

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Study Gauges 'Risk Load' for High-Poverty Schools

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

Poverty is not just a lack of money. It's a shorthand for a host of other problems—scanty dinners and crumbling housing projects, chronic illnesses, and depressed or angry parents—that can interfere with a child's ability to learn.

Educators and researchers in several of the nation's largest districts are trying to look at schools based on a fuller picture of children's experiences, rather than only seeing poverty as a label.

In a study released today, researchers at the **Center for New York City Affairs** linked data from the U.S. Census Bureau's **American Community Survey**, the school district, and the municipal housing, homeless services, and children's services agencies, and matched the data with 748 elementary schools (which, unlike the districtwide enrollment system for secondary school, use geographic attendance areas.)

Researchers found that 18 factors in a student's school and neighborhood strongly predicted his or her likelihood of chronic absenteeism and the student's scores on New York's accountability tests that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Taken together, these indicators create a measure of the "risk load" in each of the Big Apple's elementary schools.

If you think about the community context, you would be able to better understand when students come into the school building, what they are carrying with them," said Kim Nauer, the education research director of the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School, and an author of the study.

### 'Truly Disadvantaged'

New York City is the latest in a growing number of urban districts attempting to find better indicators of strength and challenge in low-performing schools.

For example, the **University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research** aligns U.S. Census block data with employment, crime, and school data to separate poor-but-stable communities and schools from

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### 18 Risk Factors

The Center for New York City Affairs identified 18 school and neighborhood indicators that contribute to high risk in urban schools with high concentration of poverty. The indicators are intended to help administrators and policymakers find areas for improvement, such as high teacher turnover or student suspensions.

the ones they call "truly disadvantaged."

The percentage of students who receive free and reduced-price lunch is a "very rough indicator," said Elaine M. Allensworth, the director of the consortium. "It doesn't differentiate schools or students very well in a school or district where 85 percent of the students get free lunch. In a district like Chicago, we have some neighborhoods where all the students get free lunch but it's still working poor—and some neighborhoods where the male unemployment rate is above 60 percent and almost all families are below the poverty line. Often, those communities have very high crime rates and few neighborhood institutions that are very viable. That's a very different situation."

The **University of Pennsylvania's Kids Integrated Data System**, or KIDS, a model for New York and Chicago's work, incorporates real-time data from seven city agencies and the school district of Philadelphia.

In a separate 2013 study, John W. Fantuzzo, a human-relations professor and the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Child Research Center, compared a set of urban high-poverty schools based on factors including birth risks, low parental education levels, homelessness, maltreatment, and lead exposure. Once those risk factors were taken into account, poverty and race were no longer significantly associated with reading achievement or school attendance.

"We've been [using race and poverty as a proxy for disadvantage] for decades, and it's done nothing," Mr. Fantuzzo said. "'Oh, the poor kids are poor, the black kids and Latino kids do badly.' That's immoral to me. These kids are having experiences, ... and we have to make those visible. We need actionable intelligence."

Mr. Fantuzzo, who consulted early on with the New York researchers, said they made good use of the "low-hanging fruit" that often is collected but unused in both government agencies and the state P-20 longitudinal-data systems. In Philadelphia, KIDS was used to develop a measure of student engagement—found to be a protective factor for disadvantaged students—which is now being applied to the district's kindergarten report cards and which Mr. Fantuzzo advocates including in K-12 report cards as well.

"From a child-development perspective, it's not status that disadvantages you or advantages you. It's your experiences ... abuse or homelessness. ... Some very concrete sets of experiences are more powerful predictors than free and reduced lunch," Mr. Fantuzzo said. "We have to build capacities that make visible important, mutable variables that we can do something about."

### School Factors:

1. Students eligible for free lunch
2. Students known to be in temporary housing
3. Students eligible for welfare benefits from the city Human Resources Administration
4. Special education students
5. Black or Hispanic students
6. Principal turnover
7. Teacher turnover
8. Student turnover
9. Student suspensions
10. Safety score on the district's Learning Environment Survey
11. Engagement score on the Learning Environment Survey

### Neighborhood Factors:

12. Involvement with the city's Administration for Children's Services
13. Poverty rate according to the U.S. Census for the school's attendance area
14. Adult education levels
15. Professional employment
16. Male unemployment
17. Presence of public housing in a school's attendance area
18. Presence of a homeless shelter in a school's attendance area

## Hidden Differences

In the New York City study, for instance, P.S. 92 in the Bronx had an 82 percent poverty rate, and only 5 percent of its students passed the new state test aligned to the common standards in reading, with only 4 percent passing in math in 2012-13. However, P.S. 63 Author's Academy in the South Bronx, whose poverty rate is 96 percent, had five times higher passing rates in both reading and math in 2012-13.

Why? A look at the schools' relative risk loads may give a few hints. P.S. 92 serves homeless shelters, and nearly twice as many students are chronically absent—46 percent compared with Author's Academy's 28 percent. Moreover, P.S. 92's teacher turnover is more than double that of its southern neighbor, with 21 percent of teachers having taught at a different school the prior year, versus 10 percent new teachers at P.S. 63. It's not clear whether any individual factor causes the gaps in individual risk factors among schools, but the indicators point to differences in the supports and interventions each school needs.

"Everyone talks about the achievement gap and says, 'Well, it's up to the teachers to make these kids smarter.' But if you look at the risk-load gap, it explains the achievement gap," said Ms. Nauer of the Center for New York City Affairs. "So then, what do you do? You create a series of things within the classroom environment that are known to be protective or helpful to students who have these risks."

For example, Pat Mitchell, the principal of P.S. 48 Wordsworth in Jamaica, in the city's Queens borough, "serves some of the lowest-income kids in the city but her kids have less of a risk-load burden," Ms. Nauer said.

The school has 16 different risk factors—the same number as P.S. 92—but its rate of chronic absenteeism is 26 percent.

"She's interesting because she has done everything right in focusing on both attendance and classroom instruction. Her attendance and test scores have been steadily improving," added Ms. Nauer.

When Ms. Mitchell took over as principal in 2007, she found the school didn't have the continuity to be self-reflective. Among its many risk factors were high student, teacher, and principal mobility—Ms. Mitchell herself was the fifth leader in eight years—and the principal welcomed the data to "peel back the layers to find out why a problem is happening."

"Some of the factors, most people don't even consider," she said. "Students were identified for low attendance but not tracked over time.

"There are things we cannot touch: how much a family makes, how many adults are in the home, how many jobs they have to have to pay for rent," Ms. Mitchell said. "We can't do anything about that. What surprised me were the things that I had never thought about before that have a huge effect on the school culture."

The school, for instance, became one of the pilot campuses for an initiative during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration to improve attendance. Digging into the school's chronic absenteeism got Ms. Mitchell and her staff talking about the ways they contributed to student absenteeism, through approaches

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to discipline and asthma.

"I never even thought about the number of children who are being suspended. I just thought, 'We have scholars who are misbehaving and we have to suspend them.' I never realized how it affected the whole school culture," she said.

Now, the school works to find in-school discipline and has a team monitoring chronically absent students, praising every improvement they find.

"Scholars are so shocked when I say, 'You were absent 17 days last year and only one this year, and I'm so proud of you,' " Ms. Mitchell said.

The New York study also recommends that Mayor Bill de Blasio work with all schools to analyze child-welfare agencies systemwide in light of the indicators. "I hope it will be helpful in making [school] principals aware of the questions they should be asking," Ms. Nauer said. "The whole endgame here is to make school as positive as possible for the little guys and make sure they are not in a cycle of failure by the time they get to middle school."

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