Counting Low-Income Students

January 13, 2020
Kristin Blagg

URBAN INSTITUTE · ELEVATE · THE · DEBATE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities.

As an organization, the Urban Institute does not take positions on issues. The views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

- Recent changes to the school lunch program have increased access to the program, but reduced the utility of free lunch receipt as a poverty measure

- States have multiple options for identifying low-income students and for ensuring their success through both funding and accountability metrics

Students benefit from universal free lunch

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) makes free-lunch receipt universal in certain schools and districts
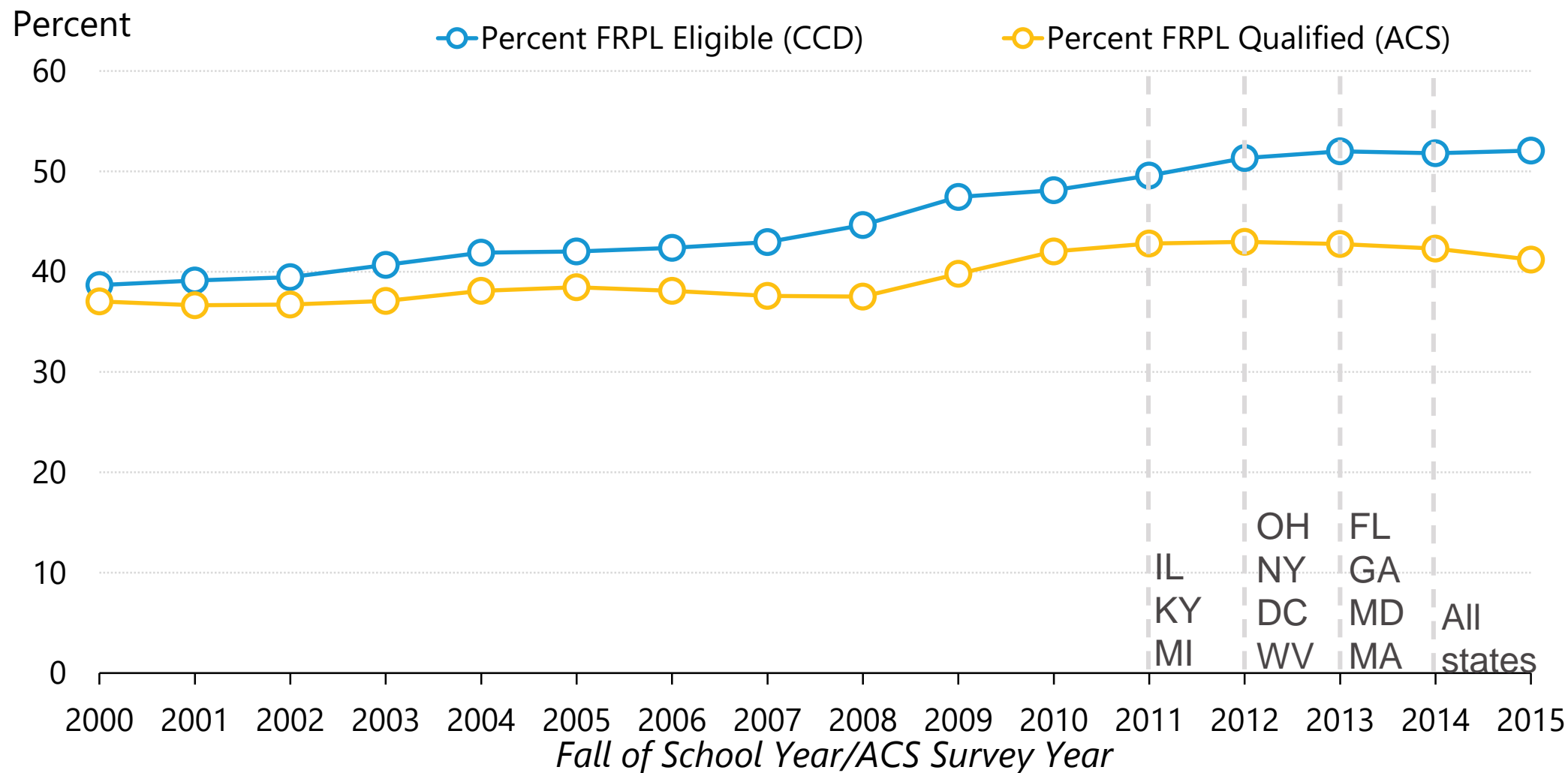
- Schools and districts can elect to provide free lunch to all students using CEP when the share of students that are identified as low-income through participation in programs like SNAP is higher than 40 percent

- We estimate that about 23 percent of Oregon students are enrolled in a CEP school

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides substantial benefits for students

- CEP adoption:

