

A Hand Still Raised

How New York City's Homeless Students Fit into Charter Schools

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a policy brief from ICPH

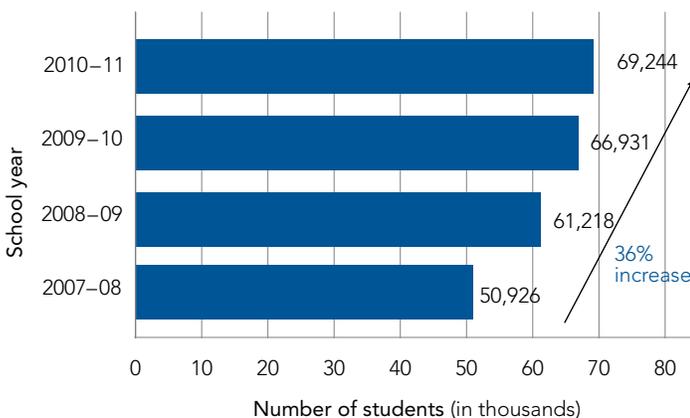
Charter schools were introduced to New York City in 1999 to inject new life into the nation's largest education system. Fourteen years later, the debate over whether these institutions succeed in helping the city's neediest students remains front and center. While only 4% of New York City's more than one million students currently attend charter schools, the last several years have seen an exponential increase in the charter-school enrollment of homeless students¹: an astounding 1,723% from 2007 to 2010.² Even though their total number remains small, at just over 2,000 students citywide, such a large and rapid increase cannot be ignored. Little is currently known about how these hardest-to-reach students fit into New York City's charter-school experiment. Using data from the Basic Educational Data System and its successor, the Student Information Repository System, from school year (SY) 2007–08 through SY 2010–11, this report seeks to provide a snapshot of the charter-school system in New York City and raise important questions about its role in the education of homeless students.

Homeless Students' Numbers Rise

Meeting the educational needs of homeless students in New York City is not a new challenge, but it is a growing one. With their numbers steadily climbing in the last five years, the need to find innovative ways to do so has become even greater. In 2007 homeless children made up 5% of the student body, at 50,926 students. By 2010 that number had swelled 36%, to 69,244, representing 7% of the total population (see Figure 1).³

Figure 1

NYC HOMELESS STUDENT POPULATION GROWTH



Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007–10.

This increase comes as no surprise, as the number of homeless families has reached a new record and is likely to keep rising.⁴

Given the strong link between obtaining a high-school diploma and attaining self-sufficiency in adulthood, ensuring that homeless students receive the best education possible is vital.⁵ As a transient and often hard-to-identify group, homeless students face many barriers to services that others take for granted. Simply enrolling in a school can be a challenge without necessary documentation or a fixed address, and the instability of daily life greatly increases the likelihood of switching schools multiple times a year and missing many school days, setting back educational attainment.⁶ In fact, 97% of homeless children have moved at least once in a single year.⁷

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To address these pressing issues, Congress included several provisions designed to support the education of homeless students in the McKinney-Vento Act of 1987, the first and only piece of major federal legislation to focus on homelessness.⁸ The law ensures that children experiencing homelessness have the same access to education as their peers and guarantees additional supports to allow these children to overcome barriers to education, such as lack of transportation, irregular meals, and difficulties with enrollment.⁹ It also requires each Local Educational Agency (LEA) to designate a liaison who can assist homeless children and families.¹⁰ As public institutions, charter schools are subject to all of the requirements established under the McKinney-Vento Act. Despite those protections, however, homeless children are three times more likely than their housed peers to be placed in special-education programs, four times more likely to drop out of school, eight to nine times more likely to repeat grades, and twice as likely to score poorly on standardized tests in math and reading.¹¹

Charter Schools 101

Charter schools are elementary or secondary schools that receive public funding but have been exempted from some of the regulations that govern other public schools. In exchange, they are held accountable for producing certain results as established in each school’s charter.¹² Unlike traditional public schools, charters have the ability to sidestep unionized teachers’ collective-bargaining rights, the freedom to lengthen the school day and year as they see fit, and the right to manage their own budgets.

