue, worry, low self-esteem, shyness*

My research indicates that intangible issues—emotional health and mental health—are the most pervasive problems that homeless students face. Poor emotional health is described in surveys by symptoms such as “chronic fatigue, chronic worrying [stress], low self-esteem, shyness.” As we see in Table 1, nearly 80% of survey responses report emotional health problems as one of the “major issues faced by homeless students at [their] school.”

Homeless students face the same academic worries as their housed peers, yet these are amplified by additional emotional and mental health hurdles. Respondents report that students face severe “emotional trauma” due to “shuffling” from school to school, moving where they live, issues at home that can include domestic violence, and isolation. Finally, children without stable homes frequently have responsibilities and worries that exceed what children their age are equipped to handle. My interviews show that these children often share their parents’ worries in the search for housing, employment, basic needs, and caring for younger siblings. Respondents are concerned that their students may also live in dangerous conditions at their shelters.

When children are saddled with adult responsibilities at shelters or overcrowded apartments, they cannot focus on homework. A number of my survey respondents and interviewees reported that homeless students inconsistently complete homework due to stress and distractions after school. These students arrive at school exhausted, unhappy, or distracted by problems lingering from the previous night. Students with these emotional experiences can display “defiant” and “impulsive” misbehaviors or may instead stop talking and withdraw into themselves. One of my respondents spoke of a student of hers who did not want to attend class due to stress from his housing situation. This student regularly acted out so that he would be sent out of class. These misbehaviors stopped when he moved into permanent housing.

As policies lag, individual faculty do what they can to aid students’ emotional well-being. One survey respondent summed up goals for reinforcing emotional health: “Our school has built a strong social emotional component to each day so that students have an opportunity to define how they feel, express concerns that they might have as well as [create] a tool box of strategies to use throughout the day and at home.” Setting out clear goals has helped this school pinpoint best practices: “We have a big arts program and we put on a school play each year. Students...have the opportunity to be a part of this community and at the same time develop self-confidence. We have three guidance counselors as well as small class size, with most classes having two teachers.” The goal of giving students a chance to “define how they feel, express concerns... [and create] a toolbox of strategies...” led the school to develop an extracurricular program, theatre, that develops confidence in self-expression. Small class sizes and the presence of counselors make it easier for students to find an adult with whom they can “express concerns.” This example shows how having a clear understanding of what constitutes good emotional health helps schools develop precise strategies for boosting emotional health.

Many survey respondents and interviewees reported providing, out of school budgets or out of pocket, more mental and emotional health counseling and recruiting more social workers than is required by law and the *Bridging the Gap* initiative. My interviews and surveys revealed a number of additional innovative responses to student stress:

- One school established a lecture series called *What It Takes*: “Among the presenters we had Pulitzer Prize [sic] Winners Junot Diaz and Sandra Cisneros.”
- “...After identifying the [homeless] students, we involve them in building facilities issues such as having them attend school safety meeting, having them operate the school's sustainability plan, school garden and school store. It helps build a sense of security and belonging to a stable envir[o]nment.”
- One school established a comfort dog program, inspired after the initiative expanded from 6 to 60 other schools in two years. These comfort dogs come with a curriculum on socio-emotional learning.
- Faculty buy holiday gifts for each student.
- Several schools established arts programs to develop community and self-expression.
- Schools make extracurriculars mandatory.
- One school established a health clinic inside the school building.
- One school established a partnership with the Child Mind Institute, whose counselors come directly to the school to meet with students.

*Mental health: Anxiety, ADD, and unidentified medical conditions*

My survey gives the following as examples of mental illness: depression, anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In Table 1, we saw that 41% of survey responses report mental health problems as one of the “major issues faced by homeless students at [their] school.” A respondent explained that some students take medications for mental health issues that have side effects causing them to act out and to fall asleep in class. Information regarding their specific illnesses and medications must be confidential, making these side effects challenging to adequately address. The issue is compounded by a lack of coordination between schools and doctors. There is no apparent ad-hoc method that can sufficiently address mental illness; changes must be made at a citywide level, in law and policy,

to emphasize diagnosis and professional treatment of mental illnesses through counseling and coordination between doctors and schools.

