

IMPROVING OPPORTUNITY & ACHIEVEMENT FOR STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Recommendations for New York's Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The new federal education law known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is an opportunity for New York State to focus attention, urgency, and resources on ensuring that schools enable all students—including the most vulnerable—to achieve at high levels.

Students in temporary housing—commonly referred to as homeless students—are a particularly vulnerable population, given the trauma they have been exposed to both before and as a result of their homelessness. Yet their needs often go unrecognized, or worse yet, ignored in schools. At the same time, it is not uncommon for schools to offer a student's homeless status as an excuse for his or her poor academic performance. Students experiencing homelessness, however, can and do excel academically when provided the right school supports.

School districts reported that 148,215 New York students were in temporary housing in the 2016-17 school year (a number generally regarded as far lower than the actual number of homeless students because of difficulties with identification).¹ ESSA provides New York with a prime opportunity to focus on these students so that they can meet their academic potential. ESSA draws attention to the needs of students experiencing homelessness in two important ways:

- Under ESSA, **states are now required to separately report on academic outcomes for students in temporary housing**, including grade 3-8 assessments and high school graduation rates. This reporting transparency can help ensure that homeless students' performance and

needs will be considered as part of the school improvement process.

- A number of changes to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the federal law promoting school stability for students in temporary housing, were also included in ESSA. These changes provide **additional protections for students experiencing homelessness to ensure that they have access to the same educational programs and services as their permanently housed peers**, such as access to early childhood education and school transportation.

Why are these provisions so important? Because right now, students experiencing homelessness are frequently under-served by our education system.

Our coalition of civil rights, education, parent, and business organizations believes that ESSA should be used as a powerful tool to change the trajectory for homeless student outcomes.

A review of the data on achievement levels for students in temporary housing across New York State highlights why this is so critical.

SHINING A LIGHT ON ACHIEVEMENT FOR STUDENTS IN TEMPORARY HOUSING

Our analysis focused on results from the 2015-16 state assessments in English language arts (ELA) and math for students in grades 3-8.² More than 90,000 test-takers—10 percent of all students who took the state assessments—were either homeless in the 2015-16 school year or formerly homeless at any time since