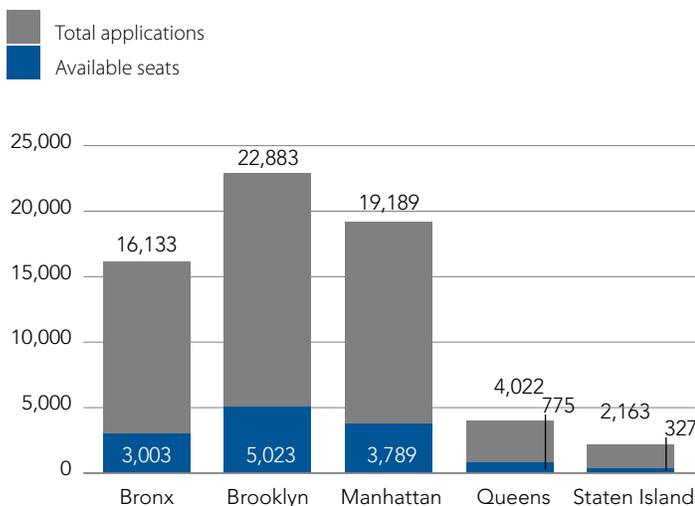
Proponents of charter schools claim that their added flexibility allows greater innovation and opportunity for learning, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also cite better scores on standardized math and reading exams, and better rates of improved scores, for charter-school students than for their traditional-public-school counterparts. Critics, on the other hand, question the level of accountability to which charter schools are held by their authorizing organizations. They also contend that higher scores are a result of “creaming” the most motivated students from district public schools. Both national and local studies of charter-school performance show mixed results. An evaluation of New York City’s charter schools released in 2009 concluded that, on average, students who received charter-school lottery slots showed better test results in math and reading than those students who applied but did not get slots.¹³

Supply and Demand

Regardless of the open questions surrounding accountability and performance, seats in charter schools remain in high demand. Estimates for SY 2011–12 show a total of 64,390

Figure 2
CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATIONS AND AVAILABLE NEW SEATS BY BOROUGH

(SY 2011–12 Estimates)

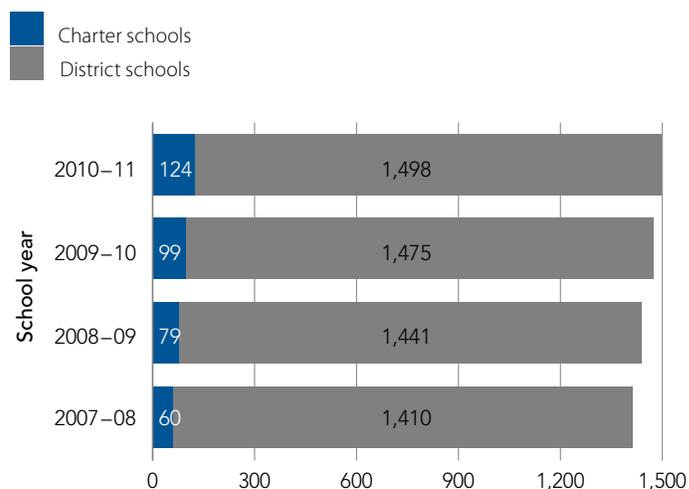


Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007–10.

applications for just 12,917 new seats citywide (see Figure 2).¹⁴ The majority submitted applications for schools in Harlem, the South Bronx, or Central Brooklyn. These neighborhoods also contain the greatest number of new seats available to students.¹⁵

Demand has also led to a rapid increase in the founding of new charter schools. Since 2007 New York City has seen the number in operation double, from 60 in SY 2007–08 to 124 in SY 2010–11 (see Figure 3).¹⁶ The majority cater to elementary education. While charter schools still represent a small portion of the total number of schools in New York City, at 8%, up from 4% in 2007, the number is likely to grow, as the push for more charter schools shows no sign of abating.