  - increases test score performance (Ruffini 2018, Gordanier et al 2019, Schwartz and Rothbart 2019)

  - reduces suspension rates (Gordon and Ruffini 2018)

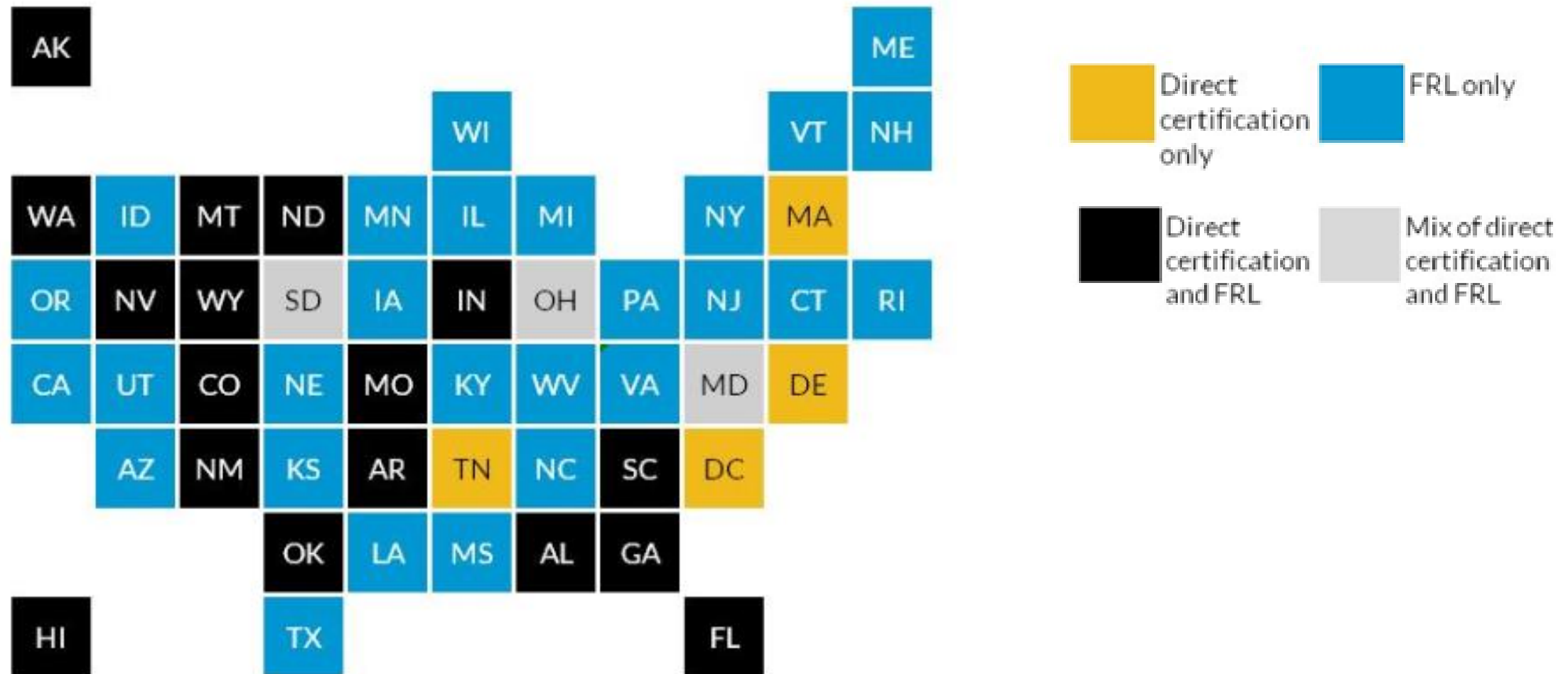 - increases the share of students with a healthy BMI (Davis and Musaddiq 2018)

Receipt of free- and reduced-price lunch is a less reliable indicator of poverty

The share of FRPL-eligible students has increased above the share of FRPL-qualified students

Percent

—○— Percent FRPL Eligible (CCD)   —○— Percent FRPL Qualified (ACS)

