



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Getting Additional Resources to Students in Need

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The research conclusions are clear: low-income students face more educational challenges than higher-income students, which impacts how well they do in the classroom and beyond. Both the Deputy Mayor for Education and the DC Council are proposing ways to add more resources to serve low-income students in our publicly funded schools. One approach supported by both the executive and legislative branches is to add additional dollars through the per-pupil funding formula for students considered to be “at-risk.” DCFPI supports this approach in general, but we want to see the definition of “at-risk” more broadly defined to adequately capture this population of students.

Both DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC public charter schools get most of their resources from local funds, which is determined by the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF). The formula starts with a base level of funding per student to provide general education services. Beyond the base, the formula has supplemental weights to reflect the added costs of serving students in certain categories, such as special education and English language learners. For DCPS and public charter schools, the total local funding each school receives is based on the UPSFF amounts multiplied by the number of students at different grade levels and in various special needs categories.

Both the Deputy Mayor and the DC Council’s Education Committee propose adding a supplemental weight for poverty to take effect in the 2014-2015 school year. The question now is how to define “at-risk” and how much weight to give it.

Researchers often use the number of students eligible for free and reduced meals as a reliable estimate for targeting education resources to low-income students at the school level. However, the recently implemented “community eligibility option”— which allows schools with very high percentages of low-income students to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students – means that individual student paperwork will no longer be collected. As a result, policymakers in the District are looking to other ways to define eligible students for the new at-risk UPSFF weight.

One proposal comes from the initial recommendations of the Deputy Mayor’s public education adequacy study. It defines at-risk students as those who are in households eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), in the DC foster care system, or are considered homeless through the federal McKinney Vento program. The projected number of students eligible by this definition is 25,908 across DCPS and public charter schools.

DCFPI is concerned that this definition underestimates the student population that should be considered at-risk. TANF eligibility is only 44 percent of federal poverty level, much lower than the eligibility level for free/reduced price meals, which is 185 percent of the poverty level. The TANF measure also raises concerns because of evidence that citizen children of undocumented immigrants may not be accessing TANF benefits even when eligible. It is difficult to know how many children in the DC school system fall into this category, but national research indicates only 36 percent of these families below the poverty line actually receive TANF.¹

Instead, DCFPI recommends “at-risk” be defined by eligibility for federal SNAP benefits, which is 130 percent of the federal poverty level. This would still undercount certain immigrants, who may not be eligible for SNAP or who may participate at low rates. The District also could create statistical methods – based on city-wide data – to adjust school level data to better reflect the full low-income population.

DCFPI recognizes that students at risk of academic failure can also be part of the at-risk definition, but we are not in favor of replacing a measure based on income with one based solely on students not making academic progress. This type of definition would adversely affect schools that successfully bring low-income at-risk students up to grade level. Likewise, taking away resources from a school that successfully improves student achievement would be counterproductive.

If the purpose of adding an at-risk supplemental weight is to provide more resources where they are most needed, it is critical the at-risk population is properly defined to reflect low-income students.

¹ Jeffrey S. Passel, “Demography of Immigrant Youth: Past, Present and Future,” *Future of Children*, Vol. 21, No. 1. (Spring 2011) http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/21_01_02.pdf.