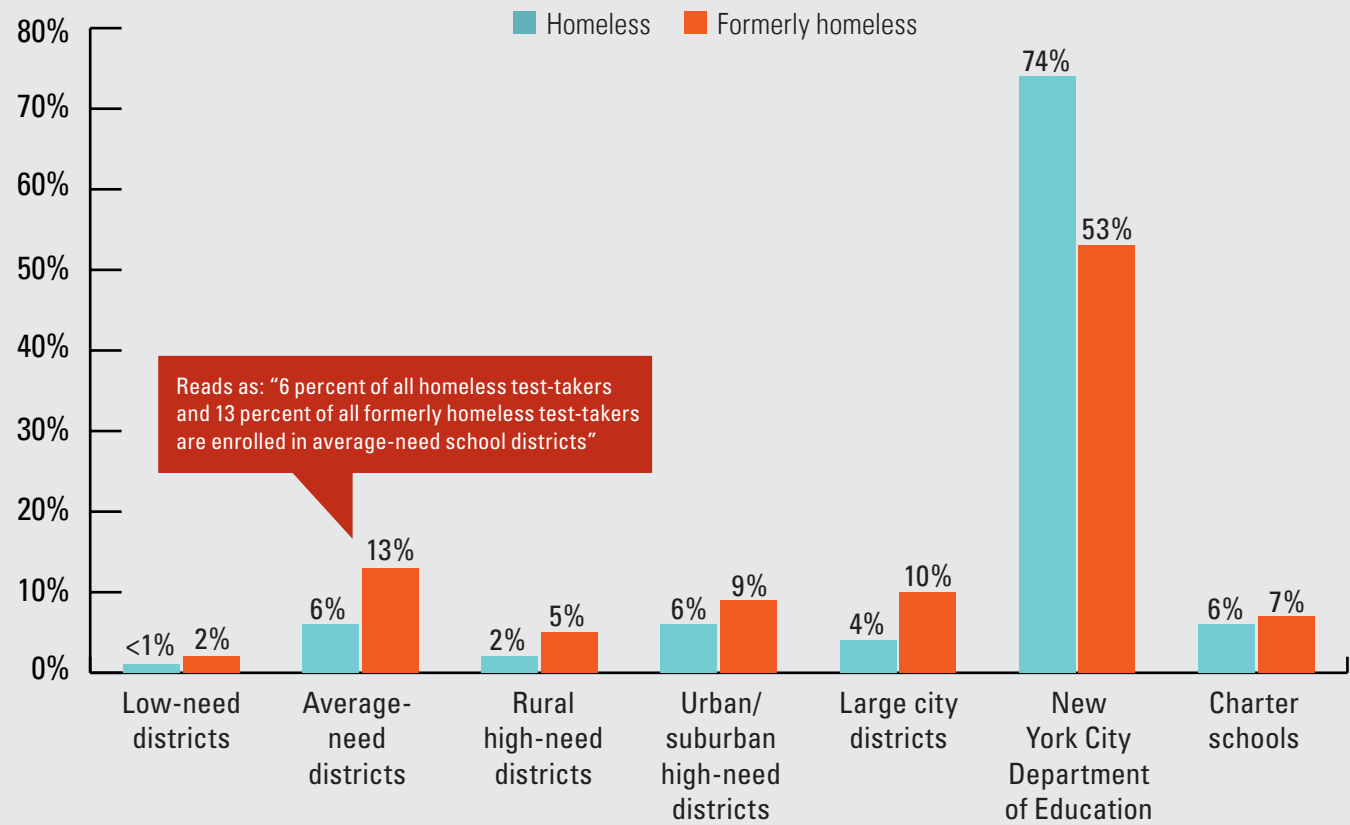


kindergarten or when they enrolled in New York State public schools. These students are enrolled in schools across the state; in fact, while at least three-quarters of

test-takers in temporary housing are in New York City, more than 40 percent of *formerly homeless* test-takers are educated in schools in the rest of the state (see Figure 1).

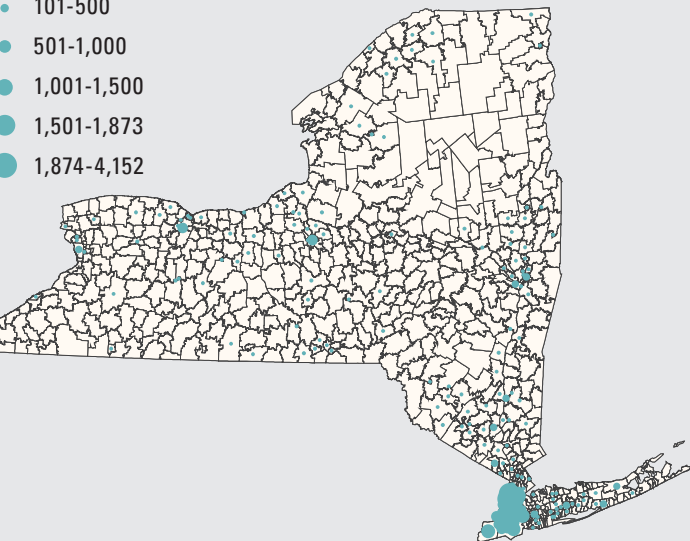
Figure 1: Where homeless and formerly homeless test-takers attend school

Share of the state’s homeless and formerly homeless English language arts (ELA) test-takers who are enrolled in each school district need/resource capacity category



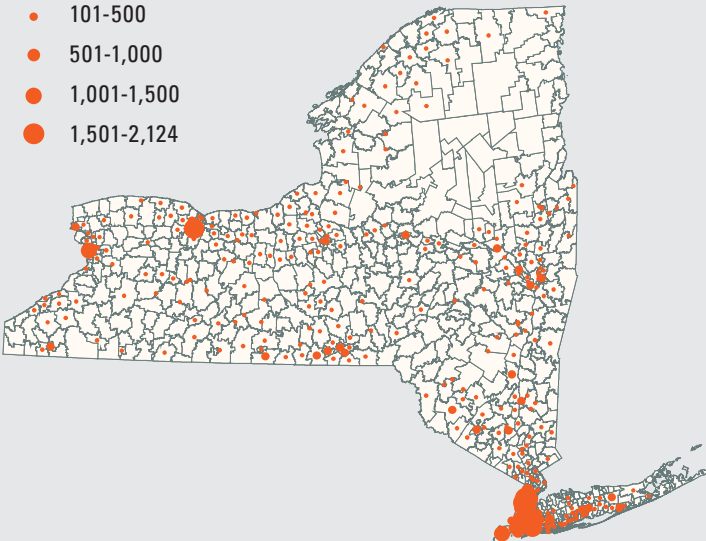
NUMBER OF HOMELESS TEST-TAKERS (ELA)

- 10-100
- 101-500
- 501-1,000
- 1,001-1,500
- 1,501-1,873
- 1,874-4,152



NUMBER OF FORMERLY HOMELESS TEST-TAKERS (ELA)

- 10-100
- 101-500
- 501-1,000
- 1,001-1,500
- 1,501-2,124



Source: New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2015-16 data. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York.

Our analysis reveals three major findings that can inform New York’s decision-making as it implements key provisions of ESSA:

Finding 1: Statewide, homeless students are half as likely to meet state academic standards compared to students who have never been homeless.

Only 20 percent of students in temporary housing are proficient in ELA, compared to 40 percent of their peers who have never experienced homelessness since kindergarten or when they enrolled in New York State public schools. In math, just 19 percent of students in temporary housing are proficient—compared to 42 percent of never-homeless students (see Figure 2).