### *Social connections*

Homeless children struggle to build social capital due to the nature of their housing, the frequency with which they change schools, and stigma. The expectation of stigma can compel homeless students to develop secretive habits, hiding their situation from faculty and liaisons who otherwise could have supported them. Inevitably, students who frequently change schools lose social ties, keeping students isolated from homework assistance and valuable information traveling by word-of-mouth. Homeless students are most commonly isolated from peers due to frequent school transfers, inability to maintain their desired hygiene routine, or emotional issues such as poor anger management, shyness, or depression.

My respondents reported doing the following non-mandated activities with the express purpose of improving the social lives of homeless students:

- Distributing hygiene materials such as wipes and deodorant
- Including discussions of poverty and homelessness in social studies lessons
- Introducing “Student Buddies to support and provide social and emotional balance”
- Offering a wide range of and/or making extracurricular activities mandatory.

Many respondents echo the notion that extracurriculars are key to community building. A number of survey respondents also voiced that extracurricular activities keep students away from tumultuous living conditions and responsibilities at the shelter or in overcrowded apartments. They are instead welcomed where they can be supported by attentive teachers, given academically enriching rather than age-inappropriate responsibilities, and may receive food.

Unfortunately, schools do not have enough extracurriculars that are accessible to homeless students. One survey respondent said he/she cannot currently but would like to

“provide after-school tutoring and field trip opportunities for students...work[ing] around social-emotional development of students and how [to] best support children through the arts, sports, and counseling.” Another respondent would like “Additional funding/ resources for weekend enrichment.” One interviewee bemoans that the policy of acceptance into extracurriculars through lottery rather than priority hinders availability to those students that need them most. One respondent even suggested that policies should emphasize community and extracurriculars: “Maybe policies should emphasize community, mental health, extracurriculars that also keep these kids away from unstable ‘home’ life.”

### ***Transportation and Location***

A major problem preventing homeless children from accessing education lies in the choice between suffering a long commute to stay in one school and transferring to a new school. School mobility leads to noticeably reduced attendance and grades, changes in curricula and teaching style, disrupted bonds with peers and faculty, and practical maneuvering issues that come with moving physical belongings. As we saw in Table 1 above, 50.79% of my respondents cited frequent school transfers as a major issue faced by their homeless students.

Long and complicated solo commutes by public transport can be tiring and unsafe for young children and for students of all ages who have a disability. My interviewees explained that parents are reluctant to leave young or disabled children alone for lengthy commutes, even by bus. Parents worry about leaving their children unattended for so long and also worry that if there is an emergency at school, they will not be able to arrive on campus quickly. One interviewee’s students must board a bus in the Bronx at 5A.M. to arrive at their Brooklyn school and exhibit severe behavioral issues while sitting, bored, on the bus for over two hours. My interviewees explained that students frequently miss school after relocating as they wait for their

school buses to reroute, and that absences are most common among young children and students with disabilities who require supervision on the subway that working parents cannot provide.

Travel vouchers are popular; Table 2 indicates 46% of schools surveyed provide travel vouchers to homeless students, normally given directly to students by an administrator or liaison. Another 54% provide bus service to students in shelters and 11.11% provide bus service to doubled-up students (who are the majority of homeless students).

**INSERT TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE**

My interviewees have yet to see any change in busing after Mayor de Blasio's new policy expanding the bus system went into effect. Unfortunately, as seen in Table 1, 27% of respondents reported inadequate space on or coordination with school buses. While schools await full effects of de Blasio's new policy, they work individually to improve transportation for homeless students. As we will see in Table 3 shortly, 11% of survey respondents reported that staff accompany homeless students on public transportation when needed. This action is critical when parents have conflicts such as work or mandatory shelter meetings.

