

Accurate Student Poverty Data Is Crucial to Supporting All Students

Fast Facts for Policymakers and System Leaders



ALL STUDENTS DESERVE TO ACHIEVE THEIR ACADEMIC GOALS. However, some must overcome more barriers than others to get there. Students from low-income families face unique disadvantages, which often cause them to lag behind their peers from higher-income families. **Accurate student poverty data is critical to identify these students, measure their growth, and ensure that they get the supports that will help them succeed.**

Why Do Policymakers Measure Student Poverty?

With access to accurate data on student poverty, education leaders and advocates can take the following steps:



Shed light on equity disparities. States are **required** to report academic achievement and other key metrics broken down by income level. Families and advocates rely on this data to see how schools are serving students who live in poverty and advocate for their students' needs.



Target resources where they are needed most. Schools serving high proportions of students from low-income families may receive **additional state or federal funds**. **Research shows** that increases in school spending can lead to improved graduation rates, higher wages, and reductions in adult poverty—particularly for students from low-income families.



Understand what students need to succeed. With access to accurate student poverty data, education leaders and researchers can better understand what programs and policies are most effective in helping students from low-income families reach their academic goals.

A Brief History of Student Poverty Measures



Since 1946, the National School Lunch Program has been the primary source of student poverty data. Through this program, students with household incomes up to **185 percent of the federal poverty level** receive free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) at school. Traditionally, schools determined FRL status through individual household income forms, which families voluntarily filled out. Many schools today **still use this method** to measure the percentage of students from low-income families. While **imperfect**, this process helped create a national source of uniform household income data for use by educators, policymakers, and researchers.

In 2010, Congress introduced a change to the program known as the community eligibility provision (CEP). Beginning in the 2014–15 school year, the change **allowed schools** in which 40 percent or more of students were **directly certified** as being from low-income families to

DIRECT CERTIFICATION is the process by which schools and districts identify students from low-income families without collecting household income forms. Students are automatically certified for FRL if their families participate in public assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This process was **authorized by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 1989** and expanded under the **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010**.



provide free meals to *all* students.* Since its introduction, the CEP has successfully expanded participation in the FRL program; in 2019–20, students in more than **30,667 schools** received free breakfast and lunch each day through the CEP.

The CEP also has had an unintended consequence: it has made FRL status less useful as a measure of student poverty. When schools and districts adopted the CEP, they no longer had to collect household income forms. Although this change did help expand access to school meals and reduce the administrative burden on schools, it also meant the end of FRL as a uniform, widely available measure of student poverty. States now use **different strategies** to measure student poverty in CEP schools, including direct certification counts, applying multipliers to identified student percentages, or relying on FRL data collected prior to the CEP. However, there is a lack of consensus on the comparative

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value and accuracy of these alternatives. **As the CEP program expands and FRL status data becomes less accurate, policymakers will need to identify a new way to accurately measure student poverty.**

New Approaches and Understandings



As state and district leaders explore new or alternative measures of student poverty, it is important to consider how they are defining poverty. FRL status and direct certification are based on household income relative to the poverty level—a standard that has **long been criticized** as outdated and out of touch with the economic realities today's families face. These measures cannot distinguish between moderately and extremely disadvantaged students or

between those who move in and out of poverty and those who are consistently poor. They also tend to not include students from unauthorized and mixed-status immigrant families, who may not participate in public benefit programs and are therefore missing from direct certification counts. **Other measures** like actual household income, parental education, student mobility, and receipt of other social safety net programs may provide a more detailed, accurate understanding of where supports are most urgently needed.

Moving forward, policymakers will need to look for ways to integrate new measures of student poverty into school funding, accountability, and reporting systems.

Moving forward, policymakers will need to look for ways to integrate new measures of student poverty into school funding, accountability, and reporting systems. Some have already done so; **Texas**, for example, allocates school funding based on multiple metrics including the local area median income level, average parental educational attainment, percentage of single-family households, and homeownership rate. By prioritizing accurate data on student poverty, state and district leaders can ensure that students from low-income families get the supports and resources they need to succeed. **Researchers at the University of Missouri and the Data Quality Campaign are currently exploring new approaches to measuring student poverty and will share additional information in 2021.**

* The CEP was made available to a few states in the 2011–12 school year through a limited pilot program; however, it was not implemented at scale until 2014–15.



The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to bring every part of the education community together to empower educators, families, and policymakers with quality information to make decisions that ensure that students excel. For more information, go to www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@EdDataCampaign).