



# NYC School Refusal Survey

## Summary and Recommendations

Survey Period: 3/30/2022-4/15/2022

A Survey of NYC Parents of Students with Disabilities whose Children are  
Avoiding or Refusing to Attend School

By Special Support Services, LLC  
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# Background

In New York City, School Year 2021-2022 is marked with many controversies surrounding remote instruction, academic recovery services, masking or not-masking, and the debate over school governance. Chronic absenteeism has also made headlines across this country as well as our city but the conversation has excluded some of our most vulnerable students: students with disabilities. For many in the special education community, chronic absenteeism is known by a different name: *School Refusal*.

As parents of students with disabilities who provide peer support, advocates at Special Support Services, saw this problem plague many families, including our own. In order to shed light on the needs of students with disabilities facing School Refusal, we created a brief, informal survey for parents.

# Design and Distribution

Our survey aims to (1) demonstrate what school refusal looks like in students with disabilities and (2) to show the type of responses families receive from the school. The survey was purposely brief and offered only in English. This survey is a volunteer effort without a marketing or distribution budget. We promoted it on various listservs and social media groups that focus on children and disabilities.

140 parents from the five boroughs answered the survey. The most responses came from districts 2, 15, and 30. The largest number of responses came from Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

For a copy of a blank survey, please click [here](#).

# Response Overview

- For 57% of families, School Refusal symptoms had not surfaced prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- School Refusal behaviors occur at high school, middle school, and elementary school.
- Parents reported top 3 signs of School Refusal as
  1. the child engaging in frequent and substantive arguments with parents about going to school,
  2. physically refusing to go school, and
  3. complaints of pains that lacked medical basis.

# Response Overview Cont'd

- 34% of respondents said their children expressed thoughts of harming themselves.
- The majority of respondents noted School Refusal behaviors that last over 6 months and happen intermittently.
- 50% of parents answered that their children's school responded to the School Refusal by having a social worker or guidance counselor speak to their children.
- 14% of the respondents had an attendance teacher call or visit the home.
- 11% of the respondents answered that their school did nothing.
- 35% of parents volunteered to speak to the media and lawmakers about their child's experience with School Refusal.

# Reflections and Recommendations

- Strategies for dealing with chronic absenteeism for students with disabilities should include making changes to accommodations and services on the student's IEP. **School Refusal can be a manifestation of the student's disability.**
- We recommended enlisting a behavioral analyst to run a Functional Behavioral Assessment both in *and* out of the school environment to assess why a student is avoiding classes and/or school. Requesting an **independent educational evaluation (IEE) for a Functional Behavioral Assessment** can be a solution when school staff cannot perform assessment off campus. This is consistent with the NYC DOE Standard Operating Procedure Manual in which an FBA is recommended for consideration in the instance of school avoidance. The NYC DOE must guide schools on how to use independent resources when school staff cannot accurately assess data from only the school setting.