Interviewees reported a significant lag time, regularly lasting around two weeks, in bus reroutes, including for special needs students. Some administrators take steps to speed up bus reroutes: One interviewee at a school with many special needs students communicates directly with bus drivers, an activity that is not required by law and may at times involve requests that are necessary but in conflict with policy, in order to hasten rerouting after a homeless student changes location. This respondent does so in order to bypass the City's standard bureaucratic procedure that interferes with students' consistent attendance. Bus reroutes are particularly crucial because these disabled students cannot take public transportation without supervision.

Despite impressive efforts to comply with laws on transportation, certain isolated or distant shelter locations simply doom any efforts to transport students to school, even with aid from the City provided under the MVA. My interviews and surveys revealed the following examples of poor location overwhelming transportation efforts:

- A doubled-up mother was moved into permanent housing so far from her toddler’s school that not even a rerouted bus would suffice; the mother was afraid to leave her child alone on a bus for so long. With no viable transportation, this child left the school.
- Numerous students commute 2+ hours from Bronx shelters to Brooklyn and Manhattan schools. This is more common among special needs students who cannot find a closer school of similar caliber.
- Students placed in the Bronx frequently leave Brooklyn schools despite being aware of their right to remain in the schools.
- Students placed outside of NYC no longer retain full NYC transportation rights.
- Families are frequently given almost no warning when transferred to a new shelter, impeding parents from accompanying young and special needs children on commutes.

As we saw in Table 1, 83% of respondents state that children have difficult commutes.

These students frequently arrive at school late and exhausted even though they are provided with Metro-Cards or school bus services in accordance with McKinney-Vento guidelines. Even a strong and fully functional bus service cannot solve all location-based barriers; these students’ problems can only be solved by policies giving students permanent housing or space in shelters closer to their original schools. One survey respondent left the following quote in the comments section: “What would help the most [out of any possible change or initiative] is to provide shelters in the boroughs that the students were living in prior to becoming homeless.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***Basic needs***

Table 1 noted that 60.32% of respondents reported their homeless students lacked amenities such as printers, school supplies, and basic facilities at shelters; 46.03% reported food

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<sup>7</sup> De Blasio has increasingly emphasized placing homeless individuals in shelters that are in the same borough as their homes had been.

insecurity; and 39.68% reported inadequate study spaces. Table 3 details school supports covering a variety of basic needs.

**INSERT TABLE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE**

*Food insecurity*

All homeless children are eligible for free school lunches, but this does not eliminate food insecurity. Forty-six percent of my survey responses mark food insecurity as one of homeless students' greatest concerns (Table 1). Hunger leads to poor physical and mental health, behavior problems, and low educational achievements.

Interviews reveal a number of improvised approaches to minimizing student hunger. School staff turn a blind eye to hungry students grabbing extra fruits or packaged foods to take home. Staff often go further and send homeless students home with goodie bags of fruit, packaged foods, and food that would otherwise be discarded. Other schools send home food baskets over the holidays or as part of rigged raffles. The raffles are particularly beneficial because only the person who sets up the raffle will know that it is rigged to be won by homeless parents. This subtlety eliminates both the personal shame of asking for help and the public embarrassment that comes with publicizing aid. These are creative, immediate, necessary solutions, but they are inconsistent and rely on the kindness of individuals.

These individual solutions can be formalized in individual schools' partnerships with shelters and outside resources, and in creation of more lasting infrastructure on campus. For example, to more consistently feed homeless students, one interviewee partners with the NYC Food Pantry and with an organization that feeds students over weekends. He also holds a winter holiday event, at which food and book-bags are distributed, at the shelter housing many of his



students. This school is additionally starting a pantry on campus, a unique strategy among NYC schools, because parents have voiced discomfort going to food pantries elsewhere.

Another school has established a culinary program and various food shops on campus, and allows students to drop off their backpacks to be discretely filled with food items and lists of nearby food banks. The common practice of dropping off food in backpacks is ambiguously addressed by the Department of Health.<sup>8</sup> My respondent carries on anyway because it is a simple and effective response to a substantial need. These ideas battle student hunger more consistently and over a longer time frame than sending students home with leftovers or snacks.

