

# 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*

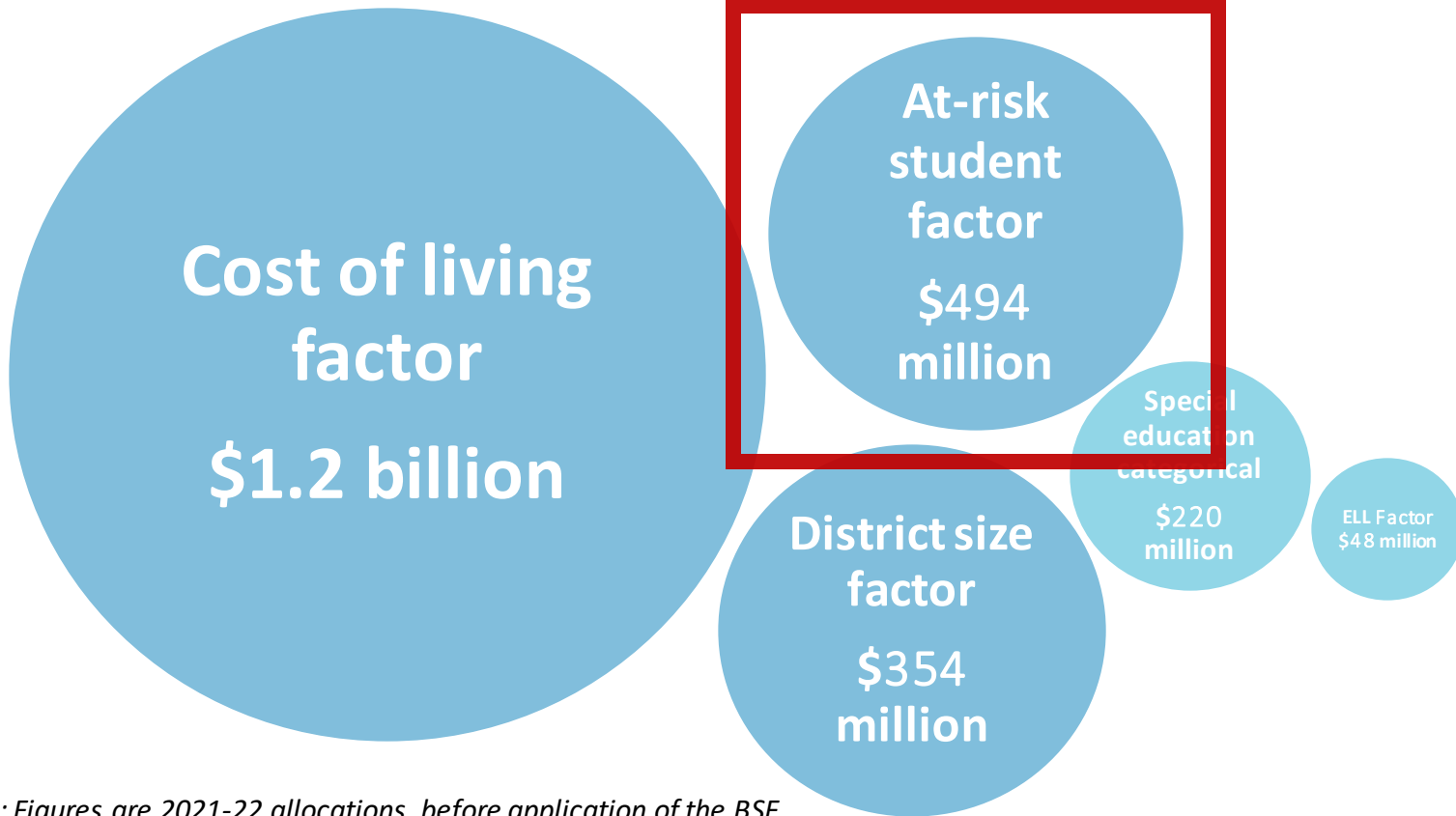
# Colorado Children's Campaign

---

- 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!

[Riley@coloradokids.org](mailto:Riley@coloradokids.org)

[Stephanie@coloradokids.org](mailto:Stephanie@coloradokids.org)

[Leslie@coloradokids.org](mailto:Leslie@coloradokids.org)

---

**COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN**  
*Every Chance for Every Child*