Figure 3
INCREASE IN NUMBER OF SCHOOLS BY YEAR AND TYPE



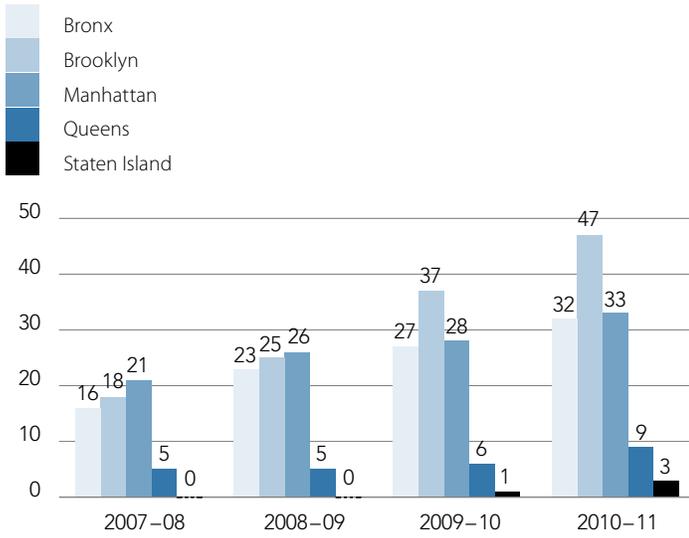
Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007–10.

Charter-school openings have not materialized evenly across all five boroughs, however. In 2007 Manhattan led the city in the number of charter schools, with 21 in operation, while Brooklyn was home to 18. Although Manhattan has steadily added charter schools every year, housing 33 in 2010, Brooklyn has surpassed all boroughs. In just four years Brooklyn opened 29 new schools, nearly tripling the number of schools in its environs to a total of 47 (see Figure 4). Queens, on the other hand, has lagged in the creation of charter schools, adding only four in the four-year period.

Enrollment of Homeless Students

Although charter schools have succeeded in increasing the enrollment of at-risk populations, it is unclear whether this is a result of a coordinated effort to recruit at-risk students or simply of the appeal of these schools for low-income and minority families with few alternatives.¹⁷ Charter schools fill their halls through a lottery-based application system overseen by the schools themselves. The application requires little information, but even

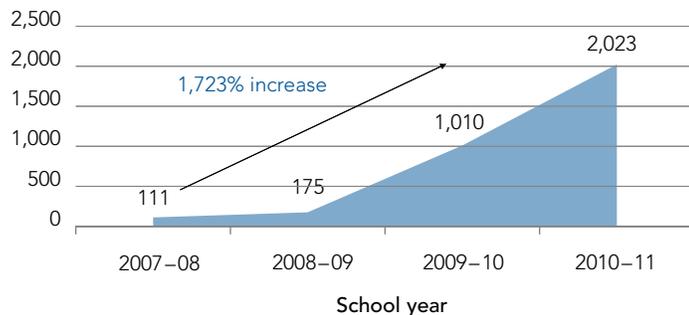
Figure 4
GROWTH OF CHARTER SCHOOLS BY BOROUGH



Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007-10.

providing a contact address can prove difficult for a transient family. Prior to 2007 homeless students were poorly represented in charter schools. In SY 2007-08, they made up only 0.5% of the population of those institutions while constituting 5% of the student body in district schools. From 2007 to 2010, however, the number of homeless students in charter schools shot up to 2,023 from 111, a 1,723% increase (see Figure 5).¹⁸ In four years, the proportion of homeless students in charters has only begun to approach parity with that of the districts.

Figure 5
NUMBER OF HOMELESS STUDENTS ENROLLED IN NEW YORK CITY CHARTER SCHOOLS

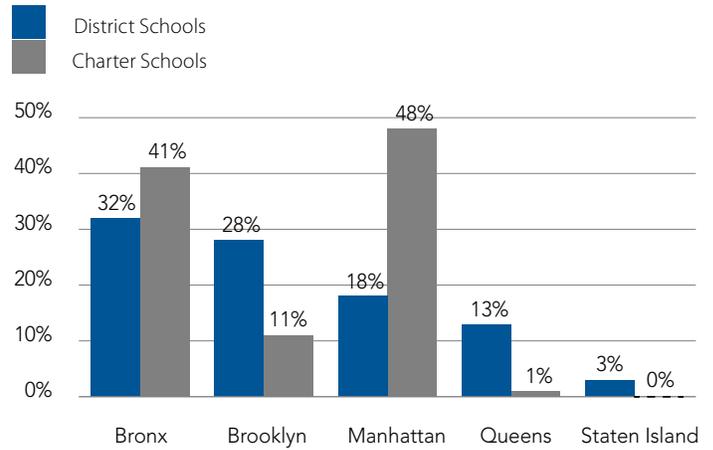


Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007-10.