An especially interesting and reliable remedy to food insecurity has been implemented in a public school in one of the City's poorest neighborhoods. This school has partnered with a chef who runs a program teaching parents how to cook simple, cheap, and healthy meals with ingredients available to them in the neighborhood or through the school's pantry. The result is sustainable education for parents lasting long after the children graduate or switch schools.

### *Income*

Students struggle in school due to a lack of stable family income. Respondents report that financial worries interfere with general well-being and may interfere with academics as high school students take higher-paying jobs over academically relevant ones or leave school to work.

Schools do the following to augment students' income:

- Financially support homeless families and even contribute to new housing funds out of pocket
- Connect parents to jobs and teach job skills through adult education
- Connect students to jobs and teach job skills
- Certain schools have been able to connect students to paid internships that are relevant to their studies.

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<sup>8</sup> The Department of Health enforces strict and complex rules regarding the approved types and methods of food distribution to students. For more information, see <https://www.health.ny.gov> and <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/index.page>.

One of my interviewees has a student whose father was recently deported under the Trump administration's new policies, leaving her family destitute and forcing them to move in with extended family. Because this girl must support her family in her father's absence, it is critical to her education that the school has connected her with a paid internship that is relevant to her studies and therefore a continuum of—rather than a departure from—her education. Her school principal further explained that 2/3 of his student body, homeless and otherwise, is set up with such paid internships that are relevant to their academic interests. However, he takes special care to place low-income students. These paid internships are not required by any law or policy, yet they are invaluable: Students do not have to choose between survival and school success.

Homeless students struggle to buy school supplies. My survey respondents reported buying supplies out of pocket for homeless students, such as: alarm clocks, goodie bags and basic supply bags, glasses, and hearing aids. Several interviewees said that their and other schools carry out annual rigged raffles that include school supplies. Finally, one school holds school events, located at students' shelters, where backpacks are distributed.

#### *Problems in shelter infrastructure*

Shelter rules, procedures, and facilities can conflict with parents' responsibilities to accompany their children to school, or with children's ability to attend and excel. For example, numerous surveys and interviews indicate that homeless students are most easily identified, and are frequently ostracized by peers, because they attend school out of uniform or in one dirty outfit that they cannot wash. Critically, there is *no* law requiring laundry facilities for family shelters, so they are not consistently provided or functional (NYC Independent Budget Office 2016, V, 17). Referring back to Table 1, 34.92% of survey respondents stated that their homeless students did not have adequate laundry facilities.

Schools find various ad-hoc means of getting students into clean clothes:

- Numerous schools discretely gift students extra pairs of underwear and socks.
- A few other schools, 7% of those surveyed, have installed washer-dryers or provide laundry supplies for student and parent use.
- Several survey respondents wrote that they supply haircuts to homeless students.
- One principal of a special needs school with many homeless students proudly states that a housed student began a Girl Scout project quietly providing homeless students with gender and age-appropriate underwear, socks, books, and toys. Her three other siblings are now involved.

Quiet, safe study spaces are elusive. Most principals state on surveys and in interviews that their homeless students have trouble completing homework in part because they have nowhere quiet to work off of campus. Table 3 states that school closing times vary greatly, and schools close as early as 2:00P.M. Table 3 reports that 83% of schools do *not* provide a place for students to work on weekends, perhaps aggravating the challenges faced by nearly 40% of students who do not have adequate study spaces (Table 2).

Some technical procedures cause problems for students. Shelters hold mandatory meetings and have varying job requirements in order to remain under the shelter's roof or to obtain certain housing vouchers. When there is conflict between work or meetings and school attendance, maintaining shelter eligibility holds priority. According to one respondent, a complication with the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) negatively affects older special needs students:<sup>9</sup> When young adult students choose to sign up at the PATH separately from parents, they are required to attend PATH meetings alone. However, special needs students may not understand PATH procedures and may be unable to remember or produce mandatory information.

