

# Missed Opportunity:

## Under-Identification of Homeless Children in New York City's Preschool Special Education

The preschool years are crucial to a child's physical, intellectual, and socio-emotional development. They also represent a window of opportunity for identifying developmental delays that may negatively affect a child's education if left unaddressed. Early identification of special education needs improves long-term educational and social outcomes for children and is mandated under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>1,2</sup> It has also been shown to decrease economic burdens through improving academic success and reducing the need for special education as children age.

The Committee for Preschool Special Education (CPSE) in New York City is charged with providing special education services to eligible children ages three to five.<sup>3</sup> While all preschool-age children in NYC should have equal access to special education supports, children who are homeless are dramatically underrepresented in the CPSE program. This leaves young homeless students more vulnerable to falling behind their peers socially and academically when they enter elementary school and can have long-lasting educational impacts. This report looks at Preschool Special Education program enrollment data and finds that more efforts are needed to identify and reach homeless children ages three to five who have special education needs. New York City's family shelter system—including its single point of entry, PATH<sup>4</sup>—could be utilized to increase the identification of homeless children in need of special education services.

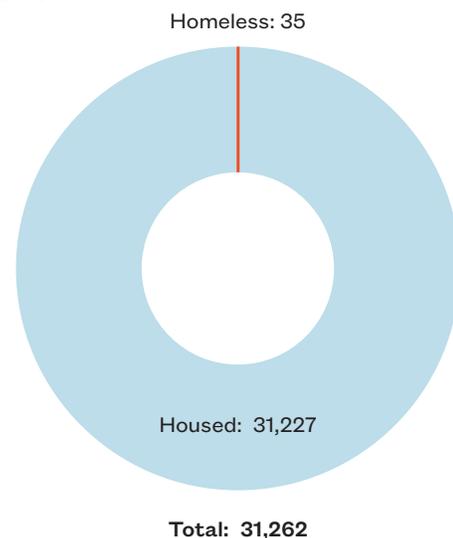
### Underrepresentation of Homeless Children Ages 3 to 5 in Special Education

Experiencing homelessness at a young age negatively impacts early childhood development. Lack of safe places to crawl and play as a toddler can delay fine and gross motor skill development, and the trauma of homelessness can affect speech and social skill acquisition. The instability and unique challenges faced by homeless children put them at a greater risk for experiencing developmental delays and early identification of special education needs is crucial. Homeless students, however, are dramatically underrepresented in NYC's Preschool Special Education program.

**Only 35 out of the 31,262 children enrolled in Preschool Special Education were homeless (0.11%). This is much lower than the citywide rate of student homelessness (8%).<sup>5</sup>**

### Preschool Special Education Students by Housing Status

SY 2015-16



Note: Estimated number of homeless students is between 32 and 35.<sup>6</sup>

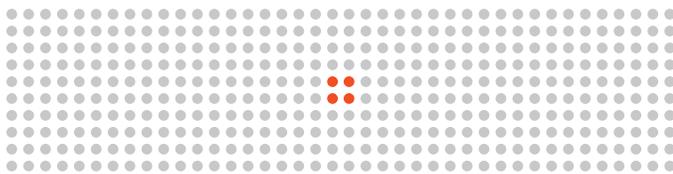
Source: New York City Mayor's Office of Operations, *Mayor's Management Report*, September 2016; New York State Education Department, *Student Information Repository System (SIRS)*, SY 2015-16.

## Magnitude of the Problem

With an estimated 20,000 homeless three- and four-year-olds citywide, there are likely over 4,000 homeless children in need of services through the NYC Preschool Special Education program who are not being reached.<sup>7</sup>

## Projected Unidentified Special Education Need

- Homeless children enrolled
- Homeless children in need of services



● = 10 children

Note: See endnote 6 for projection calculation.

Source: New York State Education Department, *Student Information Repository System (SIRS)*, SY 2015–16.

## The Unrealized Impact of Universal Pre-K on Special Education Services for Homeless Students

All children who turn four by December 31 are now eligible for New York City's Universal pre-K program. With the expansion of the program beginning in SY 2013–14 enabling more homeless children to participate in preschool, it would be expected that the number of homeless children identified for Preschool Special Education would increase. That, however, has not been the case.

Pre-K enrollment increased by 25% from SY 2011–12 to SY 2015–16. Enrollment of homeless pre-K students increased by 49% in the same time period.

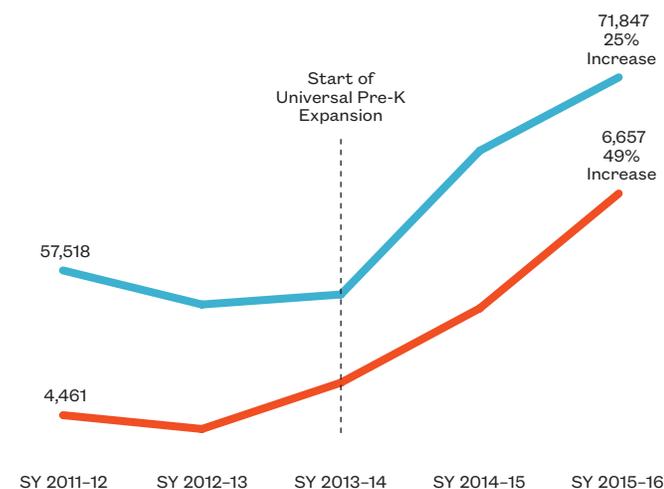
During this same time overall enrollment in the City's Preschool Special Education program increased by 13%, yet enrollment of homeless students in the Preschool Special Education program declined by 33%.