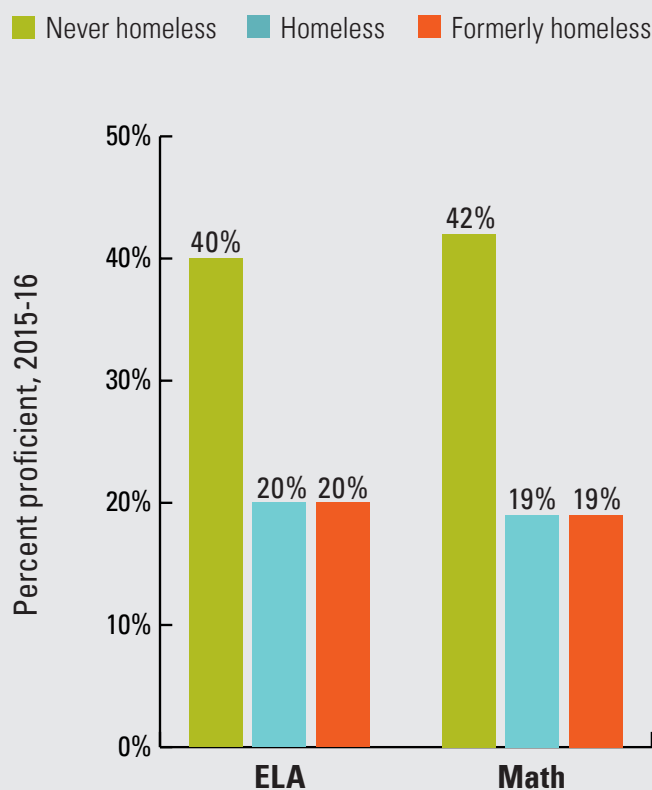
The stark gap between proficiency levels for students experiencing homelessness and students who have never been homeless is consistent across all types of school districts (see Figure 3).

Finding 2: The proficiency rates for formerly homeless students are nearly the same as achievement levels for currently homeless students.

As Figures 2 and 3 indicate, students who have *previously* experienced homelessness continue to suffer academically even after they are permanently housed. This is particularly important because there are nearly as many formerly homeless assessed students as currently homeless assessed students—yet they may regularly be denied attention and support because there are no systemic requirements to address their needs as a group.

These findings are consistent with pioneering New York City-focused data published by the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (ICPH). ICPH’s *Aftershocks* report noted that: “The educational impacts of homelessness continue even after a student is stably housed. Students who experienced any episode of homelessness within the last three years score at the same lower proficiency rates as currently homeless students. Formerly homeless students score well below low-income peers with no history of housing instability;

Figure 2: English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency for students in grades 3-8 by homelessness status



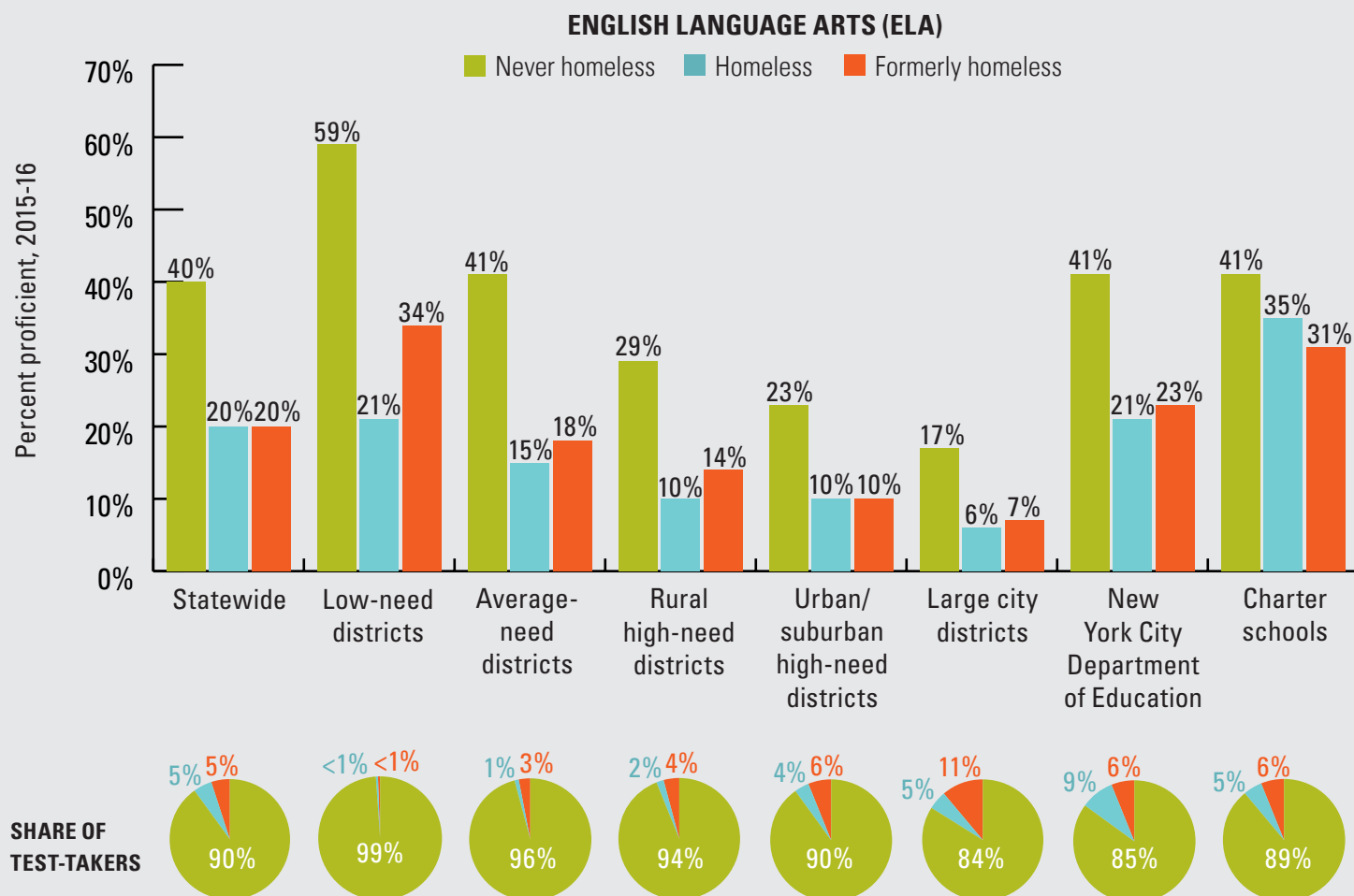
Reads as: “40 percent of never-homeless test-takers, 20 percent of homeless test-takers, and 20 percent of formerly homeless test-takers are proficient in English language arts”