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<sup>9</sup> All homeless families with children must apply for shelter at the DHS' Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center located in the Bronx.

There are few options for individual schools and school staff to ameliorate problems caused by infrastructure. However, schools improvise ways to step in. The interviewee who related her special needs students' difficulties navigating the PATH system also supports these students behind-the-scenes by sending and reminding them of relevant information. Ten to seventeen percent of my survey respondents say their schools open their doors to students during weekends, and 42% of schools stay open until 6P.M. One school surveyed allows students to work on campus until 7P.M. When parents make requests to their shelters and are met with non-compliance, school administrators sometimes volunteer to accompany parents to demand compliance. One respondent even transports families from old to new shelters and supports them in court. Another survey respondent helps parents navigate bureaucracy by simply providing useful materials: [Our school's] "Parent Place meeting center provides a computer, printer, phone... in a comfortable space for parents of homeless students to complete required paperwork, phone calls and meetings."

### ***Connections to outside resources***

Inadequate connection to outside services (anything from neighborhood food pantries to housing assistance services) is the most common "major challenge faced by [schools] in supporting homeless students;" 62% of survey respondents recognized this as a major barrier. The NYC school system simply cannot provide all supports for homeless families, especially with limited funding; almost 45% of survey respondents lamented insufficient funding (Table 1).

Respondents state their schools struggle to connect parents to outside services because many parents are too busy to attend the workshops and information sessions that schools hold in partnership with outside organizations. Additionally, students are unable to go to certain service centers because their schooldays end after many service centers close. School personnel also

struggle to connect with shelters and with outside resources. Many individual school staff and administrators report doing time-consuming “footwork” attempting to get hold of uncooperative stakeholders. One principal has been waiting for five months for an education liaison at a shelter to return her phone-call on behalf of a student. She personally visited the shelter to get hold of shelter staff directly because the liaison has not facilitated communication.

Many schools creatively connect parents with outside services:

- Respondents’ schools provide online resource and career workshops in addition to in-person workshops to appeal to embarrassed or overbooked parents.
- Schools provide adult education for parents.
- Schools provide assistance with job placement for parents and children.
- Schools provide connections to legal help, particularly for restraining orders and pathways to citizenship.
- Frustrated faculty make a point of “pounding the pavement” to make necessary connections between their schools and their students’ shelters.

Several interviewees separately expressed the same policy change request: Mandatory meetings should take place between shelter staff, school administration, and parents within days of the arrival of any homeless student on campus. Such communication could resolve conflicts in infrastructure, create more efficient support systems, and give faculty and staff a venue to collaborate to support students.

### ***Support of students with disabilities***

My research indicates that schools struggle more to support students with disabilities when they are homeless. Table 1 indicates that 48% of my survey respondents named "inadequate means to support students with physical, mental, or educational disabilities" as a major challenge faced by their schools in supporting homeless students. Schools with high numbers of students with disabilities struggle to manage students’ disabilities because they struggle to determine their exact needs, especially when students have cognitive disabilities and

their needs are not immediately apparent. Several respondents reported that medical documents are often lost in transit as homeless students move location. They explain that since school personnel cannot diagnose disabilities, including learning disabilities, the lack of medical documentation and diagnoses prevents schools from providing appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to address the disabilities.

Students with disabilities may face additional responsibilities and hurdles at their shelters that lead to general stress and fatigue impacting their schoolwork. Shelters are regularly insensitive to or unaware of the needs of disabled students. One interviewee explained that some shelters run after-school programs that are not open to special needs students at all. One respondent noted that students with cognitive or “invisible” disabilities maybe left unsupervised at inappropriate times because their mental or emotional needs are not known to staff. This respondent described how a student in a wheelchair was housed on the third floor of a shelter with a defective elevator. He had to be carried up and down the stairs each day by his mother, who was smaller than he was at the time.

