

What Does It Mean?: More area students receiving free, reduced lunches
February 8, 2007 - The Times Daily (AL), by Lisa Singleton-Rickman

A decade ago, a school's greatest concern regarding its population of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches was keeping those students' status confidential.

Today, confidentiality is still guaranteed, but schools are faced with an ever-growing number of students who fall into that category.

Schools receive more federal dollars if there are a higher number of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, said Judy Patterson, Lauderdale County schools child nutrition director.

"The number of students getting free lunches is linked to other federal (money) as well, like Title One federal programs that provide additional reading and math help," Patterson said.

Title One funds, however, are used to help any student who struggles in those academic areas, not just students living at or below the poverty level.

Patterson's district is one of six in the area that has increased in the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches since the 2005-06 school year.

Only three districts -- Sheffield, Tuscumbia and Muscle Shoals -- have decreased, according to figures reported in the report card summary for Alabama schools.

All nine of the school districts in Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties have seen increases in the number of qualifying students in the past five years.

The number in most districts fluctuates 1 to 4 percent from year to year.

The number of students in the Sheffield district eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is down this year 3.4 percent from the previous school year. Still, the system has the highest percentage in the area at 71.5.

Sheffield Superintendent of Education Richard Gardner said he is encouraged by the decrease. "It obviously indicates an improving economy."

Sheffield is the smallest school district in the area and has the most federal housing, which, officials say, contributes to a higher percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch.

"The drop indicates to me that the people in Sheffield are finding work they didn't have before," Gardner said. "That level can fluctuate according to unemployment rates"

The Muscle Shoals district, with the lowest percentage of students eligible for free lunches, has stayed the same the past two years. But at 27 percent, it is up nearly 10 percent since 1999.

"It all boils down to demographics," said Muscle Shoals Child Nutrition Director Betsy Speer. "The number of families applying most often relates to socioeconomic level."

High school students in Muscle Shoals continue to have the lowest number of students on free lunches at 23 percent. Two years ago, that figure was at 18.8 percent.

Two factors have likely been culprits in the increase: family applications replacing individual student applications and the direct certification program whereby a family receiving food stamps is automatically eligible for free school lunch.

Every district has been impacted by direct certification.

"Previously, parents had to fill out forms for each student separately and now that they're all on one form, it's a much simpler application process," Speer said.

As for direct certification, Patterson said it was the single factor that boosted her district's percentage the most.

"We gained students in the program who wouldn't have otherwise applied," Patterson said. "We've come a long way toward protecting the identities of those students receiving free lunches, but there's still some degree of stigma attached for many. I've had parents call crying, who have never before been in a position to need help. I try to encourage them to let the system work for them until they can get back on their feet."

Other factors can also be linked to increases in the number of students eligible for free lunches. Loss of jobs in an area and an increase in rental properties are two factors that are synonymous with eligibility increases.

Tuscumbia Superintendent Royce Massey said his district's free and reduced-lunch percentage rose with the addition of direct certification, but the increase in rental properties has also affected the increase. This year, the district is down 3 percent.

The district's enrollment is down about 35 students this year, which Massey said likely played a role in the decrease.

He also reasons that the work force has changed from less manufacturing jobs to service type jobs with lower wages.

"It generally speaks well for the area when the numbers (of free lunches) go down because you figure more people are working or making more money," Massey said. "I'd rather see it go down than up because it signifies to me that the area is doing better economically."

In Colbert County, the numbers have continued to increase, which is a sign of a struggling economy, said Angie Datuin, child nutrition coordinator for Colbert County schools.

"Our income levels aren't increasing with the cost of living, so more people are applying for free lunches," she said.

"Overall, the system works well, and the government is trying to protect the districts that don't have a good tax base. We're in the severe need classification (more than 60 percent) so we get additional funding throughout the district."

That funding helps districts like Colbert County by allowing programs that supplement the educational process for children in poverty and even provides remediation where needed.

A study titled "Effects of Poverty on Children" published in the Future of Children Journal for the Brookings Institution, revealed that family income appears to be more strongly related to children's ability and achievement than their emotional outcomes.

The study notes that children who experience poverty during their preschool and early school years have lower rates of school completion than children and adolescents who experience poverty in later years.

Research has linked childhood poverty and lower educational performance for years, according to Tuscumbia assistant superintendent Barbara Pounders.

As a testing coordinator for six years in the Sheffield system, then a principal at R.E.Thompson elementary in Tuscumbia, Pounders worked with teachers to implement a strategy for helping children from low income levels.

"We strived to make each student feel important," Pounders said. "Our greatest appeal is to the kids because it's often easier to get their attention than their parents."

Many students living in poverty don't have books, nor has the value of education been instilled in them, Pounders said.

"It's up to educators to work with those students, to instill that value for education," she said. "(Standardized) testing is related to cultural issues and often to experiences children living in poverty have never had. They're at a disadvantage and educators must level the playing field for them."

Lisa Singleton-Rickman can be reached at 740-5735 or lisa.singleton-rickman@timesdaily.com.