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Gov. Brown proposes change in tallying of low-income students for funding formula

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By [Jane Meredith Adams](#)

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In his May budget revision, Gov. Jerry Brown on Tuesday proposed a change that will allow school



An Oakland student enjoys a snack at school. Eligibility for the National School Lunch Program is key to the new formula for funding education. Photo credit: EdSource Today/ Jane Meredith Adams

districts to more broadly define who is eligible for a free or reduced-price meal and, by association, who is identified as low-income and eligible to receive extra state education funds. The proposal would affect more than 1 million students who fall into a gray area of free lunch eligibility.

While the new [Local Control Funding Formula](#) requires school districts to count low-income students annually, and ties funding to the tally, Brown’s proposal would allow a subset of schools with large numbers of low-income students to count them only once every four years. Instead of individual student data, schools where more than 80 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals would

be allowed to submit a group percentage of low-income students. The proposal would allow the schools to continue the system they have used for years, although it requires that districts be diligent about verifying student family income levels every four years.

Brown’s proposal would give districts what they have sought: greater flexibility and less paperwork. These 1,500 high-poverty schools operate under [Provision 2](#) of the [National School Lunch Program](#), which frees schools with high concentrations of low-income students from conducting the time-consuming and costly process of verifying income eligibility for free or reduced price meals every year. Instead, these schools collect a “base year” of income eligibility data every four years, although schools can obtain extensions and in some cases the data have become quite stale, according to the state. In exchange for being relieved of paperwork, the schools provide free meals to every student, with districts paying the difference between the qualified percentage and 100 percent.

But with hundreds of millions of dollars for low-income students on the line under the new funding system, the California Department of Education said it needed current student data. Districts with large populations of low-income students, led by Los Angeles Unified and Fresno Unified, have protested vociferously for the past nine months, even as they have collected the necessary information.

Ruth F. Quinto, chief financial officer of Fresno Unified, said last fall that the new data collection was unnecessary, given an abundance of federal and state data documenting poverty through the census, unemployment rates and enrollment in state food stamp programs.

Los Angeles Unified Superintendent John Deasy said that families were wary of filling out forms they’d never seen before, and according to the rules of the free lunch program, the schools

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couldn't require that forms be returned for students to receive free meals. Deasy [charged](#) that requiring new forms from the low-income families was inconsistent with the spirit and the letter of the new funding formula, which the governor has described as a push toward equity for needy students.

But still, districts pulled together alternative income verification forms and launched widespread campaigns to collect information from families. Fresno Unified gave away tickets to the Fresno Fair to encourage families to return forms and sent teams of parents door-to-door. Oakland Unified handed out 1,400 tickets to Raiders games to reward schools that collected high numbers of forms.

After months of conversations with districts, school lunch advocates and the California School Boards Association, Gov. Brown proposed the changes in the May revision of his [spending plan for 2014-15](#).

Deasy expressed gratitude that the governor had responded to districts' complaints. "I want to thank Gov. Jerry Brown for listening to our concerns about streamlining processes under the new Local Control Funding Formula," he said in a statement. "His proposed changes should help mitigate the burdensome process for collecting alternative forms to verify income eligibility, so that we can focus more attention on teaching and learning."

Brown's proposed changes would also allow the districts to throw out their 2013-14 count of high-needs students, if the count for 2014-15 is higher.

Tia Shimada at California Food Policy Advocates said the proposed changes would encourage schools to continue to participate in programs that serve all students free meals, while still being able to provide necessary data for the funding formula. The proposed changes are "a step in the right direction," she said.

Jane Meredith Adams covers student health. [Contact her](#) or follow her [@JaneAdams](#). Sign up [here](#) for EdHealth, EdSource Today's free newsletter on student health.

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