A respondent stated that shelters regularly give a mere 6-hour notice when transferring residents; she has an autistic student who was moved with this 6-hour notice. As a result of this already stressful and triggering move, the student’s bus took several days to reroute, leaving him without reliable transportation to school. He was given a MetroCard by the City, but due to his special needs, his mother had to accompany him to school. She arrived late to work for days until his bus rerouted, and nearly lost her job.

Schools report the following actions to support students with disabilities:

- Create a deliberate increase in communication and transparency
- Meet individually with shelter staff, doctors, or parents to sort out medical histories
- Choose to provide busing to all disabled students based on their IEPs

- Ensure bus routes and schedules are current by handing notes directly to drivers
- Provide physical therapy for students with physical disabilities
- Provide occupational training, sign language courses, and hearing services for students with disabilities
- Ensure students connect with disability services and food stamp centers.

Communication among stakeholders is vital: One respondent asserts that everyone involved in disabled students' lives should simply be aware that these students have special needs so that they are prepared to adjust to these needs as necessary.

### **Discussion**

In the following section, I compare current practices to applicable standards, particularly the MVA requirement for equal academic access and opportunities, as outlined earlier. and proceed with recommendations for policies and other actions.

#### ***Gap analysis: Equalizing access to quality education***

My results concerning lack of connections to outside resources, undiagnosed mental health issues, and neglect of students' disabilities all point to an overarching lack of coordination between stakeholders. The MVA acknowledges the importance of communication and appoints liaisons mandated to coordinate between LEAs, shelters, and a wide range of agencies and programs (42 U.S.C. § 11432). However, principals and social workers report taking on extra, inefficient legwork because formal policies and liaisons do not adequately coordinate as per McKinney-Vento requirements. Policies must be amended to expand the number of liaisons or support and streamline their work with mandatory meetings, a suggestion that I address shortly.

Children cannot reach full academic potential when their mental or emotional health is compromised, and yet, there are no sufficient policies or widespread initiatives to aid and protect homeless students' mental health. This is in part because mental health is downplayed in the primary relevant laws, the MVA and the ESSA. The MVA only requires connections to mental

health services; it does not require any in-school mental health services. At present, schools and social workers such as *Bridging the Gap* social workers go above and beyond the MVA and ESSA requirements for mental health protections, yet continue to report emotional and mental health as enormous barriers to homeless students' education. Title 42 of the U.S. Code, § 11432 (g)(F)(iii) mandates that schools ensure homeless students "do not face barriers to accessing academic and extracurricular activities." However, many respondents say their schools do not have enough extracurriculars accessible to homeless students. I will discuss shortly the role that extracurricular activities could play in bolstering mental health through the creation of social connections, provisions for both outlets and advice, and the simple fact that they would keep children away from stressful shelter or doubled-up apartment environments.

Although the legal provisions of the MVA and ESSA focus on transportation of homeless students and have led to significant progress in their transport overall, transportation practices have yet to successfully eliminate barriers, as the MVA requires, to homeless students' attendance at their original school. Homeless students' access to education is disproportionately affected by chaotic transportation. Despite Mayor de Blasio's expansion of the bus system in January 2016, as of November 2017 no interviewees reported improvements in their students' busing. Furthermore, as addressed in the transportation section of my results, many interviewees reported a significant lag time, regularly lasting around two weeks, when rerouting busing through the standard bureaucratic system. During this time frame, students struggle to get to school or cannot attend at all.

### ***Recommendations for policy and administration***

The most pressing need for policy change is with respect to mental and emotional health. Unfortunately, as I have discussed, the MVA and ESSA mention mental health only in passing,



and make no mention of emotional health, despite 41.27% of principals reporting mental health problems and 80% reporting emotional health problems among homeless students (Table 1). State and City laws and State, City, and school policies must compensate for shortcomings in federal laws to reach educational needs and the MVA requirement for equal opportunity to perform to State academic standards.