Source: New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2015-16 data. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York.

poverty alone cannot explain the impact of homelessness on student achievement.”³

The emphasis on formerly homeless students is also significant because many students will cycle between temporary and permanent housing at different points in their academic experience. Recently released data from a groundbreaking nationwide survey of young people ages 13-25 found that approximately half of the youth who experienced homelessness in a year faced homelessness for the first time and approximately half had been homeless at least once previously.⁴

Figure 3: English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency for students in grades 3-8 by homelessness status and school district need/resource capacity category



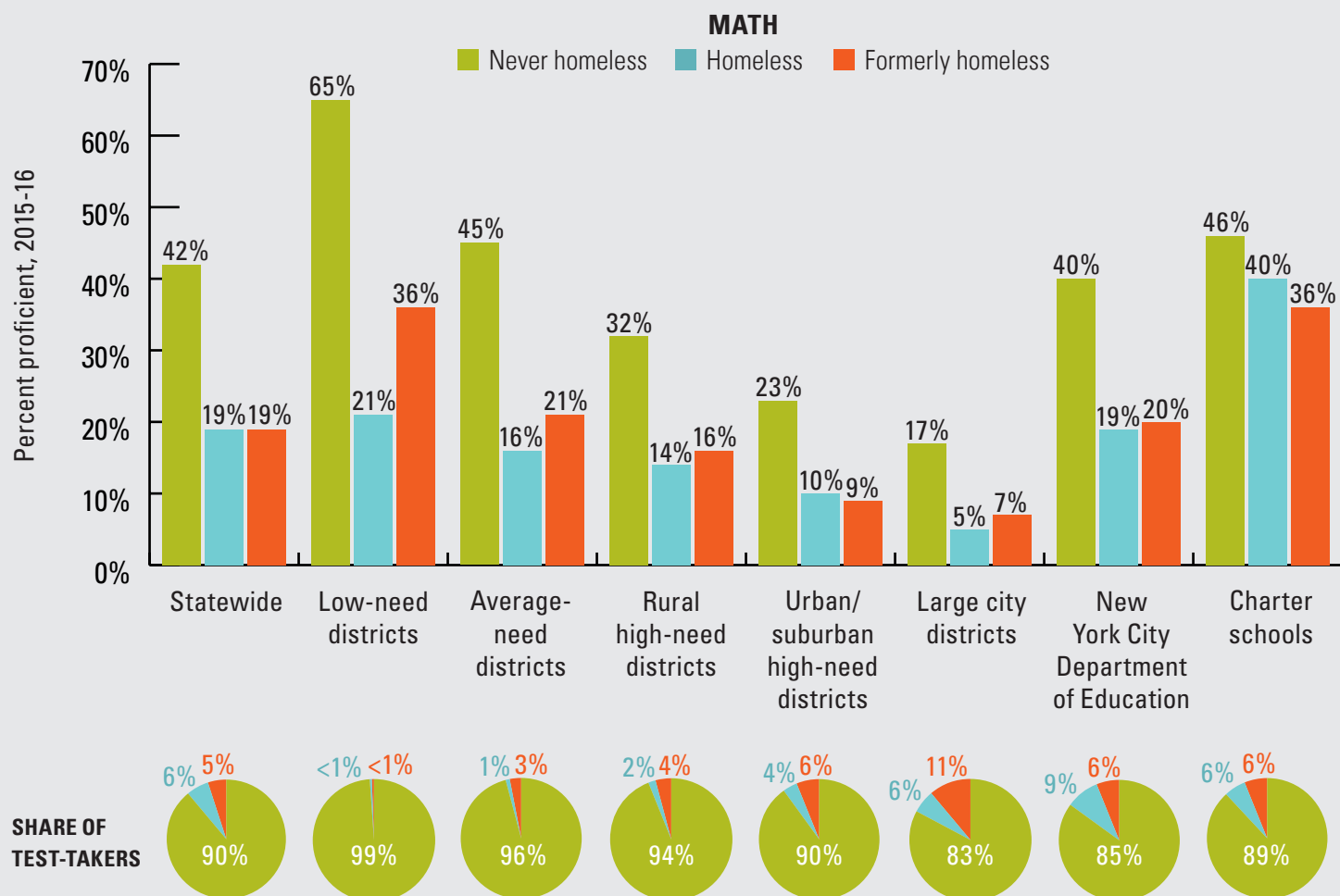
Finding 3: Students in temporary housing can and do achieve at high levels in New York State, with enormous variability in how schools are serving homeless students.