60

50

40

30

20

10

	OH	FL	
IL	NY	GA	
KY	DC	MD	All
MI	WV	MA	states

0

2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015
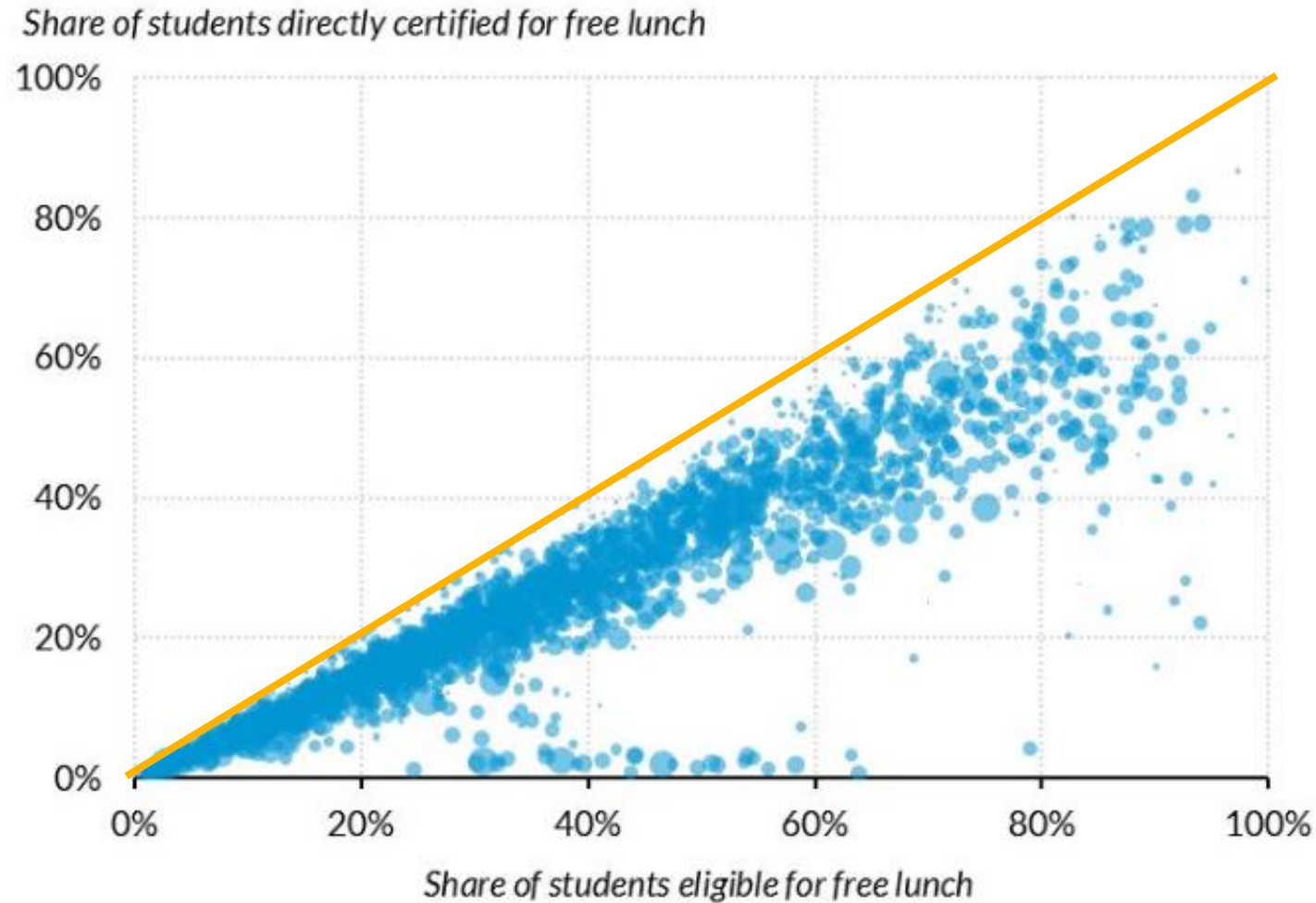
Fall of School Year/ACS Survey Year

States are quickly re-calibrating the data they collect and report

Free Lunch Measure Reported in 2016–17 CCD

When states transition from FRPL to direct certification, they tend to identify fewer students as low-income

Share of students directly certified for free lunch

Share of students eligible for free lunch

There are many options for identifying low-income students and addressing their needs

States can use multiple measures to identify students for funding

- States can adjust how they identify low income students using:

  - direct certification and categorical eligibility

  - receipt of free lunch (either via form or through CEP)

  - neighborhood Census data

  - combinations of measures

- Measures need not be student-level

Geographic measures provide aggregate data, but can also work with individual measures

- District-level Census estimates of student poverty may be best when districts are large, and few students travel outside them

- Texas assigns each census block group to one of five socio-economic status (SES) tiers.

