



Response to Questions on the 2016 LOBs

Request By: Supervisor Herrity

Relevant LOB(s): N/A

Question: Explain the drivers behind the increase in children receiving free meals compared to those receiving reduced-price meals in the Free and Reduced-Price Meals Program.

Response:

The Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FRM) program provides nutritious meals to students during the school year whose families are unable to pay the full price of meals according to criteria based on household size and income. Families who earn less than 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals and those with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty level qualify for reduced-price meals.

The number of children eligible for the FRM program in Fairfax County has increased over the past decade. According to the Virginia Department of Education, in 2005-06, approximately 20 percent of the Fairfax County Public Schools' population was eligible for the FRM program. In 2014-15, it was 28 percent of the schools' population. Within the population eligible for the FRM program, the number of children eligible for free meals has grown significantly over the past decade. According to the Virginia Department of Education, from 2005 to 2014, there was an 80 percent increase in the number of students eligible for free meals. During this same time period, the number of students eligible for reduced-price meals increased by 23 percent. Increased outreach and streamlining the certification process in recent years for certain members of the community may have increased participation for those that may have been eligible, but did not previously participate. Specific factors driving the increase in the number of students eligible for the FRM program overall as well as the number of students eligible for free meals, include the following:

- The overall poverty rate in the County has increased over the past few years and has not returned to pre-recession levels. In 2014 alone, there were over 23,000 children (18 years of age or younger) living below the federal poverty rate in Fairfax County (\$23,850 for a family of four in 2014). Children living below the federal poverty rate qualify for free meals.
- Participation in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in Fairfax County provides some insight into factors that may be driving participation in the FRM program. Those families participating



in TANF and/or SNAP also meet the eligibility criteria for the FRM program and are eligible for either reduced-price meals or free meals based on family income. Over the past decade, the number of individuals receiving TANF in Fairfax County has remained fairly stable. However, the number of individuals receiving SNAP benefits, which is also a food assistance program, has increased substantially. From 2005 to 2015, the number of individuals receiving SNAP in the County has increased by 170 percent. It is believed that this significant increase has also led to increases in the FRM program and more children are eligible for free meals rather than reduced-price meals.

- Applications for the FRM program are mailed to all households by FCPS each August. Children eligible to participate in the FRM program may be certified by applying for the program or by a school district identifying and directly certifying students in households that participate in TANF or SNAP, thereby reducing the administrative burden of filling out and processing applications. Since 2012 the USDA and the Commonwealth of Virginia have implemented concerted efforts to increase participation in the FRM program by directly identifying students in households participating in SNAP and/or TANF and providing regularly updated lists to the school districts. Previously school districts received lists of eligible families only once per year each July. This allows schools to have a more dynamic list of children who are eligible to participate in the FRM program and can consequently lead to more eligible children participating and receiving free meals.