School context matters enormously for students in temporary housing. Our analysis found 164 schools where proficiency levels for homeless students exceeded the statewide average *for all students* in ELA (38 percent proficiency in 2015-16) and 169 schools where proficiency levels for homeless students exceeded the statewide average *for all students* in math (39 percent proficiency in 2015-16) (see Figure 4).⁵

In these schools, the average gap between proficiency rates for homeless and never-homeless students is 1 percentage point in ELA and 4 percentage points in math.

The *concentration* of homeless students can also present unique challenges to schools, which is why leadership, support, and training are so important (as discussed further below). Yet even for schools where at least 10 percent of test-takers were classified as homeless, there are still dozens of examples of strong school performance: 40 schools where homeless student proficiency exceeded the statewide

Figure 3: English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency for students in grades 3-8 by homelessness status and school district need/resource capacity category (cont.)



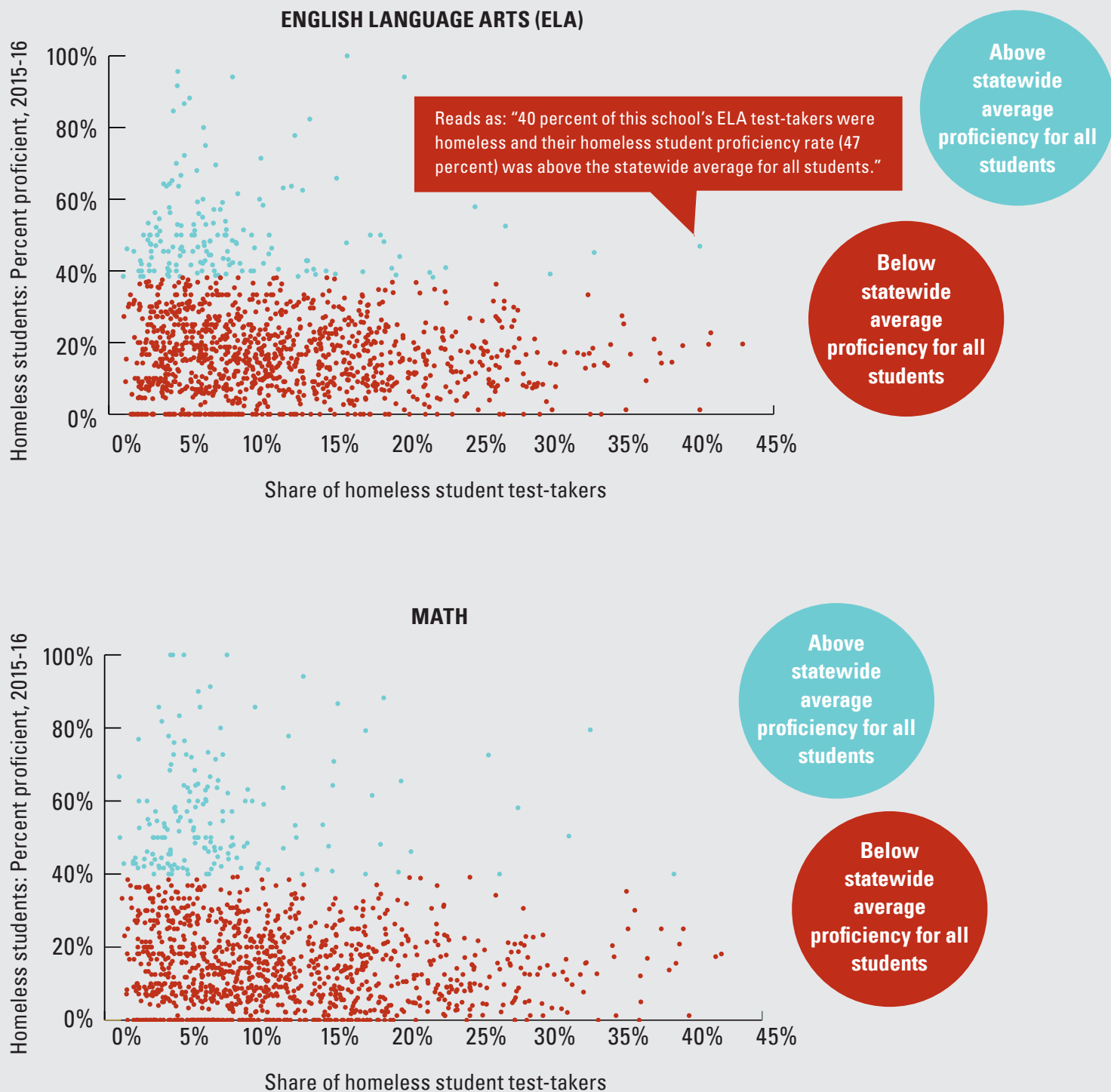
Source: New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2015-16 data. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York. Shares may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