Increases in the enrollment of homeless students in charter schools are particularly revealing when separated by city borough. Before 2007 they were largely educated in schools in Manhattan and the Bronx, with 89% of all homeless students in charters attending schools in those two boroughs. Between

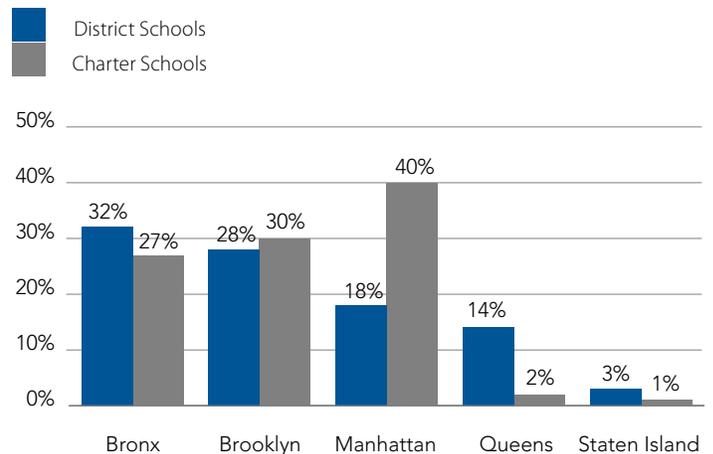
2007 and 2010, however, Brooklyn saw a near-tripling in the total number of homeless students enrolled (see Figures 6 and 7)¹⁹, supplanting the Bronx by SY 2010-11 as the borough with the second-largest population, behind Manhattan.

Figure 6
PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS STUDENTS ENROLLED BY BOROUGH (SY 2007-08)



Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007-10. Percentages for charter schools do not total 100 because of rounding. Percentages for district schools do not total 100 because alternative and special-education schools were not included.

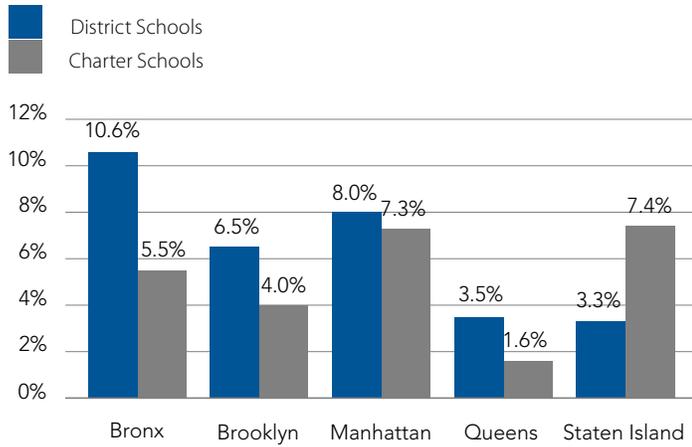
Figure 7
PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS STUDENTS ENROLLED BY BOROUGH (SY 2010-11)



Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007-10.

Despite the growth in the enrollment of homeless students in charter schools, disparities with district schools persist. Homeless students remain a larger part of the student body in district schools than in charter schools, though the gap has narrowed in Manhattan and Brooklyn. In the Bronx, for example, 10.6% of the student body in district schools experienced homelessness in

Figure 8
PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY SCHOOL TYPE
 (SY 2010–11)



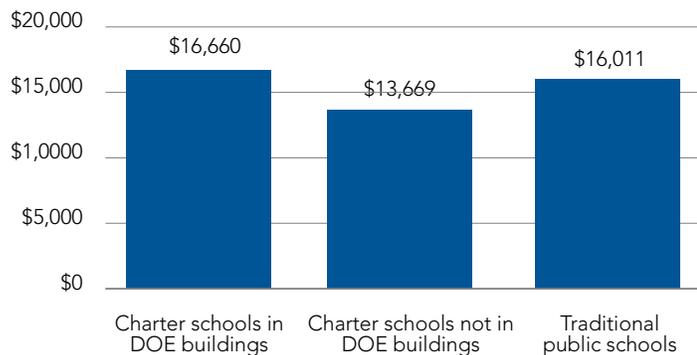
Source: BEDS/SIRS data 2007–10.

