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### **Analysis: More Minn. students relying on free and reduced lunches**

by Tom Weber, Minnesota Public Radio

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Richfield STEM Elementary School students eat lunch Wednesday, Feb. 2, 2012 in the cafeteria. Since fall 2008, the number of students on free and reduced lunch in Minnesota has jumped 14 percent. (MPR Photo/Jennifer Simonson)

The number of Minnesota students who rely on free or reduced lunch rose two percent this school year, according to new numbers analyzed by MPR News. That number is one of the best indicators of children in poverty.

While it's not a major increase compared to some of the increases of recent years, it means more than one in three children in Minnesota is on free and reduced lunch.

That bothers state Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius.

"Any amount up is a major amount - even one percent," she said. "And it's just scary because after 10 years that's 10 percent."

In Minnesota, it's more than that. Since fall 2008, the number of students on free and reduced lunch in Minnesota has jumped 14 percent. More than 312,000 students are now on the subsidy.

"As we keep upping the expectations for what we want to get done with kids, and want to be globally competitive now, but yet more and more of our kids have less advantage and less opportunity, Cassellius said. "How do we expect to get there if we're not adequately resourcing and meeting the needs for every single kid?"

The increase has major implications for families and schools to get students the food they need to concentrate. The numbers also reflect the achievement gap.

When experts talk about the achievement gap, they're actually talking about many achievement gaps. Many people think of the gap between how well white students do compared to students of color. But there's also the gap between how well students do based on their families' income.

When officials say Minnesota has one of the worst achievement gaps in the nation, that comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test more commonly known as the 'Nation's Report Card.' Last year, the average math score for white 8th graders in Minnesota was 302 out of a possible 500. The average for black students was 266. That 36-point gap is tied for third-worst in the nation, behind Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

When it comes to income, students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch scored an average of 28 points lower than students whose families make too much money to be eligible.

So should schools focus their resources on the racial achievement gap or the income gap?

Stanford University sociologist Sean Reardon would argue for the income gap.

"We've focused a lot on race and I think it's important to keep paying attention to, but I would like to see us increase the amount of attention we're paying to the socio-economic achievement gaps because they're big, they're growing, and they have huge implications for the future workforce and the health of the economy," he said.

Reardon's research suggests the poverty gap has grown larger than education leaders might realize. The statistic used to measure poverty in schools -- free and reduced lunch -- actually hides some of the inequities.

Families can get either a free or reduced-price meal if their income is no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty line. For a family of four, that means below \$41,348 a year.

There's a big difference between students whose families are just over that poverty mark -- making \$42,000 --- and a family making six figures, Reardon said. In the eyes of the Nation's Report Card, both students would be in the same category when calculating the income gap.

"You know, it's sort of like saying, 'who are the best basketball players' and you just categorize people into being above 5'10" or below 5'10" - and there's a lot of variation between being six

foot and 6'8," he said. "It's just sort of obscured if we put just one dichotomous measure in there. So, it's a rough proxy - it's not as nuanced as if we had fuller information on income."

Reardon compared test scores to each student's actual family income. It's costlier and more laborious research than using the widely-available free and reduced lunch data, but he found the gap in scores between rich and poor students had actually grown by about 40 percent since the 60s, a larger gap increase than gaps based on race.

Reardon said officials shouldn't ignore the racial gap, but focus more on the income gap.

Cassellius says we should focus on both.

"In the general public, people may see the achievement gap as black/white," she said. "But in our circles, in education circles, everyone clearly understands that poverty is a huge factor, and a huge barrier. Because children come with less."

But if income plays such a large role, why not make it the main focus? Wouldn't solving that also solve the racial gap, by proxy?

Not entirely, said Minnesota's recently-retired state demographer Tom Gillaspay. He's watched as Minnesota has become a more diverse state, something it will keep doing for decades to come. Even when you account for poverty, there's still a gap happening based on race, he said.

"The vast majority of this is explained by this vicious poverty cycle, but there is still some elements of race and ethnicity built into it," Gillaspay said.

Ryan Vernosh, a teacher at Battle Creek Middle School in St. Paul, has been thinking about the achievement gaps. He was at Maxfield School a couple years ago when he was named Minnesota's Teacher of the Year. Both schools have a majority of minority students and both have high free and reduced lunch counts -- 88-percent at Battle Creek and 99-percent at Maxfield. Just four students are not on free and reduced lunch at Maxfield, according to state data.

Of course you can't ignore poverty, but Vernosh said it's arguably more important to stay focused on race.

"When you look at what it means to be growing up white in America and growing up black, in this case in America, those can be two very different and distinct lived experiences," he said. "And we can't just brush that aside when we have students coming in who are experiencing the effects of systemic racism... who might experience the impacts of racially-based inequities, in terms of hiring practices, of health care services."

And if the achievement gap is only income-based and not race-based, Vernosh said white students who are in poverty should score as well or below black students who aren't in poverty. But that's not what happens, and he uses state MCA test scores as an example.

In 2010, white students who were on free and reduced lunch still scored slightly better on math than black students who were not on free and reduced lunch, 57 percent to 53 percent.

"I think this data really points to a cultural disconnect with our students and families who have been marginalized since, well let's face it, since the inception of our country," Vernosh said.

So if we go back to my original question relating to those new numbers about free and reduced lunch -- is the real achievement gap all about income or all about race? In every case there was the belief that the answer must be both to some degree.

Gillaspy said he truly believes the cycle of poverty can be broken because we've done it before.

"In 1950, Minnesota was a below-average education state," he said. "We were also a below-average income state. We're now one of the highest-education and highest-income states in the country. We seem to be forgetting, I think, that we came from there."

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