ELA average for *all students* and 34 schools where homeless student proficiency exceeded the statewide math average for *all students*. There is no average gap between ELA proficiency rates for homeless and never-homeless students in these schools, and the average gap in math is 1 percentage point.

In addition, it is important to remember that the context for homeless student achievement is often the *school district* where they are enrolled. Our analysis found that *currently homeless* students in New York City out-performed *students who had never been homeless* in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, in both ELA and math.

Finally, in charter schools, students in temporary housing perform far above the levels of their homeless peers in district-run schools and much closer to the same level as charter students who have never experienced homelessness (see Figure 3). On average, New York City charter schools enroll a smaller proportion of homeless test-takers than district-run schools; however, for schools with similar concentrations of homeless test-takers, charter schools have average proficiency exceeding that of district-run schools. While there are important conversations about enrollment and retention of students experiencing homelessness in charter schools, these achievement findings are also worth exploring further in order to identify best practices.

Figure 4: Variability in homeless student proficiency by share of homeless test-takers enrolled in the school



Source: New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2015-16 data. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York. Excludes schools with fewer than 10 test-takers classified as homeless.

COALITION RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of this data and drawing on the homeless student-related provisions of ESSA, the following recommendations offer the state a roadmap for improving homeless student academic outcomes as the new law is implemented:

1 Improve transparency on student outcomes, resources, and access.

For the first time, ESSA requires that states disaggregate outcome data for homeless students, including assessment results and high school graduation rates. That is a critical requirement, and it should only be the beginning of how we improve transparency to focus schools, school districts, and policymakers on the needs of homeless students.

Academic transparency

- Depending on a homeless student's particular living situation (e.g., shelter or doubled up), she or he may have varying needs and might benefit from potentially different types of interventions. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) should **disaggregate homeless student data and report academic outcomes for students in shelters, students who are doubled up, and unaccompanied youth**. By disaggregating data based on type of temporary housing (while protecting personally identifiable information), NYSED can assist schools and school districts in developing targeted supports for homeless students based on the type of temporary housing. It is also important to recognize that students may cycle among different types of homelessness during a school year, and having this information can help schools properly target supports. As described below, NYSED should ensure that these findings are reflected in specific evidence-based strategies focused on supporting students in temporary housing in schools' improvement plans.

- Given that formerly homeless students do not on average have higher outcomes than their currently homeless peers, NYSED should **report at the school and district levels on outcomes for students who previously experienced homelessness** in addition to outcomes for students currently in temporary housing, while protecting personally identifiable information.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "HOMELESS"?

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines homeless children and youth as those who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." The definition includes students who:

- are "sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason"—commonly referred to as "doubling up"
- are "living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations"
- are "living in emergency or transitional shelters"
- were "abandoned in hospitals"
- "have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings"
- are "living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings"
- migratory children who qualify as homeless

The law also applies to unaccompanied youth who are homeless, regardless of their immigration status.⁶

Source: New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students. See: http://www.nysteachs.org/media/INF_LP_Fed_MV.pdf

Financial transparency

- ESSA requires all school districts and charter schools that receive Title I funding to set aside a portion of this funding to support students in temporary housing. School districts and charters have the flexibility to use the set-aside funding for various purposes, including emergency school supplies and school fees. School districts and charters are currently required to report on how much Title I funding has been *set aside* to support students in temporary housing and what types of services will be provided, but they are *not* required to report on how much funding they actually used and what kind of services were actually offered to homeless students using Title I funding. The state should require school districts and charters to report this additional information and these reports should be made publicly available to **ensure transparency and promote the use of evidence-based practices.**
- NYSED currently administers the McKinney-Vento Act grant program, which provides an additional source of funding for school districts to provide services to students experiencing homelessness. NYSED should review districts' use of McKinney-Vento grants to **identify potential best practices that can be shared with districts across the state and review the effectiveness of programs currently offered by districts** when considering renewal requests in each funding cycle.

