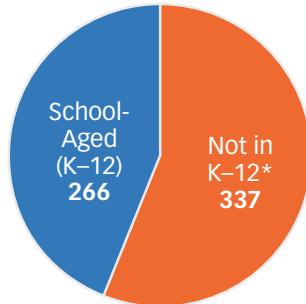


# Snapshot: Back to School 2021–2022

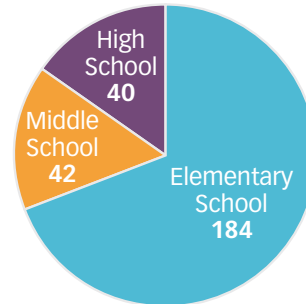
Fall 2021 marked the first time that all New York City school classrooms were open to all students, each and every day, since March 2020. This snapshot offers the perspective of 10 parents<sup>1</sup> and five staff members at HFH shelters, collected through one-on-one interviews,<sup>2</sup> on the challenges and benefits of children’s return to in-person schooling.

### Children at HFH

Of the roughly 600 children in HFH’s shelters, 44% or 266 are school-aged, attending kindergarten to 12th grade. More than two-thirds of these children are in elementary school.<sup>3</sup>



### School Level of Children in K-12



\*NOTE: includes infants and toddlers as well as children who may be enrolled in DOE EarlyLearn, 3-K, Pre-K.

## Benefits of the Return to School

Like most students in New York City, children at HFH attended school remotely or on a blended remote and in-person schedule for the 2020–2021 school year. Almost all parents at HFH found that their child struggled to focus while attending school remotely, and some were concerned that their academic advancement suffered. The iPads and tablets provided by the Department of Education would also sometimes break and, while they would be replaced quickly, the hassle and disruption were frustrating. The return to in-person school in the fall of 2021 brought many benefits. For HFH Family Services staff, they can more easily learn about and build relationships with adult clients; clients are often more willing to speak openly with case managers when their children are not present. Below are some of the benefits for children and their parents:

### Benefits of the Return to School for Children

#### According to Parents:

- Learn more and perform better academically
- Access hands-on-support from teachers and aides
- Get excited about getting out of their rooms
- Make friends and socialize with their peers
- Focus without the distraction of games and toys

### Benefits of the Return to School for Parents:

- More free time to address their employment, housing, and other needs
- Alleviated a great deal of parents’ childcare burdens, allowing them to return to work and prior pre-pandemic childcare arrangements

## Parents’ Perspectives on the Benefits of In-Person School



I personally feel that they have more support in school ... [My child] has three different teachers that she sees every day ... And they’re all very ... in tune with what she needs. And so that’s been really helpful. I feel like they’re better teachers than I am.



[I’m] happy that they’re back in school. I don’t like remote learning. They were suffering. My [child] did terribly. She passed by the skin of her teeth. I’m glad she’s back in school ... they’re able to socialize. That’s the best thing.



It was hard for [my child] to do remote ... Because it’s like no school. To me, he didn’t like that. He liked to be in school. With school, I had no problem going back. I had the problem [with him] staying home.



They learn more when they’re in school. Hands-on learning, for me, is the best [compared to virtual learning].



## Challenges with the Return to School

### Concerns about COVID-19 and Vaccines

Like many New Yorkers, parents at HFH shelters have varying levels of fear about COVID-19 infection and confidence in school administrators to keep their children safe [interviews were conducted prior to the discovery of the omicron variant]. While many parents said they were comfortable with their child’s school’s handling of the pandemic, several feel very anxious about sending their child back to school. **“It’s not easy to put your child at risk,”** said one parent, though she ultimately felt the educational benefits of in-person outweighed the risk. Another parent was horrified that her child was pressured by administrators to go to school even while he had a severe cough and that live remote instruction was not guaranteed to a student in quarantine. “I wish remote would come back ... I feel like the safety is not being taken as I think it should,” she said. Those parents who felt comfortable with their child back in school cited consistent, clear, and immediate communication from the schools as extremely helpful. One parent stated, “I get an email every day from the DOE [with] just the breakdown [of COVID cases], and it’s only been that one student the whole time. So, **I feel like the principal at the school is really, really good and keeps the parents up-to-date and everything.**” Another parent said, “We communicate. We’re like family ... Anything happen[s], I could call any one of them in [the] school ... Everybody’s on point.”

Parents at HFH also have varying perspectives on the COVID-19 vaccine, with some relieved by their child receiving it: “I feel better [about sending my child back to school] now that he got vaccinated.” Other parents are distrustful of its safety. One parent’s concern that the vaccine would be required for school attendance—not yet City policy—contributed to her decision to homeschool her child. Families often pose the questions of whether to get vaccinated and whether to vaccinate their child to Family Services staff, some of whom feel that providing guidance on vaccines is difficult as they are not healthcare professionals.