# Reflections and Recommendations cont'd

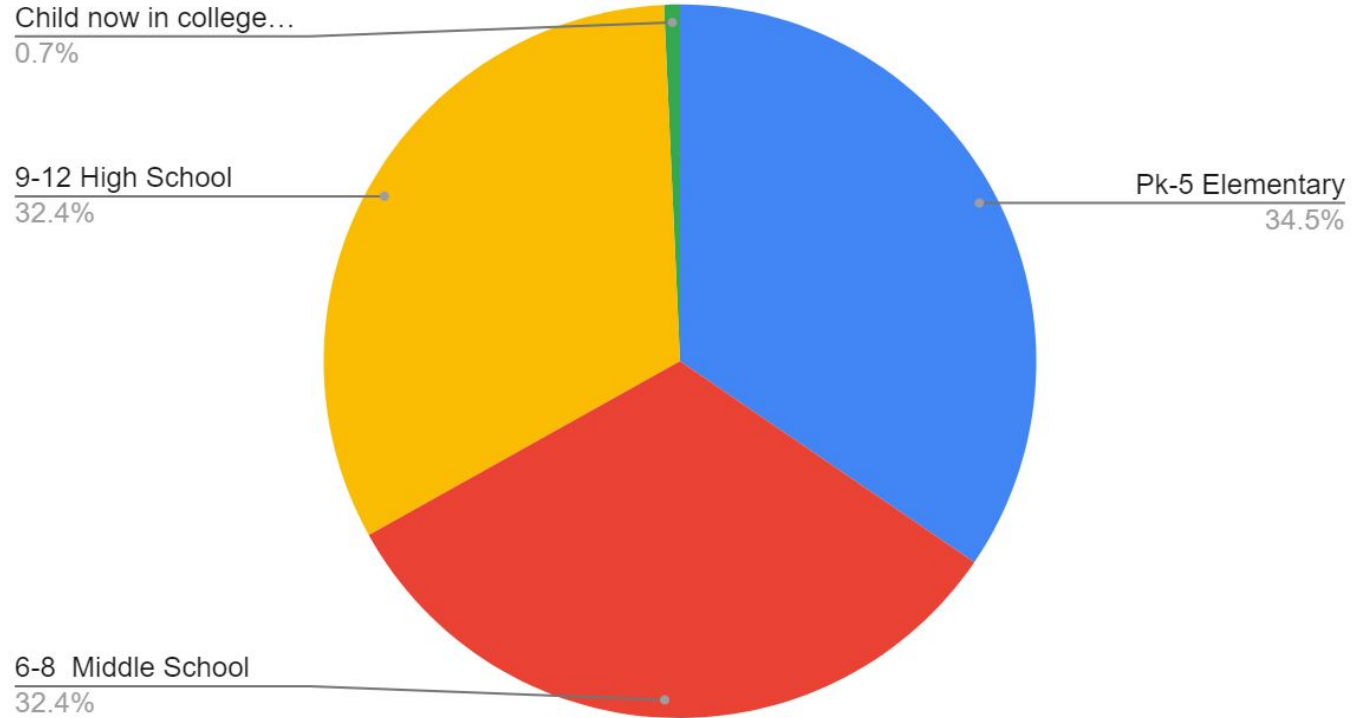
- Parents also do not know that there is a designation called **"407 Students"** in the New York City Department of Education in which a school response is triggered after a consecutive absence of 10 days or more. This is concerning as our survey shows that intermittent absences over long periods of time is the most frequent pattern of School Refusal versus consecutive absences.
- **Training should be provided to all 504 and IEP-related staff in schools** to refer and assess students quickly in order to address root problems so as to increase participation in the school curriculum.
- School Refusal has been a challenge for students prior to the pandemic however, it is worth investigating how much of the pandemic has ignited and/or exacerbated this problem. By doing so, recovery services for students with disabilities struggling with School Refusal could be funded by **federal COVID relief funding designated for students with disabilities**.