Access and identification

- Schools must have information about which students are currently in temporary housing or formerly experienced homelessness in order to be able to target services to support them, but often they do not have this information—or, as noted above, a family housing status may change during the school year. This requires an understanding of **best practices in identification, including strategies to engage stakeholders beyond the school and strategies to appropriately identify students in temporary housing who also have**

disabilities and/or are English learners, as well as data systems that effectively provide the information to school leaders and teachers while protecting personally identifiable information and family privacy.

2

Ensure that school improvement plans address the needs of students experiencing homelessness or who previously experienced homelessness.

ESSA requires states to identify schools that are consistently underperforming for any group of students. However, as the coalition noted in its recommendations on the state's draft ESSA plan, under New York's accountability system relatively few schools will be identified for *targeted support and improvement*, even if they have very low levels of achievement for certain groups of students. It is **essential that NYSED ensure that any school that is under-performing for any group of students—such as homeless students—develop a quality plan that provides the urgency, resources, and support to address the needs of those students.**

To achieve this objective, NYSED should:

- Ensure that school improvement plans include steps that schools and school districts will take to address the academic needs of students in temporary housing *and* formerly homeless students, including by drawing on disaggregated student achievement and high school graduation rate data. These plans should address the professional development needs of teachers and incorporate provisions to ensure that homeless students with disabilities and English learners receive seamless services even as their housing status or school enrollment changes. It is also important to communicate that addressing the needs of homeless and formerly homeless students is the responsibility of *all* school districts that enroll these students—no matter how many or few—while different strategies may apply based on the concentration and characteristics of students in temporary housing;

- Provide guidance to schools and school districts on how to incorporate trauma-informed practices and social-emotional supports into school improvement plans to support homeless and formerly homeless students;
- Establish expectations for how schools will incorporate health and wellness needs and family engagement for families in temporary housing into their school improvement plans, including links to service providers who deliver direct supports for parents, and how the school will develop relationships with community-based organizations that serve students and families in temporary housing. NYSED has taken a positive step by including in its ESSA plan the commitment to “develop and implement improvement plans for [comprehensive support and improvement] and [targeted support and improvement] schools that specifically address the needs of immigrant, ELL/MLL, migrant, and homeless parents and families identified through a Comprehensive Needs Assessment”; and
- Issue guidance to schools and school districts encouraging them to continue any tutoring or other academic supports provided to homeless students, as well as family supports as described above, once they transition to permanent housing.

3

Leverage the new chronic absenteeism and school discipline accountability indicators.

The McKinney-Vento Act and federal guidelines require school districts to improve homeless student attendance and encourage states to ensure that homeless students are not being disproportionately subjected to out-of-school suspensions or other punitive disciplinary measures. New York has also selected chronic absenteeism and suspension rates as accountability indicators in the state’s ESSA accountability plan—which the coalition has strongly supported and is grateful to NYSED and the Board of Regents for adopting.

Student attendance

- NYSED should make clear in guidance that a student’s temporary housing status may not be used as an excuse for not addressing a school’s high chronic absenteeism rate. Likewise, **schools and school districts should be required to address high rates of homeless student chronic absenteeism in their plans for addressing high chronic absenteeism.**
- NYSED should set the expectation that schools and school districts will align and target their funding to maximize the impact on improving attendance for students in temporary housing. Any school district that applies for McKinney-Vento Act grant funding where there are high chronic absenteeism rates for homeless students should be required to use a portion of funds to reduce absenteeism. School districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism for homeless students should also use Title I and/or McKinney-Vento Act funding to implement strategies to address the issue, such as by hiring case managers to work with families to identify the reasons for high absentee rates and assist families to improve attendance.
- Homeless students are often absent from school because they must attend city and county social service agency appointments with their parents. City and county agencies currently do not coordinate schedules with school districts, which results in students missing school, including days when state tests are administered. The Governor should convene NYSED and the two agencies with related responsibilities—the Office of Temporary & Disability Assistance and the Office of Children & Family Services—to develop a plan to minimize homeless student school absences, as envisioned by current law, and in particular address how shelter intake impacts student attendance.

Disproportionate discipline

- NYSED should issue guidelines for school districts to assess disciplinary practices

and ensure that homeless students are not disproportionately impacted.

- NYSED should **monitor school districts and create an alert system that flags when the data indicate that any group of students—including homeless students—is subject to disproportionate discipline**, including but not limited to in- or out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and/or school-based arrest.
- NYSED should collaborate with teacher preparation programs to incorporate into the curriculum information about the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, how they impact learning, and effective supports that can be used in the classroom and school community to mitigate the impact of trauma so that aspiring teachers are better equipped to provide social-emotional supports for homeless students and implement restorative justice practices for all students.

4

Improve equity in high school course access and transition to postsecondary education.

