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Redefining Low Income - A New Metric for K-12 Education Data

For many years, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has collected data on the number of low income students attending each of our public elementary and secondary schools. Research clearly shows that students from lower income households typically face more learning challenges than students from more affluent households. Collecting data on students' family income helps us to direct more resources to their schools and helps us to monitor how well those schools are doing with those students.

The most commonly used metric for measuring income status has been eligibility for free or reduced price meals under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's school nutrition program. Families submit application forms documenting their household income. If the income falls below certain levels set by USDA, students in that family can then receive free or reduced price school breakfasts and lunches. Under long-standing U.S. Department of Education guidance, these students are then recorded as "low income" for purposes of educational statistics.

Two years ago, USDA introduced the [Community Eligibility Program](#) (CEP) as an option for schools and districts with high concentrations of low income students. Under CEP, all students in the participating schools are entitled to receive free meals under the school nutrition program. This eliminates the cost and administrative burden of collecting and processing family applications, as well as the costs associated with collecting lunch fees. More importantly, CEP increases student participation in school nutrition programs, and we know that students learn better when they are not hungry. For all these reasons, DESE is encouraging eligible schools and districts to participate in CEP.

But without the availability of free and reduced price data in many of our largest districts, we faced the need to develop a new income status metric that could be used consistently across the state. This new metric, which we are calling **economically disadvantaged** to differentiate it from the old "low income" measure, will be used to report data from all schools and districts, not just those participating in CEP. The new measure will be based on a student's participation in one or more of the following state-administered programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) foster care program; and MassHealth (Medicaid).

Individual school districts have used the so-called "direct certification" process to access enrollment data from these programs for many years, in order to validate their free and reduced price school lunch participation. DESE will now use the same direct certification process on a statewide basis. Strict data security protocols are in place at the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to ensure that all confidential data is protected in accordance with federal and state data privacy statutes and MassIT security policies.

Because of this change in methodology, the number of "economically disadvantaged" students reported as enrolled on October 1, 2014, in most schools will be lower than the number of "low income" students reported in 2013-14 and prior years. Obviously this has nothing to do with any real changes in family income; it is simply a shift from one valid measure to another valid measure. Neither measure is "right" or "wrong" (in fact, neither measure lines up exactly with the Census Bureau's "poverty" definition), but either can be a useful surrogate in identifying how well we are serving children at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. **It is important for users of this data to understand that enrollment percentages and achievement data for "economically disadvantaged" students cannot be directly compared to "low income" data in prior years.**

How will this change affect particular district programs and activities?

- The **foundation budget**, which is used to calculate both Chapter 70 school aid and charter school tuition rates, currently relies on free and reduced price data. FY16 will be a transition year, using FY15 free and reduced price data from non-CEP districts and a combination of FY14 free and reduced price data plus direct certification for new students in CEP districts. For FY17 and beyond, we have recommended to the Foundation Budget Review Commission that the low-income increments in the formula be increased sufficiently to offset the lower number of students in the economically disadvantaged category.
- For **grant programs** that require poverty data for eligibility or entitlement calculations, the appropriate DESE program office will provide guidance directly to districts and schools.
- **School building authority reimbursement rates** are also based in part on low income percentages. We are providing information to the MSBA Board and will assist them in evaluating alternatives.
- Performance metrics in DESE's **school and district accountability system** will be updated to reflect the new measurement. DESE will provide additional guidance to districts regarding this transition.
- Schools and districts that use free and reduced price eligibility for **sliding scale fees** or other local purposes may continue to do so. For schools participating in CEP, this may involve a combination of direct certification data and some supplemental data collection from families.
- Districts will receive updated **SIMS reporting instructions**.

For all of us who have used free and reduced price eligibility data for a multitude of purposes over the years, the shift to a new metric will not be easy. Nevertheless, it is a necessary change so that our less affluent cities and towns can take advantage of the many benefits of USDA's Community Eligibility Program. We appreciate your patience and understanding as we work through all the details of this change.

For further information or assistance, please contact:

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A Changing Metric: Low Income vs. Economically Disadvantaged

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