SY 2010–11, compared with 5.5% in charters (see Figure 8)²⁰. While Staten Island remains the lone borough where charter schools surpass their district counterparts in homeless-student enrollment as a proportion of total enrollment, the number of students enrolled in charter schools there is too small to make meaningful comparisons. Overall, homeless students continue to be underrepresented in charter schools in comparison with their district peers.

Unanswered Questions

To fully evaluate the long-term effects of charter schools on homeless students, more data must be gathered and more questions must be answered. Before making decisions to expand programs that have not as yet proven to be qualitatively better

Figure 9
ANNUAL FUNDING PER STUDENT, 2011



Source: “Charter Schools Housed in the City’s School Buildings Get More Public Funding per Student than Traditional Public Schools,” *Independent Budget Office Web Log*.

or more cost-effective than their traditional-school counterparts, school districts and policymakers should examine the following to accurately assess the educational value of charter schools in their neighborhoods and their ability to serve and retain homeless students.

School Performance

Gauging school performance remains difficult, as official appraisals of many charter schools are either incomplete or unavailable. Charter schools that have operated less than two or three years, are still adding grade levels, or have yet to graduate classes are not given progress-report grades, the standard by which all city schools are compared. More than a quarter (28%) of New York City’s charter schools did not receive grades in SY 2010–11. Until charter schools are consistently and accurately evaluated, families will remain severely limited in their ability to make meaningful comparisons and informed decisions about the education choices for their children.²¹

Funding Disparities

Charter schools that are housed in city-operated buildings, representing two-thirds of all charters, received \$649 more per student than traditional public schools during SY 2009–10 (see Figure 9).²² In 2011, 102 of the city’s 124 charter schools (or 82%) were in Department of Education buildings. The Independent Budget Office estimates that the funding gap between traditional and charter schools widened in the 2010–11 school year. Given the lack of clear evidence that they do a better job of educating youth, providing more funding to charter schools could unnecessarily undermine the viability of the traditional public schools that share the same city-owned spaces.

Application Process

While enrollment in charter schools has increased overall among homeless students, there remains a concern that only the most motivated homeless families are likely to successfully manage the application process. A memorandum issued by the New York State Department of Education in July 2010 granted homeless students additional flexibility in the admissions process, which requires schools to give preference to students living in their districts. With homeless students allowed to list multiple previous residences for the purposes of tracking school attendance, they have a greater selection of schools to choose from than other students, which can ensure both greater stability and opportunity in their education.²³ However, it is unknown how many of these families are taking advantage of their expanded residency preference.

Outreach for Enrollment

The common criticism that charter schools educate smaller percentages of at-risk students than district schools seems to have merit, as less than 4% of charter schools in SY 2010–11 took measures to enroll students in temporary housing in their

programs.²⁴ Charter schools have also reported very low rates of targeted outreach to other at-risk populations, such as English Language Learners, foster children, and special-needs children. When coupled with the fact that homeless students are underrepresented in charter schools, these data make it difficult for those schools to challenge allegations of creaming students for better performance and raise serious questions about exactly who potentially benefits from a charter-school education.

These statistics are likely to be scrutinized in the near future, as policy changes have placed an increased focus on balancing enrollment. In May 2010 the New York State Department of Education updated its Charter Schools Act Amendment of 1998, requiring that any charter school make “good faith” efforts to enroll and retain English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students at the same rate as the traditional public schools in the same district.²⁵ As this change occurred after the application window for SY 2010–11 had passed, the latest data available do not reflect its impact on enrollment levels.²⁶ If the measure has been successful, charters’ proportional enrollment of difficult-to-serve populations should become apparent at the end of SY 2012–13. After this point, more data will be needed to know if charter schools are building the capacity required to provide for the scholastic needs of English Language Learners, low-income children, and particularly special-needs students, as homeless children are three times more likely than their housed peers to be enrolled in special-education programs.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the principle behind charter schools should be applicable to homeless students: one of their stated goals is to educate high-needs children in small classes using tailored approaches. However, there is limited understanding of whether these schools succeed when it comes to homeless students, because there is little knowledge of how or where these students fit in. Charter schools have been touted as an integral part of school reform, but there is as yet no definitive evidence that they are the solution to the challenges plaguing many urban school systems. Until these outstanding questions are answered, we cannot know if charter schools are able to promote the positive educational outcomes for homeless children so vital to eliminating the social and economic barriers to success that homelessness can erect.