My research subjects already implement many non-required supports that could become useful additions to policy. As my interviewees bemoaned, neither the MVA nor the ESSA mandates counselling for students. Several respondents bring in more social workers than are required by law, and many more express a desire to do so if they can afford it in the future. Based on these interests, future legal amendments and policies at state, city, and district levels should explicitly mandate and fund social workers' presence in all schools with homeless students, as was begun by the *Bridging the Gap* policy.

Many respondents suggest that policies should emphasize extracurriculars, especially those that “work around social-emotional development of students.” One respondent suggests that the policy of acceptance into activities should be based partly on priority rather than solely on the current lottery system. According to respondents, many extracurricular activities are especially inaccessible to homeless students with disabilities. Schools should be required by law, and supported by policy, to train staff in handling special needs in extracurricular settings. Suitable transportation must also be provided; some extracurricular activities, like gym and art classes, might be added into school days to beat shelter curfews or to avoid the need to arrange additional after-school busing. An individual school policy or perhaps DOE policy in support of expansion of extracurricular activities available to homeless students would be a particularly

cost-effective means to further support emotional health, boost social networks, spread the word about helpful programs and expand students' support systems.

There are many creative, often low-cost possibilities to expand extracurriculars. I recommend that schools follow the process described earlier in which a survey respondent developed precise extracurricular programming strategies to promote good emotional health, particularly through the creation of a “tool box of strategies” and “self-confidence.” Other schools could follow suit, adjusting extracurriculars to the needs of their particular student bodies. For example, it would cost schools little to implement a sketch club that could serve as a relaxing and low-stress environment to socialize, “define how [participants] feel,” and “express concerns” as the above school administrator suggested. Furthermore, the field of art therapy has demonstrated art's therapeutic properties.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps another school could reach its mental and emotional health goals by forming parent clubs that would provide “help for parents to combat the problems at the root of their homelessness (jobs, education, discrimination, gentrification).”

Policies should be placed to solidify communication networks between organizations and schools. These could include increased in-school publicity for services, creation of a system to efficiently match organizations with schools, or mandatory meetings between organization staff and school staff. Interestingly, multiple interviewees and survey respondents independently voiced the same policy suggestion: All suggest holding meetings, at the start of each school year or within days of the arrival of a new homeless student, between school staff, shelter staff, and homeless students' guardians. This policy suggestion would facilitate communication, encourage strategies and efficiency to support students, eliminate time spent on informal and disorganized “footwork” by individuals, and open up a mechanism for voicing grievances.

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<sup>10</sup> Art therapy is a form of expression-based therapy in which a psychiatrist guides and evaluates art projects that the patient makes as part of a therapeutic program.

The NYC Health Department places numerous complex regulations on the type, quality, and manner of food distribution.<sup>11</sup> These regulations, put into practice, can impede individual and informal school efforts to provide food aid to students in need. Many of my respondents resort to putting snacks, leftovers, cereals, etc. into students' backpacks, raffle baskets, or hands. These crucial tactics are common yet are not necessarily in accord with NYC Health Department regulations. New York State or City could implement a variation on the 1996 Federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act to override Health Department regulations to provide immunity for contributions of food to homeless children.<sup>12</sup> Alternately, the NYC Health Department and DOE could collaborate on a set of regulations to safely accept, store, and distribute informal contributions of food to children.

### ***Concluding comments***

Extant literature emphasizes problems and policy solutions concerning transportation to school and locations of shelters in proximity to school. My research finds that poor mental and emotional health is an even more substantial barrier preventing homeless students from equal access to quality education, and proceeds to fill this gap in the literature. It also expands on other obstacles to equal educational opportunities. My findings focus on both difficulties that homeless students face and creative methods by which schools support students in handling them. I hope that this research will spark further research and activism and will ultimately improve the experience of homeless students by influencing policy, legislation, and our understanding of educational standards.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see <https://www.health.ny.gov> and <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/index.page>.

<sup>12</sup> “If some or all of the donated food and grocery products do not meet all quality and labeling standards imposed by Federal, State, and local laws and regulations, the person or gleaner who donates the food and grocery products shall not be subject to civil or criminal liability...” (42 U.S. Code § 1791 (e)).

