

New York City schools overwhelmed by student homelessness

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Despite the increasing population of homeless families and children in New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat, has cut promised additional funding of services for homeless students in the public schools from his preliminary fiscal year 2018 city budget proposal.

Last year the mayor had budgeted \$30 million to provide literacy teachers to mentor students in homeless shelters in order to improve attendance, punctuality and matriculation. De Blasio's proposal for next year's budget cuts \$10 million from those funds. This would eliminate the jobs of 30 new social workers, as well as some attendance teachers, hired to support schools with particularly large homeless populations. The city currently has almost twice as many school security officers as counselors.

Although de Blasio stated that he hopes to restore the funds in some form, New York and school districts nationwide expect to face federal budget cuts under President Donald Trump and his nominee for secretary of education, Betsy DeVos. Trump proposed during his campaign to divert \$20 billion in existing federal education money toward vouchers that families could use to help pay for private and religious schools, perhaps to be taken from \$15 billion in federal Title I funds dedicated to schools serving the poorest children. For New York City this could threaten \$1 billion in Title I funds.

While city spending on homelessness rose to an estimated \$1.7 billion in the current fiscal year, above initial projections, reflecting the overall increase in the homeless population, the amount budgeted for the Department of Homeless Services for the coming fiscal year would be reduced by \$257 million, according to the *New York Times*.

In November 2016, there were 62,840 homeless

people sleeping each night in the New York City municipal shelter system, including 15,899 families with 24,251 children. Families comprise about three-quarters of the homeless shelter population. The homeless student population of the New York City public schools—including those in shelters, temporary housing, and doubled-up in the apartments of others—more than doubled from 50,926 in the 2007-2008 school year, before the financial crisis, to 105,445 in 2015-2016. That represents one-tenth of the slightly over 1 million total student population, as reported by the nonprofit Advocates for Children of New York.

Of the over 100,000 homeless students, 87,000 live in shelters or temporary housing. The remainder reside temporarily, and precariously, doubled up in the apartments of relatives or friends, either with or separated from their immediate family.

Homelessness increases difficulties for teachers and students in the city's crowded classrooms. Homeless students are characteristically erratic in their attendance and homework, and they suffer from more emotional and physical health problems. Vacations or holidays from schools, which generally bring rest and enjoyment to those better off, actually create more challenges for homeless children needing alternatives to the food, care and attention that schools provide.

The Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness has reported that over two-thirds of New York City students who were homeless during the 2014-2015 school year were also homeless in a previous school year. Forty percent of homeless children transferred schools during the school year and over half missed 20 or more days of school. Only one-third of homeless students with special education needs received their mandated Individual Education Plan by the end of

kindergarten.

Last year, the de Blasio administration was forced to change regulations requiring that children accompany their parents to the multiple, time-consuming sessions needed to apply for admission to a shelter. This rule had caused students to miss school. In addition, children of families that were transferred to new shelters were forced to either change schools or travel long distances across the city from shelters, which are often in isolated areas with poor transportation. De Blasio has promised busing for those students, but funding is insecure.

Lack of an adequate education budget in New York State and City has resulted, in part, from the state legislature and Governor Andrew Cuomo, also a Democrat, underfunding a court-ordered plan for increased state education aid called the Foundation Aid Formula, following the 2008 banking collapse. While Cuomo claims that the billion dollars he is adding to this year's education budget makes it the largest in history, the State Education Department estimates that \$4.3 billion would be needed to provide the total due under the formula, of which New York City is owed \$1.9 billion, twice as much as in Cuomo's entire budget.

The United Federation of Teachers, the city's teachers union, with 200,000 members, recently described its efforts on behalf of homeless students. These included clothing drives, and getting the online supply company Yoobi to donate an equal amount of supplies for homeless children as were bought from the company by teachers. Such token gestures—which only add to the burden of the city's teachers—seek to cover for the union's complicity in attacks on the public education system spearheaded by the Obama administration, as well as state and local Democrats.

The WSWS attended a public meeting on city services for homeless students held in P.S. 5 (Public School 5) in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Parent members of the Community Education Council seemed surprised to learn that the city provides only one official to supervise services for homeless students for all of Brooklyn, a borough of 2.6 million people, including the three school districts having the greatest concentration of homeless students.

Omega Bullock, the only homeless parent at the meeting, spoke to the WSWS. "It is so true what was

said—if you are homeless, the kids miss school. My son, Martel, is in his fifth school since we came to New York. He got left back because of that. He is smart, a good student. But he has been homeless for very much of his life."

She added that a daughter, Aisatu, suffers from psychological difficulties as a result of homelessness. "Changing shelters and schools can wreck a child's mind. She was unbalanced and missing days in school," she said.

Omega now lives in a six-story Halsey Street shelter for homeless families near P.S. 5, where her three children attend school. "For five years I have been in and out of the city shelter system and have been trying that long to get a voucher for permanent housing. I came to this meeting looking to see if there is somebody I can talk to, to find permanent housing. I did not."

"I am on the top, the sixth floor, at the shelter," she said. "Part of the ceiling came down and it took them three or four months before it was fixed. They want to relocate me to the South: 'Do you have family in the South? We will pay for your fare and for food traveling.' But what am I gonna do there? I don't have a job there or a place to stay there."

She said, "I came to New York from Baltimore after I left my children's father. But everybody in my family here is doing their own thing and I cannot live with them. I want permanent housing so I could work and do what regular people do, but the cost of living in New York City is so high."



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