# Reflections and Recommendations cont'd

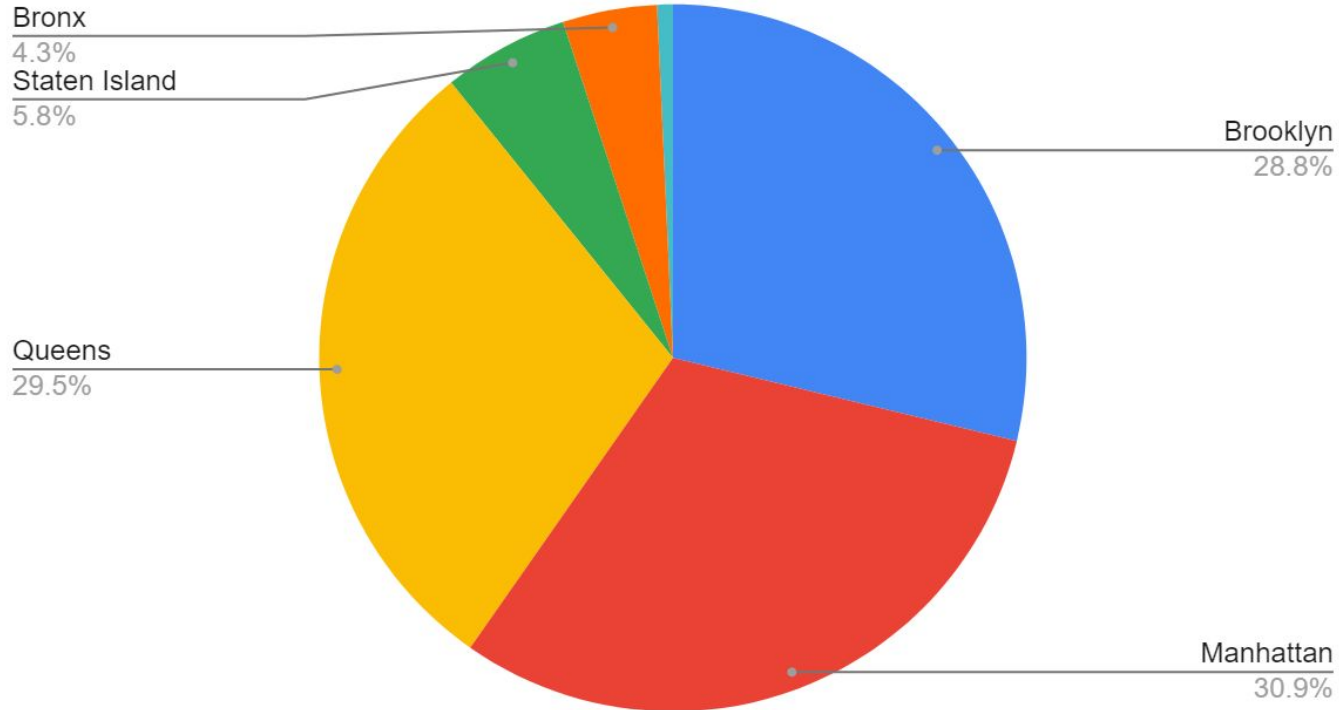
- Other methods of support and mandated actions for students with School Refusal should be made available and used beyond reporting the student's parents to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS).
- **Chancellor's Regulations A-210** "Standards for Attendance Programs" should include known measures to support students with disabilities and students with suspected disabilities.
- The NYC DOE's **Every Student, Every Day Attendance Improvement Plan** should be immediately revised to consider the root causes and absence patterns of students with disabilities struggling with chronic absenteeism. The current plan does not address their needs. The Plan also does not provide any counsel on how to address School Refusal with the use of special education accommodations and services.



