

Vulnerable Schools and COVID-19

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Ten years ago, we published *Is Demography Still Destiny? Neighborhood Demographics and Public High School Students' Readiness for College in New York City*. In that study, we linked the college-readiness rates of graduating NYC students to the racial/ethnic composition of their home neighborhoods. We found that the higher the percentage of Black and Latinx residents in city neighborhoods, the lower their students' college readiness scores. We concluded that, against the claims by the then mayor and Schools Chancellor, unfortunately, demography was still destiny for the city's Black and Latinx students.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the disproportionate effects of income loss, learning loss, and housing insecurity in predominately Black and Latinx communities. During the past year and a half, these communities have also suffered COVID-19's highest infection and death rates. We compared the NYC Health Department's COVID-19 Neighborhood Data with the key findings from our *Demography/Destiny* study to analyze the relationship between students' college readiness rates, the racial/ethnic composition of students' home neighborhoods, and neighborhood indicators of the severity of COVID-19 diagnosis and death rates. Our findings for six neighborhoods—three with very low and three with very high college readiness rates—indicate that the ethnic/racial composition of a student's home neighborhood is not only a strong predictor of students' graduating high school ready for college, but is also closely related to trends in COVID-19 rates of diagnosis and death. The struggling neighborhoods we identified ten years ago have become even more vulnerable.

TABLE 1.
COLLEGE READINESS PERCENTAGE, BLACK & LATINX RESIDENT PERCENTAGE, AND COVID-19 OUTCOMES FOR 6 NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

Neighborhoods	College Readiness (%)	Black & Latinx Residents (%)	People Diagnosed with COVID-19	People who Died of COVID-19	COVID-19 Death Rate per 100,000 People
Low College-Ready Neighborhoods					
Mott Haven (10455)	8	100	1 out of 7	1 out of 217	460.69
Ocean Hill (11212: Ocean-Hill-Brownsville)	12	99	1 out of 8	1 out of 168	592.16
Melrose (10451: Concourse/Melrose)	12	100	1 out of 7	1 out of 191	521.46
High College-Ready Neighborhoods					
Tribeca (10007, 10278, 10279)	79	9	1 out of 12	1 out of 1,747	57.21
Lenox Hill (10065: Lenox Hill/Upper East Side)	74	6	1 out of 14	1 out of 569	175.63
Upper East Side (10028: Upper East Side/Yorkville)	70	8	1 out of 16	1 out of 816	122.44

Notes: The Health Department's COVID-19 Neighborhood data is updated daily; this table is based on data for Friday, August 6, 2021.

Neighborhood names come from our original study. Zipcodes and corresponding geographical names (in parenthesis) come from the Health Department's data. (they do not map directly onto one another).

New York City's COVID-19 death rate: 402.68 per 100,000 people.



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For the past year and a half, COVID-19 has severely reduced the learning curves of the city's low-income Black and Latinx students. After the city instituted remote learning, unequal access to computers and the skewed distribution of Internet connectivity limited the capacity of many Black and Latinx families to link their students to virtual instruction. Though the city made significant efforts to distribute laptops and iPads to students without such devices, overarching connectivity issues and limited broadband access locked many city students out of remote learning. Worse, because so many Black and Latinx family members in high COVID-impacted neighborhoods are employed as essential front-line workers, they could not work remotely and were often unable to effectively support their children's online educational experience. Finally, because many families of essential workers were consistently exposed to COVID-19 at work, their children witnessed the ravages the pandemic wreaked on their families, friends, and neighborhoods. Far too many Black and Latinx students suffered the emotional and mental health tolls of these experiences.

The stimulus funds the Biden administration has allocated to allay the pandemic's devastation includes significant funds for the city's schools. NYC has begun to specify the uses of that new funding; for example, a recently announced city program provides funding to reduce class size in 72 elementary schools with overly large class sizes, high poverty indices, and low test scores. The use of these targeted data indicators is welcome, but the criteria for schools particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 could be usefully expanded. Schools serving high percentages of homeless students, for example, as well as schools serving high percentages of chronically absent students, were very hard hit by the pandemic. (Among the many trenchant reports of the Center for NYC Affairs at The New School is *A Better Picture of Poverty* [2014], which argues for the strategic use of chronic absentee data in identifying and intervening to improve vulnerable schools.)