Homeless high school students often fall behind when they transfer schools or school districts or have to miss school because of reasons related to their housing status. Changes in the McKinney-Vento Act require school districts to **remove barriers that often limit the ability of students experiencing homelessness to receive high school credit**, including seat time requirements. NYSED should:

- Provide school districts with guidance on how to evaluate course credits in order to promote consistency across the state and ensure that homeless youth receive credit, including partial credit, for coursework completed in other school districts; and
- Issue guidance for school districts with seat time requirements for course credit to ensure

that district attendance policies do not unfairly penalize homeless students. For example, district policies on excused absences should include absences on account of attending social service agency appointments or moving.

The McKinney-Vento Act now also requires school districts to **focus on homeless students' transition to postsecondary education**. The state should:

- Issue guidance setting expectations for how school districts should assist homeless youth with preparations for college. For example, while protecting student and family privacy, school districts should provide guidance counselors with lists of homeless students in the 11th and 12th grades and ensure that guidance counselors conduct outreach to these students and their families so that they are aware of the college and financial aid application process;
- Develop trainings on supporting homeless youth with postsecondary transition and require high school guidance counselors to participate in these trainings;
- Develop a partnership between NYSED and higher education institutions to address the growing population of homeless youth transitioning to higher education. For example, NYSED, SUNY, CUNY, and social service agencies should come together to identify the challenges that homeless youth face in the transition to higher education and develop a coordinated plan to address these challenges; and
- Create homeless student resource centers at each SUNY and CUNY campus to ensure that once homeless students are enrolled in higher education programs they are provided with the support and resources they need in order to remain in and graduate from college, such as affordable housing (including during the summer and on breaks), quality child care, and emergency assistance covering food, transportation, and supplies.

Finally, **college affordability remains a crucial barrier for students in temporary housing**, and the state's current financial aid policies make the situation worse through what is effectively a Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) penalty for unaccompanied homeless youth. Students in temporary housing receive different levels of maximum TAP grants based on whether they file for aid with dependent or independent status. As a result, unaccompanied homeless youth (who would count as independent students) receive less aid than their peers. This "TAP gap" has already been corrected for foster youth, and the same should be done to protect students in temporary housing.

5 **Make transportation more accessible.**

Providing **transportation can improve student stability and reduce the need for mid-year transfers that limit academic attainment**. The McKinney-Vento Act now requires school districts to provide transportation to homeless students for the remainder of the school year or until the student's terminal year in the school that she/he has been attending if the student becomes permanently housed. This is an important step, but the federal law does not provide any additional funding to pay for it. The state should increase transportation aid so that school districts have resources to cover these additional expenditures.

6 **Improve access to early childhood education.**

The McKinney-Vento Act also now recognizes that pre-kindergarten programs are an integral part of homeless students' education by, for the first time, including Pre-K in the definition of school. The state should take full advantage of this powerful opportunity to **improve access to high-quality early childhood education for students in temporary housing**.

- NYSED should issue guidance for school districts on Pre-K outreach to homeless families to ensure Pre-K-eligible children in temporary housing are

enrolling in and attending Pre-K programs where (or when) Pre-K is available.

- The state budget should provide school districts with sufficient funding to cover the cost of homeless children enrolled in district-provided Pre-K programs.
- School districts should prioritize outreach and enrollment to homeless families for other early childhood programs, beyond 4-year-old pre-kindergarten.
- The state budget should allow school districts to claim aid for transportation costs associated with transporting homeless children to Pre-K programs, which is not currently funded. ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to Barbara Duffield, Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection; the Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness; and Advocates for Children of New York for their contributions to the youth homelessness field and for their input on this policy brief

ENDNOTES

¹ New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students. "Data on Homelessness in New York State." Available at: <http://www.nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html#data>.

On under-identification, see, for example: Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. Missed Opportunity: Under-Identification of Homeless Children in New York City's Preschool Special Education (New York, NY: February 2017). Available at: http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICPH_MissedOpportunity_Under-IdentificationofHomelessChildreninNYCPreschoolSpecialEducation_February2017.pdf.

² New York State Education Department. Unpublished 2015-16 data. Analysis by The Education Trust–New York.

³ Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. Aftershocks: The Lasting Impact of Homelessness on Student Achievement (New York, NY: February 2016). Available at: http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Aftershocks_2_3_A_FIN.pdf.

Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness. On the Map: The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2017 (New York, NY: August 2017). Available at: http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/map-atlas-student-homelessness-new-york-city-2017/.

⁴ Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁵ For the school-level analyses referenced in Finding 3, we excluded any school where fewer than 10 test-takers were classified as homeless students.

⁶ As described by the New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students: "An unaccompanied youth is a student who is not the physical custody of their parent or legal guardian; this includes young people who have run away from home, have been kicked out of their homes, or have been abandoned by parents. There is no age limit for unaccompanied youth, but these students are most often in their teens. Unaccompanied youth are protected under the McKinney-Vento Act when the student also does not have a fixed, adequate, and regular nighttime residence...." See: <http://nysteachs.org/info-topic/unaccompanied.html>.