## What school level below applies to your child?

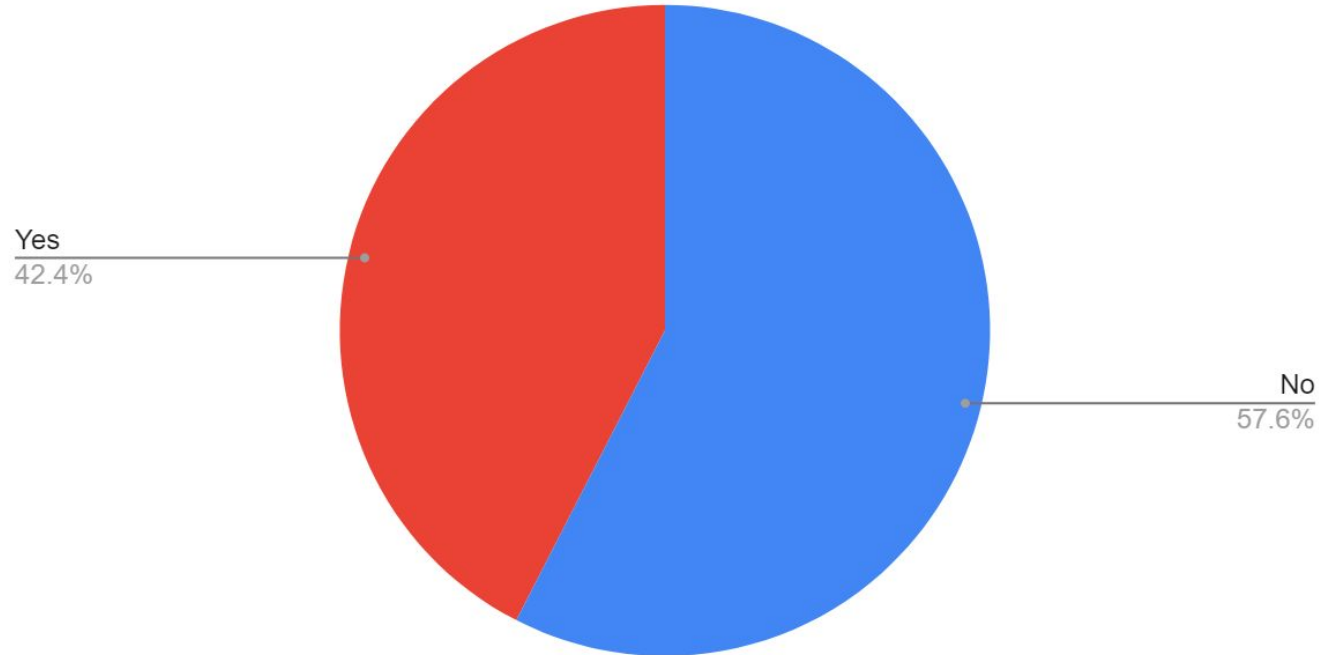


## In what borough is your child's school if you live in NYC?



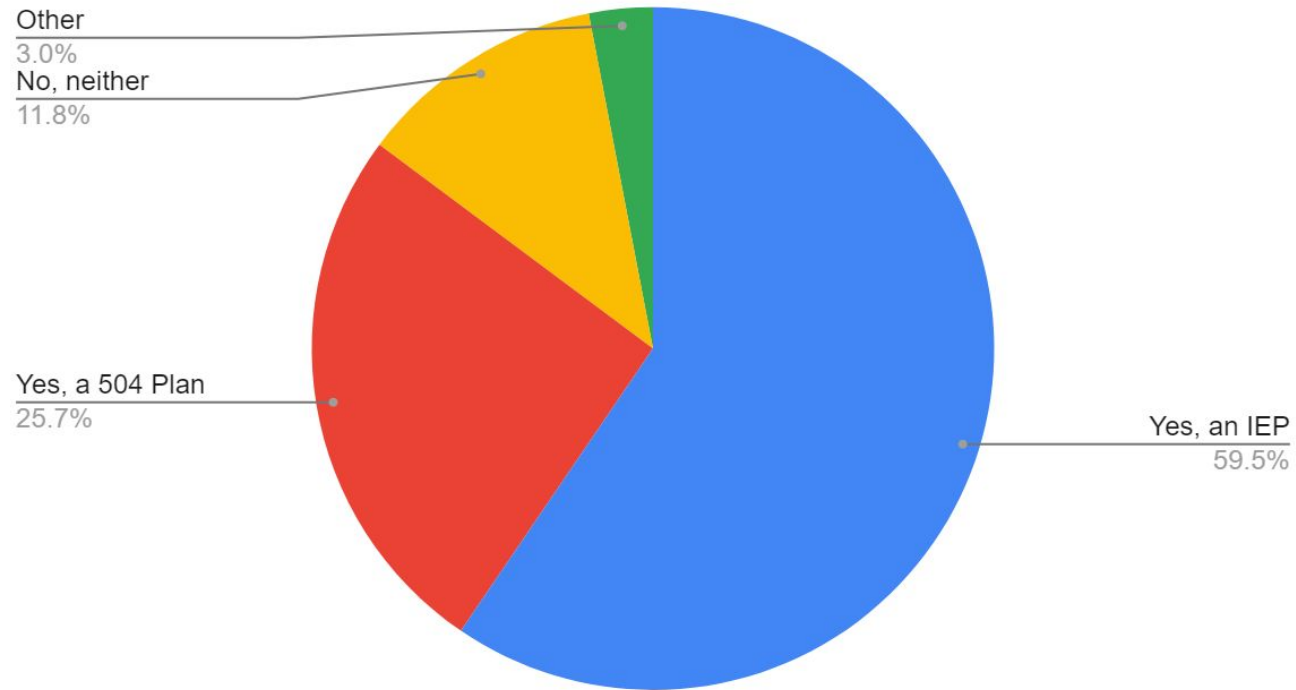
| <b>Top School Refusal Signs by Number of Respondents</b>                                                                                                       | <b>Number of responses</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Morning routines require substantive argument, negotiating, discussions, for your child to go to school                                                        | 92                         |
| Straight out refusing to go                                                                                                                                    | 87                         |
| Complains of pains that lack medical basis, stomachaches, headaches                                                                                            | 78                         |
| Shows signs of depression, feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest in usual activities, feelings of worthlessness/guilt                                     | 71                         |
| Child struggling to go to sleep and stay asleep at night                                                                                                       | 65                         |
| Demonstrates significant lack of motivation for anything, not just things involving school                                                                     | 64                         |
| Going to school but trying to come home early due to illness                                                                                                   | 57                         |
| Anxiety about specific objects or situations ie, riding the bus, being inside building, socializing with other students, filters not working, getting covid-19 | 51                         |
| Refuses to do what you ask in all situations, not just those related to school                                                                                 | 48                         |
| Has panic attacks (could include feelings of racing heart, sweating, dizziness, shortness of breath or shaking)                                                | 45                         |
| Has expressed thoughts about harming him/her/their self.                                                                                                       | 34                         |
| Has become more aggressive toward others                                                                                                                       | 30                         |
| Is failing school, even outside of school refusal behavior                                                                                                     | 29                         |
| Separation anxiety concerns, ie, something terrible will happen when separated from home/loved ones                                                            | 28                         |
| Afraid to leave house for any reason, not just to go to school                                                                                                 | 22                         |
| Cutting class while in school                                                                                                                                  | 20                         |
| Other                                                                                                                                                          | 15                         |