Endnotes

- ¹ New York City Department of Education, "School Demographics and Accountability Snapshot" and "Progress Reports," <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm> (accessed September 4, 2012).
- ² New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students (NYS-TEACHS), "NYS-TEACHS › Info by Topic: Data and Statistics on Homelessness," *Data Files SY 2007–08, SY 2008–09, SY 2009–10 and SY 2010–11*, <http://www.nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html> (accessed August 6, 2012).
- ³ Ibid. All data on homeless student enrollment from SY 2007–08 and SY 2008–09 are from the Basic Educational Data System (BEDS) compiled by NYS-TEACHS. All data from SY 2009–10 and SY 2010–11 are from the Student Information Repository System (SIRS) compiled by NYS-TEACHS. Schools across the city and state follow uniform reporting instructions in order to produce a portrait of the number of homeless students for BEDS and SIRS. As opposed to the definition used by the Department of Homeless Services, which records only those living in the shelter system, all public schools adhere to the federal definition of homelessness, which considers homeless any child or youth who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes not only students who are living in shelters, transitional housing, hotels, and motels, but also those who are living in cars or campgrounds or are sharing others' housing due to their own housing loss, economic hardship, or other reason. While this definition of homelessness is a vital step toward helping students stay in school during periods of housing instability and recognizes the various crises that may lead to housing loss, it creates differences in reports of homeless students in the system published by the Department of Education and the Department of Homeless Services each year.
- ⁴ Edwards, Aaron. "New York City Acts Quickly Amid Sharp Rise in Homelessness," *New York Times*, August 10, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/11/nyregion/nyc-homeless-shelters-in-record-demand-new-facilities-planned.html> (accessed August 10, 2012).
- ⁵ Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, *How a GED Is a Real Advantage in Reducing Homelessness in New York City*, 2011.
- ⁶ National Coalition for the Homeless, "Education of Homeless Children and Youth," www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/education.pdf (accessed August 15, 2012).
- ⁷ National Center on Family Homelessness, "Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts," www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/ArchitecturePlanning/discover/centers/CYE/Publications/Documents/outcasts.pdf (accessed August 16, 2012).
- ⁸ For more information, see *McKinney-Vento Act: NCH Fact Sheet #18*, National Coalition for the Homeless, June 2006.
- ⁹ McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 Part C, Subtitle B, Section 721, U.S. Department of Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg116.html> (accessed December 3, 2012).
- ¹⁰ McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 Part C, Subtitle B, Section 722 (g)(1)(J)(ii), U.S. Department of Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg116.html> (accessed December 3, 2012).
- ¹¹ Homes for the Homeless, *Access to Success: Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Families*, 1993. www.icphny.org/PDF/reports/AccessToSuccess.pdf?Submit1=Free+Download (accessed August 10, 2012); National Center on Family Homelessness, "Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts," www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/ArchitecturePlanning/discover/centers/CYE/Publications/Documents/outcasts.pdf (accessed August 16, 2012).
- ¹² National Education Association, "Charter Schools: Definition," <http://www.nea.org/home/16332.htm> (accessed August 12, 2012).
- ¹³ Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, *Charter School Performance in New York City*, 2010. <http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/NYC%202009%20CREDO.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2012).
- ¹⁴ New York City Charter School Center, "New York City Charter Schools: 2011–12 Enrollment Lottery Trends," http://www.nyccharterschools.org/sites/default/files/resources/Lottery2011Report_v5.pdf (accessed December 3, 2012).