## Decline in Preschool Special Education for Homeless Children Despite Overall Pre-K Growth

### New York City Pre-K Enrollment

SY 2011–12 Through SY 2015–16

- Homeless Pre-K Enrollment
- Pre-K Enrollment

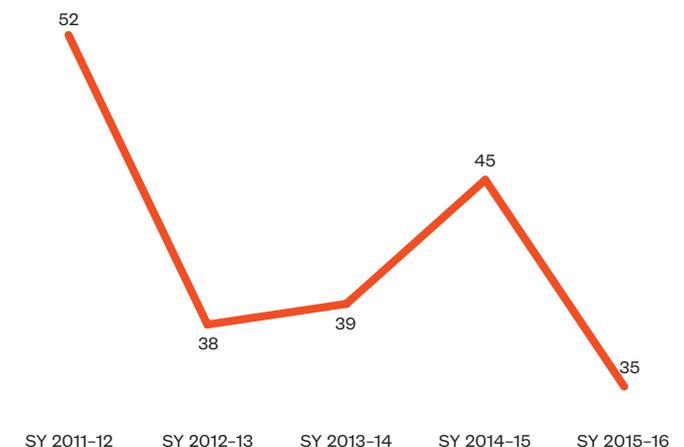


Note: Numbers include both half-day and full-day pre-K.

Source: New York City Department of Education, *Annual Enrollment Snapshots*, SY 2011–12 to SY 2015–16; New York State Education Department, *Student Information Repository System (SIRS)*, SY 2011–12 to SY 2015–16.

### Number of Homeless Students Enrolled in the New York City's Preschool Special Education Program

SY 2011–12 Through SY 2015–16



Source: New York State Education Department, *Student Information Repository System (SIRS)*, SY 2011–12 to SY 2015–16.

## Policy Considerations

There is a need for greater recognition of the special education needs of homeless preschoolers. An estimated 20,000 homeless three- and four-year-olds live in New York City and it is likely that at least 4,000 of these children have special education needs that are not being met.

If allocated, additional resources for existing City agencies, such as the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), and the Department of Education (DOE), as well as community-based social service organizations could be leveraged to increase identification for this vulnerable group of children.

---

The family shelter system could assign dedicated staff to both identify and help parents complete the Preschool Special Education program evaluation—a process that can often be difficult to navigate. These services could be provided to both parents living in the shelter and families living in the surrounding community, transforming shelters into community residential resource centers.

---

Universal developmental screenings could be implemented at PATH—the City's central entry point for the family shelter system—for homeless children under the age of five whose families apply for shelter.

---

PATH could serve as an informational resource for homeless parents to raise awareness about the free Preschool Special Education services that are available through the City and how, if needed, they can be vital to healthy child development and school success.

---

Schools could provide developmental screenings for younger siblings of homeless students identified as living doubled up. This could help to reach homeless children who are the most likely to be disconnected from City agencies.

---

Early identification of children for special education services has been shown to decrease economic burden through improving academic success and reducing the need for special education as children age. In other words, it is not only the right thing to do but it will save the city much needed dollars in the long run. Reaching homeless preschoolers requires some effort and up-front cost. This investment, however, will pay off with savings from the additional services that older children identified with special needs will otherwise require. Doing nothing will be costly in the long term and will negatively impact the education of thousands of children.

1 U.S. Department of Education, *IDEA Regulations: Early Intervening Services*, October 4, 2006.

2 National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, *The Importance of Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and their Families*, April 2011.

3 New York City Administration for Children's Services, "Preschool (3 to 5)," <http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/education/preschool.html> (accessed January 12, 2017).

4 The Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) center located in the Bronx is the only point of intake into the New York City homeless shelter system for families with children. New York City Department of Homeless Services, *Families with Children: Applying for Temporary Housing Assistance*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/shelter/families/families-with-children-applying.page> (accessed January 12, 2017).

5 The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, *On The Map: The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City*, August 2016.

6 Data show students enrolled in New York City's Preschool Special Education program for children ages three to five. Due to data that has been redacted to protect student privacy, the total number of homeless students enrolled in the Preschool Special Education program is estimated and could fall between 32 and 35 students. To account for the maximum potential number of redacted students, the largest number was used.

7 Based on New York City Department of Education data, there were 84,386 Kindergartners and 87,804 first graders enrolled in the city in SY 2015–16. This suggests an estimated 170,000 three- and four-year-olds in SY 2015–16. Data from the New York State Education Department show 10,082 homeless Kindergartners and 10,420 homeless first graders in SY 2015–16. This suggests an estimated 20,000 homeless three- and four-year-olds and 150,000 housed three- and four-year-olds in SY 2015–16. Since 31,227 housed students were enrolled in Preschool Special Education, approximately 20.8% (31,227 / 150,000) of housed preschoolers were enrolled in Preschool Special Education. Assuming homeless students face at least equal special education needs, over 4,000 homeless preschoolers should be receiving special education services (0.208 x 20,000 = 4,160). New York City Department of Education, Annual Enrollment Snapshots, SY 2015–16; New York State Education Department, Student Information Repository System (SIRS), SY 2015–16.

**Ralph da Costa Nunez, PhD**

President and CEO

**Liz Cohen**

Chief of Staff

**Jennifer Erb-Downward**

Principal Policy Analyst

**Anna Shaw-Amoah**

Senior Policy Analyst

**Rachel Barth**

Policy Analyst

**Joanne King**

Director of Communications and External Affairs

media@ICPHusa.org

**ICPH** Institute for Children,  
Poverty & Homelessness

[www.ICPHusa.org](http://www.ICPHusa.org)

ICPH is an independent, New York City-based public policy organization that works on the issues of poverty and family homelessness.

 ICPH\_homeless

 InstituteforChildrenandPoverty

 icph\_usa

 ICPHusa