Did your child's school refusal or school avoidance behaviors begin prior to the start of the pandemic?



| <b>How long has your child been showing School Refusal?</b>      | <b>Percentage</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 month or less or intermittent refusal                          | 2%                |
| 1-3 months of intermittent refusal                               | 11%               |
| 3-6 months of intermittent refusal                               | 19%               |
| 6 or more months of intermittent refusal                         | 36%               |
| 1 month or less of outright refusal- not going to school at all  | 2%                |
| 1-3 months of outright refusal- not going to school at all       | 3%                |
| 3-6 months of outright refusal- not going to school at all       | 5%                |
| 6 or more months of outright refusal- not going to school at all | 12%               |
| Other                                                            | approx. 15%       |

## Does your child have and IEP or 504?



| <b>Actions Taken by School</b>                                                                                 | <b>Percentage of Respondents</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Had a social worker or guidance counselor talk to your child                                                   | 50%                              |
| Respondents wrote additional information                                                                       | 26%                              |
| Provided a point person staff member to help encourage child to come into the building                         | 20%                              |
| Provided you with schoolwork so your child is not as behind.                                                   | 19%                              |
| Had attendance teacher visit or call you                                                                       | 14%                              |
| Asked you to provide a reward to encourage school attendance                                                   | 12%                              |
| Offered to connect you to an outside agency for support                                                        | 11%                              |
| Nothing (were totaled based on responses)                                                                      | 11%                              |
| Suggested considering medication for your child                                                                | 10%                              |
| Asked you to make home undesirable (no internet, video games, etc)                                             | 7%                               |
| Called ACS (Child Protective Services)                                                                         | 6%                               |
| Asked you to come up with home punishments/consequences for child not attending school                         | 6%                               |
| Had a restorative circle or restorative justice meeting with your child                                        | 3%                               |
| Offered at-risk counseling to the child over the phone or virtually                                            | 2%                               |
| Social worker/counselor or similar gave a behavior assessment scale (such as School Refusal Assessment Scale)? | <1%                              |
| Worked on making the classroom more engaging                                                                   | <1%                              |

# About Special Support Services, LLC

The creators of this survey and its summary is [Special Support Services, LLC](#). They are a group of three advocates, Rachel Ford, Amber Decker, and Jennifer Choi. Their mission is to support parents of students with disabilities as they move through the complex special education process in New York City. As parents of students with disabilities in NYC public schools themselves, they also use their in-depth knowledge to volunteer in several disability-related advocacy groups both locally and nationally. While Special Support Services created this survey, Rachel, Jenn, and Amber would like to thank the parents in support groups for families of children with disabilities for filling out and sharing this survey so that their children's struggles can be uncovered. For any questions, please email Jenn Choi at [jenn@SpecialSupportServices.com](mailto:jenn@SpecialSupportServices.com)