

Free and Reduced-Priced Lunch Eligibility

DEFINITION

This indicator measures the percent of children in grades 1 through 12 eligible for free or reduced price lunches under the National School Lunch Program.

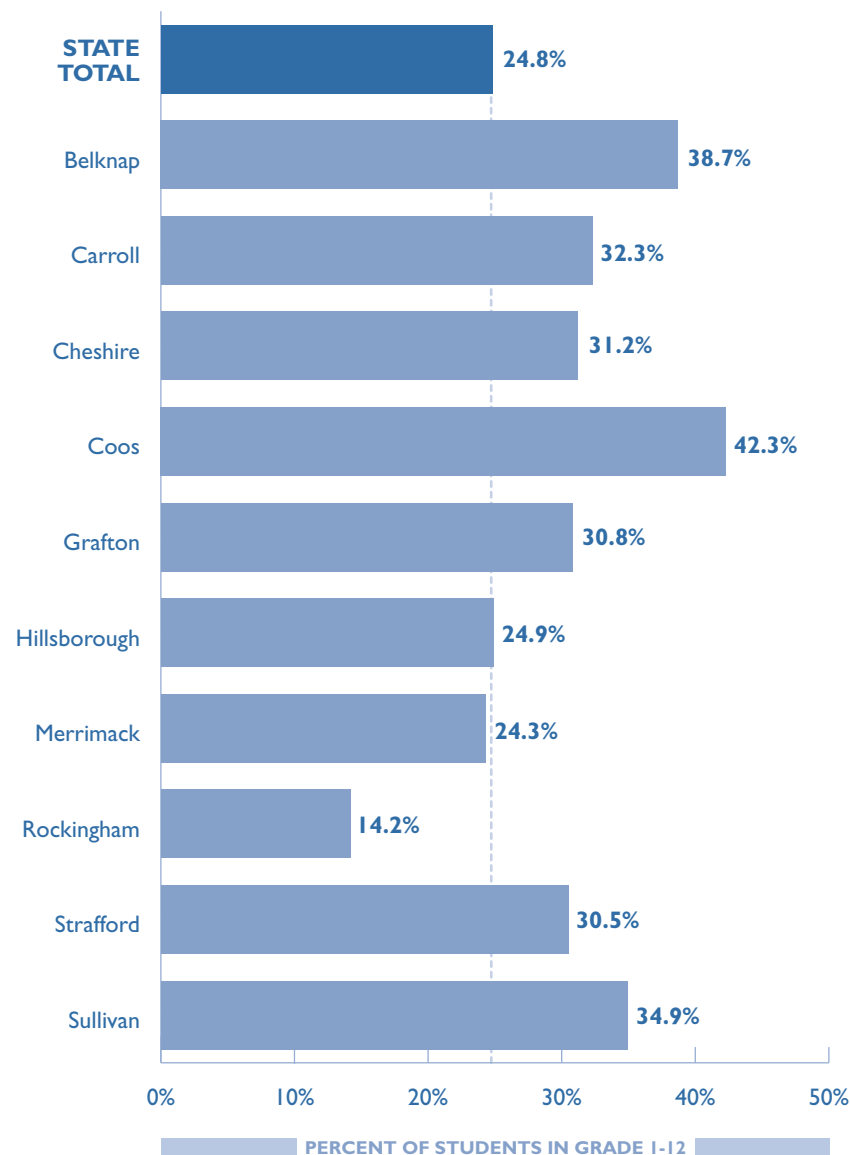
CONTEXT

Eligibility for free or reduced price lunches (FRL) is widely used as a proxy for poverty rates in federal programs determining allocation of federal Title I funds and state aid programs such as New Hampshire's adequacy aid (Carey 2002, Tappin and Norton, 2009).

Children living in households at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, set at \$28,665 per year for a family of four in 2009, qualify for free meals; those with incomes between 131 and 185 percent of poverty, set at \$40,793 per year for a family of four in 2009, qualify for reduced-price meals (New Hampshire Department of Education 2010).

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By County, 2009



NEW HAMPSHIRE FINDINGS

In 2009, 24.8 percent of New Hampshire school children were free or reduced lunch (FRL) eligible. This rate varied considerably by county. In Rockingham County 14.2 percent of children were FRL eligible while in Coos County 42.3 percent of children were FRL eligible. The variation is even greater by school district. Three school districts—New Castle, South Hampton, and Waterville Valley—have no children who are FRL eligible, while more than half the children in nine districts—Stark, Stewartstown, Winchester, Rumney, Bath, Franklin, Nelson, Laconia, and Warren (in order from the highest to lowest percentage eligible)—are FRL eligible. These very high FRL eligible districts are scattered across New Hampshire, with the exception of the southeastern part of the state where none are located. (see *chart on previous page*)

The percentage of children classified as FRL eligible, both in New Hampshire and the U.S. as a whole, rose over the past 10 years (Bass 2010). For example, 16.4 percent of New Hampshire children were FRL eligible in 2002, rising to 20.9 percent in 2008, and then jumping to 24.8 percent in 2009. In 2009, 26.3 percent of New Hampshire children in grades 1 through 8 were FRL eligible, but only 19.7 percent of children in grades 9 through 12 were eligible. Peer pressure may be responsible for the reduced number of high school students, causing them not to turn in the required paperwork. Therefore, the free and reduced lunch program eligibility data are a more accurate poverty measure for elementary/middle school students than high school students. (Moore, Hulseley and Ponza 2009).

SOURCE OF DATA FOR ILLUSTRATION/METHODOLOGY

The New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE) reports free and reduced price lunch eligibility by school district for children in grades 1 through 12. (NHDOE does not report eligibility for elementary and secondary school students separately by school district.) To estimate eligibility by county, we first identified which county had school districts with grades 1 through 12. Then we used district average eligibility rates to derive county average eligibility rates by weighting each district by its enrollment or estimated enrollment. See Appendix for more detailed methodology description.

New Hampshire Department of Education. 2010. www.education.nh.gov

REFERENCES

Bass, David N. 2010. *Fraud in the Lunchroom?* Education Next. Winter. pp 67-71. www.educationnext.org.

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Tappin, Ryan J. and Steve Norton. 2009. *New Hampshire's Latest School Funding Formula*. New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies. Concord, NH. www.nhpolicy.org