This need for more precise identification of vulnerable schools is both timely and critical to school improvement. When one of us (Norm) was a school board member in Brooklyn's District 15, one of the district's schools was the epicenter of huge enrollment increases, primarily of immigrant students from Latin America. Because so many of these new students entered the District 15 school with widely varying levels of previous education including long periods of interrupted schooling, the school established a vestibule program, in some cases lasting a few months, in which students were not grouped into age-based classes. Instead, teacher teams formed and reformed impromptu groups based on students' varying skill levels and through interviews, observations, and assessments, carefully identified students' capacities, strengths, and instructional needs. Only then were students placed in classes with their learning profiles available to their individual teachers.

Another example: the Brooklyn High School for Telecommunication Arts and Technology for years enrolled, by design, a very significant percentage of students with disabilities. To ensure that these students' academic capacities were not limited by the standardized instructional procedures of a large high school, Telecommunication's teachers and administrators designed a combined 9th-10th grade Special Education curriculum and teaching program which encouraged and supported those students' developmental learning stages.

The new stimulus funds must be distributed equitably, with a particular focus on the city's most vulnerable schools. Of the city school system's 650 elementary schools with early grades in 2020-21, almost 400, or more than 60%, are predominantly Black and Latinx, low-income and perform poorly on standardized tests. No single approach to improvement will fit the diverse needs of these challenged schools, whose vulnerabilities were heightened by the effects of COVID-19. For example, the subset of schools that serve significant populations of homeless students (who had lower rates of online participation during remote schooling), need enhanced transportation resources and consistent outreach, so that student learning capacity is not disrupted by the bureaucratic demands, continual transfers, and other limits of the shelter system. This subset of schools must also provide full-time after-school programming, including homework help and Internet access not available in shelters. Finally, homeless students (as well as many other vulnerable groups of students who have experienced different types of trauma during this pandemic) need the full range of social/emotional supports that effective school-based counseling and nurturing can provide.

Another subset of vulnerable schools, made even more vulnerable by the effects of COVID-19, has high percentages of students with chronic absenteeism. (NYC public schools with the lowest attendance rates were predominately in the same neighborhoods with the highest COVID-19 rates). *A Better Picture of Poverty* estimates that nearly 130 city elementary schools struggle with persistent chronic absenteeism—some 30% to 40% of the schools' students are absent more than 10% of the school year. (This figure was likely much higher in 2020-21 due to the pandemic.) Effective teaching is severely challenged in schools whose attendance varies so significantly. Curriculum continuity is threatened; teacher-student connections and relationships are attenuated; and student academic achievement suffers enormously. (The New School's maps of the city school districts most deeply affected by persistent chronic absenteeism correlate very strongly with the neighborhoods we identified as having the lowest levels of college readiness in our *Demography/Destiny* study.)

Carefully structured and well-run community schools can offer programs to meet many of the needs of children and families in these subsets of vulnerable schools, but only if the community schools' CBOs identify their schools' specific needs and design specifically tailored programs to meet those needs. Moreover, currently, there are not enough community school programs to respond to the needs of the 400 vulnerable elementary schools across the city.

To advance the city's capacity to respond to student and family need in those vulnerable elementary schools, and to intervene to improve them, the DOE should build on the analyses begun by *A Better Picture of Poverty*. The DOE should use its extensive data library to precisely characterize the conditions of student and family need in as many subsets of vulnerable elementary schools as possible. Then the DOE, in collaboration with community schools and advocacy and school reform groups, should define the interventions that will make a difference in those subsets of vulnerable schools.

In its modest class size reduction program for the initial subset of 72 elementary schools, the DOE seems to have provided a menu of choices for each targeted school. Schools can add a second teacher to existing classes, hire additional teachers and form new classes, or hire support staff to provide additional instructional supports. The DOE needs to similarly incentivize and support the principals and teachers of those 400 vulnerable elementary schools to design and develop a menu of specific programs that meet the needs of each school and their students, needs that the pandemic has cruelly exacerbated.