

Measuring Student Poverty in Colorado's School Finance System

*Legislative Interim Committee on School Finance
August 24th, 2021*



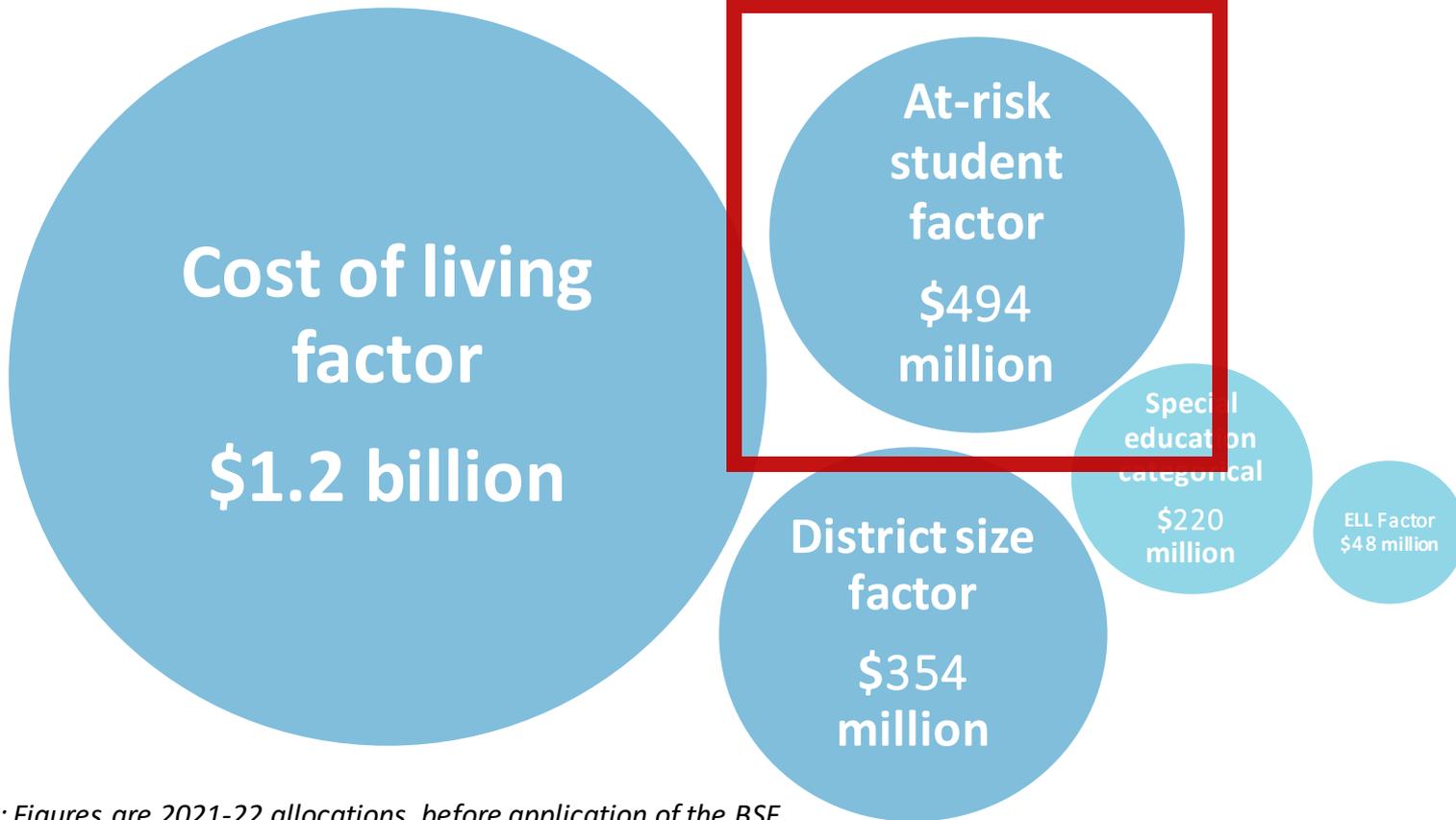
COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN
Every Chance for Every Child

Colorado Children's Campaign

- A nonprofit, nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization committed since 1985 to ensuring every chance for every child in Colorado
- Champion policies and programs in child health, early childhood, K-12 education and family economic security
- Statewide Network & Work in Coalition
- Research & Data-Driven



Student Need is Outsized



Note: Figures are 2021-22 allocations, before application of the BSF



How we use FRL to measure poverty



Free meal = < 130% of FPL, or \$34,450 for family of 4

Reduced-price meal = < 185% of FPL, or \$49,025 for family of 4

- Two ways to qualify for FRL:
 1. Parents fill out a *paper* application w/ income, SSN, household membership
 2. Direct Certification: automatic eligibility (no paper application needed) thru participation in hunger programs like SNAP and TANF
- FRL eligibility is the singular proxy that qualifies school districts for “at-risk” funding through the state’s formula – an additional weight of at least 12% more funding
 - Prior to SY 21-22, funding was allocated for students eligible for free lunch only
 - SB21-268 included students eligible for both free and reduced-price lunch

Problems with FRL as our primary measure of poverty



The National School Lunch Program was designed as an anti-hunger program, & FRL eligibility isn't the most accurate or preferable proxy for student need.

1. FRL only accounts for income status – not important social/economic factors associated with student success and need.
2. FRL is a binary measure that fails to account for varying levels of need
3. FRL hinders participation in other important programs
4. FRL data collection is decentralized, problematic, & burdensome

Problem #1: FRL only accounts for income status



- Family income is a one-dimensional measure that ignores other economic and social factors that influence a child's educational trajectory:
 - Parent educational attainment
 - Home ownership / wealth
 - Availability of resources or jobs in the surrounding community
- Accounting for these factors would provide a more nuanced picture of the level of student need in Colorado communities.

Problem #2: FRL is a binary measure



- Students whose families earn even one dollar above the cutoff for FRL are not considered economically disadvantaged
- FRL does not distinguish between children living in the deepest poverty and those who have somewhat more resources, failing to account for varying levels of need
 - A family of 4 with an income of \$12,000 is considered the same as a family with an income of \$45,000
 - Districts receive the same at-risk weight for these students

Problem #3: FRL hinders participation in other programs



- **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** has the potential to increase meal participation and reduce district administrative burden
 - But CEP hasn't been widely adopted because of the connection between individual income data obtained through FRL forms and at-risk funding in the school finance formula.
 - If families don't complete FRL forms, districts receive less at-risk funding
 - Districts that adopt CEP still have to collect income forms
- **Pandemic-EBT** benefits did not get to families who lost access to school meals when schools closed.
 - The low quality of Colorado's state-level student data meant that only 48% of eligible students received P-EBT benefits in the first round

Problem #4: Decentralized collection of FRL data



- FRL data is only collected at the district level, and then numbers of free and reduced-price lunch eligible students are reported to the state.
- The system relies on the collection of paper forms which is burdensome for parents, schools, and districts.
- Count of At-Risk students was down ~53,000 than 20-21 projections even with the economic downturn from the pandemic
 - Families had less incentive to turn in the form due to remote learning and a federal policy change that allowed for universal free meals
- The needed collection of this paper form has negatively impacted other programs for students and families, like P-EBT.

Paths Forward to Consider



- Examine student poverty more comprehensively
 - Study alternative proxies for economic disadvantage to better identify and target resources to students who need them
- Understand the barriers and limitations to using various approaches and how funding to schools and districts would change
- Explore making FRL application secure and accessible online for families and allow for state-level collection of data
- Having a student-centered formula relies on having accurate picture of the students in the system and their various needs.

Thank you!

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