

Testimony in support of House Bill 22-1202 – At-risk Student Measure for School Finance

Leslie Colwell – House Education – March 3, 2022

- Good afternoon members of the committee. My name is Leslie Colwell, and I lead the Colorado Children's Campaign's work on K-12 issues, including school finance.
- We're grateful that School Finance Interim Committee took on identifying alternative poverty proxies as part of its charge this year, and enthusiastically support House Bill 1202. The experience of child poverty presents barriers to learning, and to provide students from low-income families with the resources and opportunities to succeed, we must use an accurate measure of economic hardship.
- Unfortunately, our reliance on free and reduced-price lunch forms for school funding purposes has been a growing problem for years, and the pandemic made this especially apparent as we saw at-risk student counts decline dramatically.
- We're excited that the committee decided to move forward with exploring Identified Student Percentage supplemented with Medicaid, with the inclusion of a student-centered neighborhood weight. From our work in the children's health space, we know that though Colorado has low participation rates in the various programs that are currently included in direct certification, we have a HIGH take-up rate for Medicaid and CHIP – upwards of 90% of eligible children are enrolled. The inclusion of Medicaid enrollment in direct certification would have the effect of automatically capturing a larger number of students who qualify for means-tested social services.
- At the same time, we see many benefits to using a multi-pronged approach that includes student-centered neighborhood weights, and we have spent some time digging into how such a system is being administered in Texas.
- For one, we know that household income only captures one dimension of socioeconomic disadvantage. Texas's approach paints a more complete and nuanced picture of need, and acknowledges that students are influenced by the conditions of the neighborhood in which they live, regardless of their own family's income. Student-centered neighborhood weights have the potential to capture other measures that affect children's educational trajectories, like parental educational attainment and home ownership rates, and differentiate funding amounts according to levels of need.
- House Bill 1202 establishes a thoughtful process for transitioning to a new method for measuring poverty. We know that a new system will take at least a year to set up, in part because Colorado would first need to apply for the federal waiver to include Medicaid in direct certification. It will also be necessary to figure out needed data sharing agreements between agencies, what to do about Medicaid data availability at the school district level, and which neighborhood indicators are most relevant for Colorado's purposes. We believe the additional time needed to get this right will be worth it in the long run.
- We urge you to vote yes on HB-1202 to improve our school funding formula and schools' ability to educate the kids they serve. Thank you for your consideration.