### Return to Pre-Pandemic Routines and Commutes to School

The return to in-person learning has created changes in the routines students developed during their year-plus of remote learning. Some students do not want to go back to school buildings; they became accustomed to doing work from the comfort of their rooms and often did not have to participate in school for as many hours as they do now. HFH Family Services staff found this especially true for high school students.

Some of the aversion to returning to in-person can be attributed to students’ lengthy commutes to school. On average, students at HFH travel **43 minutes to school via public transportation**,<sup>4</sup> though some students take a school bus, walk to school, or are driven by a parent. Far commutes to school inhibit participation in HFH afterschool programming as some students return to their shelter too late to join: “Either she goes to school, or she goes to afterschool. She can’t do both,” said one parent.

Site	All Students (K-12)		Elementary School		Middle School		High School	
	Number of Students	Average Travel Time	Number of Students	Average Travel Time	Number of Students	Average Travel Time	Number of Students	Average Travel Time
Allie’s Place	52	39 Minutes	33	32 Minutes	12	44 Minutes	7	63 Minutes
Prospect	32	27 Minutes	18	26 Minutes	5	16 Minutes	9	35 Minutes
Saratoga	132	49 Minutes	97	45 Minutes	20	57 Minutes	15	68 Minutes
Williamsbridge	50	43 Minutes	36	40 Minutes	5	40 Minutes	9	60 Minutes
All HFH Sites	266	43 Minutes	184	40 Minutes	42	46 Minutes	40	58 Minutes

With children predominantly learning remotely for the past year, the **distance between the school and shelter was often a nonissue for families**, and those who entered the shelter system during the pandemic may have never considered it.

While the federal McKinney-Vento Act ensures that homeless children can continue to attend their school of origin despite shelter location, the decision around whether to change a child’s school to be near a shelter, or transfer to a shelter close to a child’s school, is a complicated one. Some parents who are placed in boroughs different from their child’s school opt not to change schools because they believe their shelter stay will be short; it wouldn’t be worth the hassle, and they don’t want their child to lose access to a familiar, supportive environment. After a while, some families will make a change. Some parents weigh the safety risk; one of the primary drivers of family homelessness is domestic violence, and survivors’ shelter placements are in boroughs different from their boroughs

of origin to avoid abusers. Changing a child’s school to one nearby may reveal shelter location to an abuser. Students in charter schools are also less likely to transfer schools, as the seat in a charter school may be coveted. Perhaps because of this, **charter school students in HFH shelters travel an average of 20 minutes longer** than students in district-run public schools.<sup>5</sup>

## Coordination with the DOE and Bus Routes

**The 266 school-aged children in HFH shelters attend 177 unique schools, roughly one school for every one to two students.** Successful coordination among clients, HFH staff, the DOE, the on-site DOE liaison, the schools themselves, and DHS is a challenge for all stakeholders, especially with so many schools involved. In particular, communication around school bus routes is once again a challenge. Finding out what time buses will arrive and learning about changes to routes in a timely fashion, among other concerns, have been difficult for families.

For families in conditional status,<sup>6</sup> securing the bus route itself is a challenge. Each time the family is deemed ineligible, their paperwork must be completed anew, including their request for a bus route, which slows down the processing of their request. On average, students who belong to families in conditional status travel 12 minutes longer than those in families determined eligible for shelter, which may be because they have yet to transfer schools while their case is in limbo. **Nearly one in four school-aged children at HFH are part of families in conditional status.**<sup>7</sup>

**While most parents interviewed felt that the benefits of in-person schooling outweighed the challenges, adjusting to commuting and concerns about COVID-19 protocols have created stresses for families at HFH as their children returned to in-person schooling. This snapshot, while providing an important perspective, is limited in scope as only 10 parents’ experiences are included. Shelter providers must continue to engage parents to better understand their needs through pandemic recovery and beyond.**

1 Parents selected for interviews do not represent a random sample. Interviews were conducted to help HFH understand parents’ concerns in an effort to improve their experience in shelter.

2 Interviews were conducted during the week of November 15, 2021, in English and Spanish. Parents and staff from HFH’s four shelters were interviewed.

3 This data is an analysis of HFH’s shelter population on one day in October 2021.

4 Student commute times were calculated using the fastest route found on Google Maps between a school and an HFH shelter at 7 am on a weekday in October 2021. Many routes included multiple bus lines and/or required a transfer between a bus and the subway. Due to the inconsistencies of public transportation in New York City, it is likely that the actual commute times for students are longer than the commute times in this analysis.

5 Some charter schools do not offer busing, which means that students must commute via public transportation.

6 While the Department of Homeless Services works to determine whether a family is eligible for shelter, the family resides in shelter in what is termed “conditional status.” The process of investigating a family’s case, deeming them ineligible, having them reapply for shelter, and going through the process again is a back and forth that can last over a year.

7 Twenty-three percent and 24 percent of school-aged children at HFH on September 24, 2021 and October 26, 2021 were part of families in conditional status, respectively.