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ This is based on the 138 charter schools listed in the SIRS SY 2010–11 data. The number of charter schools is greater than the 124 mentioned previously because for the purposes of progress-report grades, sites that house both an elementary and middle school, a middle and high school, or grades K–12 are separated. Raw numbers of schools may vary depending on data source accessed, as some sources list schools that house elementary, middle, and/or high schools in the same building as more than one school. Only schools open for enrollment were included in this analysis. New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students (NYS-TEACHS), "NYS-TEACHS › Info by Topic: Data and Statistics on Homelessness," *Data Files SY 2007–08, SY 2008–09, SY 2009–10 and SY 2010–11*, <http://www.nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html> (accessed August 6, 2012).
- ¹⁷ 75% of charter-school students are considered low-income, making use of their eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL). However, there are fewer students in the lowest-income Free Lunch category in charter schools than in district schools (65.2% vs. 67.6%). On the other hand, over 60% of all charter-school students are black, compared with 30% of all students enrolled in traditional public schools. New York City Charter School Center, *The State of the Charter Schools Sector*, 2012. <http://www.nyccharterschools.org/data> (accessed September 4, 2012).
- ¹⁸ New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students (NYS-TEACHS), "NYS-TEACHS › Info by Topic: Data and Statistics on Homelessness," *Data Files SY 2007–08, SY 2008–09, SY 2009–10 and SY 2010–11*, <http://www.nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html> (accessed August 6, 2012).
- ¹⁹ District School population data for Special Education and Alternative schools are listed separately from the boroughs in which they operate and were omitted for the purposes of this analysis.
- ²⁰ In 2007 there were 967,678 students in traditional public schools, 19,216 in charter schools, and 50,926 homeless students. In 2010 there were 973,766 students in traditional public schools, 39,492 in charter schools, and 69,244 homeless students. Enrollment data for charter schools was gathered from NYC DOE databases; New York City Department of Education, "School Demographics and Accountability Snapshot" and "Progress Reports," <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm> (accessed September 4, 2012).
- ²¹ New York City Department of Education, "Progress Reports," <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm> (accessed September 4, 2012).
- ²² Domanico, Ray, and Yolanda Smith. "Charter Schools Housed in the City's School Buildings Get More Public Funding per Student than Traditional Public Schools," *Independent Budget Office Web Log*, February 15, 2011. <http://ibo.nyc.ny.us/cgi-park/?p=272> (accessed October 5, 2012).
- ²³ New York State Education Department: No Child Left Behind, "Field Memo #03-2010: New York City Charter Schools and Community School District Preference for Homeless Students," 2010. <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/nclb/guidance/memos/03-2010.html> (accessed December 6, 2012).
- ²⁴ New York City Charter School Center, "New York City Charter Schools: 2011–12 Enrollment Lottery Trends," http://www.nyccharterschools.org/sites/default/files/resources/Lottery2011Report_v5.pdf (accessed December 3, 2012).
- ²⁵ The 2010 amendment states that schools must adhere to targets set by one of three authorizing institutions. However, to date the targets have yet to be set. Until targets are released, charter schools are expected to make good-faith efforts to enroll and retain priority groups in the same proportion as traditional public schools in the same community. The means of determining whether schools are adhering to this advisement are unclear; "New York State Department of Education Charter Schools Act of 1998, Article 56, Section 2851.4(e)," New York State Legislature, Laws of New York, public. [leginfo.state.ny.us/LAWSSEAF.cgi?QUERYTYPE=LAWS+&QUERYDATA=\\$\\$EDN2851\\$\\$%40TXEDN02851+&LIST=LAW+&BROWSER=EXPLORER+&TOKEN=12661339+&TARGET=VIEW](http://leginfo.state.ny.us/LAWSSEAF.cgi?QUERYTYPE=LAWS+&QUERYDATA=$$EDN2851$$%40TXEDN02851+&LIST=LAW+&BROWSER=EXPLORER+&TOKEN=12661339+&TARGET=VIEW) (accessed October 8, 2012).
- ²⁶ Each charter school has its own application deadline, but most schools require that applications be submitted prior to April 1 for enrollment at the start of the next school year. Students selected for enrollment via lottery are chosen in April for the following year; New York City Charter School Center, "Enrollment FAQ," <http://www.nyccharterschools.org/enrollment-faq#6> (accessed August 10, 2012).

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