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## Tables

<b>What are the major issues faced by homeless students at your school? Check any that apply:</b>		<b>What are the major challenges faced by your school in supporting homeless students? Check all that apply:</b>	
Difficult commutes	<b>82.54%</b>	Inadequate coordination with services	<b>61.90%</b>
Poor emotional health (i.e. chronic fatigue, chronic worrying, low self-esteem, shyness)	<b>79.37%</b>	Inadequate means to support students with physical, mental, or educational disabilities	<b>47.62%</b>
Lack of other amenities (i.e. printer, school supplies, basic facilities at shelters)	<b>60.32%</b>	Inadequate funding	<b>44.44%</b>
Frequent school transfers	<b>50.79%</b>	Difficulty identifying students in need	<b>36.51%</b>
Inadequate study spaces	<b>39.68%</b>	Limited time among administrators and teachers	<b>31.75%</b>
Food insecurity	<b>46.03%</b>	Complications in obtaining funding	<b>15.87%</b>
Mental illness (i.e. depression, anxiety, OCD, ADD)	<b>41.27%</b>	Inadequate space on or coordination with school buses	<b>26.98%</b>
Missing paperwork	<b>26.98%</b>	Inadequate coordination with administrators	<b>12.70%</b>
Inadequate laundry facilities	<b>34.92%</b>	Other (please specify)	<b>20.63%</b>
Inadequate social support from other students	<b>11.11%</b>		
Inadequate social support from teachers, administrators, liaisons	<b>17.46%</b>		
Early shelter curfews	<b>7.94%</b>		
Other (please specify)	<b>17.46%</b>		

**Table 1: Challenges Faced by Homeless Children and Schools Supporting Them**

<b>Which of the following does your school do to support homeless students? Check any that apply:</b>		<b>If your school distributes travel vouchers to students, how are travel vouchers distributed?</b>	
Provide transportation vouchers	<b>46.03%</b>	From administrator to student	<b>31.82%</b>
Provide bus service to students in shelters	<b>53.97%</b>	From teacher to student	<b>11.36%</b>
Provide bus service to students in “doubled up” housing	<b>11.11%</b>	From liaison to student	<b>45.45%</b>
		From administrator to parent	<b>11.36%</b>
		From teacher to parent	<b>2.27%</b>
		From liaison to parent	<b>13.64%</b>
		Other (please specify)	<b>31.82%</b>

**Table 2: Transportation-Related Activities to Support Homeless Children**

	<b>Which of the following does your school do to support homeless students? Check any that apply:</b>		<b>Do students have a place that remains open ON CAMPUS to do work on weekends?</b>	
<b>Meals</b>	Provide free lunch	<b>90.48%</b>	Yes	<b>16.95%</b>
	Provide free breakfast	<b>92.06%</b>	No	<b>83.05%</b>
<b>Study Support</b>	Provide tutoring	<b>65.08%</b>	<b>How late can students remain ON CAMPUS after school to do homework?</b>	
	Remain open on weekends for use as student study space	<b>9.52%</b>		
<b>Laundry</b>	Provide laundry facilities	<b>6.35%</b>	Until 4pm	<b>10.17%</b>
<b>Additional Teacher and Staff Support</b>	“Assign” teachers to carefully monitor and support children with a drop in grades	<b>46.03%</b>	Until 5pm	<b>22.03%</b>
	“Assign” teachers to carefully monitor and support children who are frequently absent or tardy	<b>55.56%</b>	Until 6pm	<b>42.37%</b>
	Call parents if children are chronically absent	<b>85.71%</b>	Until after 6pm	<b>5.08%</b>
	“Assign” a staff member to commute with children who live far away or in dangerous/ high-traffic areas	<b>11.11%</b>	Other (please specify)	<b>18.64%</b>

**Table 3: Non-Transport School Efforts to Support Homeless Children**