  - Students who are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch get a larger weight for funding if they live in a lower-SES census block
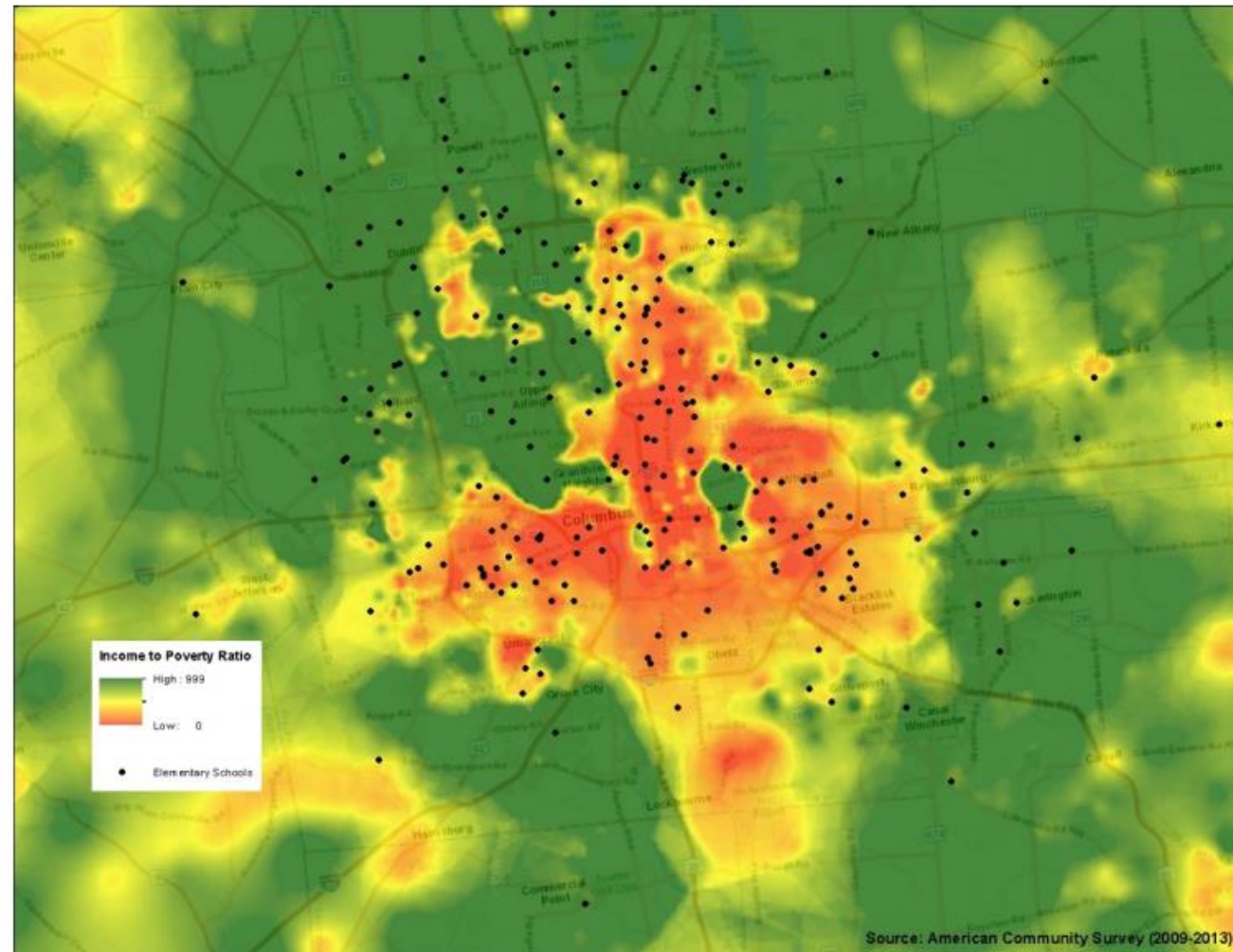
One promising strategy for linking to neighborhood data is emerging from the Department of Education

- The SIDE supplemental poverty measure creates a geostatistical surface for student neighborhoods, potentially lending more granularity to local contexts

Sidestepping the Box: Designing a Supplemental Poverty Indicator for School Neighborhoods (NCES 2018)
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/2017039.pdf

Figure 2. Income-to-poverty ratio SIDE geostatistical surface: Columbus, OH

Income to Poverty Ratio
High : 999
Low : 0
• Elementary Schools

Source: American Community Survey (2009-2013)

URBAN · INSTITUTE

States have multiple options for allocating funding based on the measure they choose

- Once one or more measures are selected, states can use these measures to differentially allocate funding

- Some states may just use a flat per-student weight, but others may account for concentrated poverty in certain districts

  - Nebraska and Massachusetts

Because achievement data must be reported by student, identification options are more limited

- States can adjust how they identify low income students using:

  - direct certification and categorical eligibility

  - receipt of free lunch (either via form or through CEP)

  - information from alternate income surveys (potentially cumbersome)

Direct certification could be improved by matching more programs

- Expand capacity for directly-identifying eligible students

  - 13 states have linkages to their Medicaid system

  - States can also categorically-identify students using school-reported data

    - Homeless, enrolled in Head Start, migrant, runaway

Changes in the school lunch program provide an opportunity for states to re-think how they identify and serve low-income students.

Questions