

Publication Summary

Forum Guide to Alternative Measures of Socioeconomic Status in Education Data Systems



The education community has historically relied heavily on free- and reduced-price meal (FRP) eligibility data to identify socioeconomically disadvantaged students, schools, areas, and populations. This information is used in ways that affect decisions related to funding, service availability, program eligibility, accountability, and research. While FRP eligibility may be appropriate for operating a meals program, it is becoming less suitable to the education community as a proxy for an individual student's socioeconomic status (SES) because of three primary reasons:

- 1) **Interpretation and use in a manner not intended by the collection:** FRP eligibility is being used as a proxy for SES even though it only reflects income (or, in some cases, school-wide characteristics) rather than other components of SES that are widely acknowledged to be relevant at the individual level, such as parent/guardian occupation and education.
- 2) **Severely limited access within the education community:** FRP eligibility data at the individual level are available only for the purposes of administering the meals program.
- 3) **Decreasing applicability as a measure of economic need:** The new Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is expected to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP); however, it will also result in the loss of individual student-level FRP eligibility data in participating education agencies, given that CEP schools are prohibited from collecting NSLP household applications.

The document provides “encyclopedia-type” entries for eight plausible alternative SES measures:

To Replicate Historical FRP Values:

- 1) Eligibility for Other Means-Tested Program
- 2) Household-Provided Information
- 3) Student/Family Categorical Status

To Reflect the Three Major Components of SES:

- 4) Family/Household Income
- 5) Highest Level of Education Completed by Resident Parent/Guardian
- 6) Occupation of Resident Parent/Guardian

To Incorporate Geographically Based Context:

- 7) Neighborhood SES
- 8) School District Poverty Estimate

This document focuses on the needs and possible solutions for administrative records in education data systems and does not reflect the full spectrum of opportunities available to the research community. The primary audience for this resource includes policymakers, program staff, and data staff in local education agencies, state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education.

The *Forum Guide to Alternative Measures of Socioeconomic Status in Education Data Systems* is a product of the National Forum on Education Statistics and is available on the Forum website at http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pub_2015158.asp. This document is intended to serve as a reference tool for education agencies engaged in identifying, evaluating, or implementing alternative SES measures. It is not a data collection instrument and does not represent a federal reporting requirement. The information and opinions published are the product of the National Forum on Education Statistics and do not necessarily represent the policies or views of the U.S. Department of Education or the National Center for Education Statistics.

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Chapter 1. A Need for Alternative SES Measures presents a call to action to the education community.

Chapter 2. Strategies for Effectively Selecting and Implementing Alternative SES Measures reviews practical steps an agency can take to adopt new measures.

Chapter 3: Alternative SES Measures describes each of the eight alternative measures.