



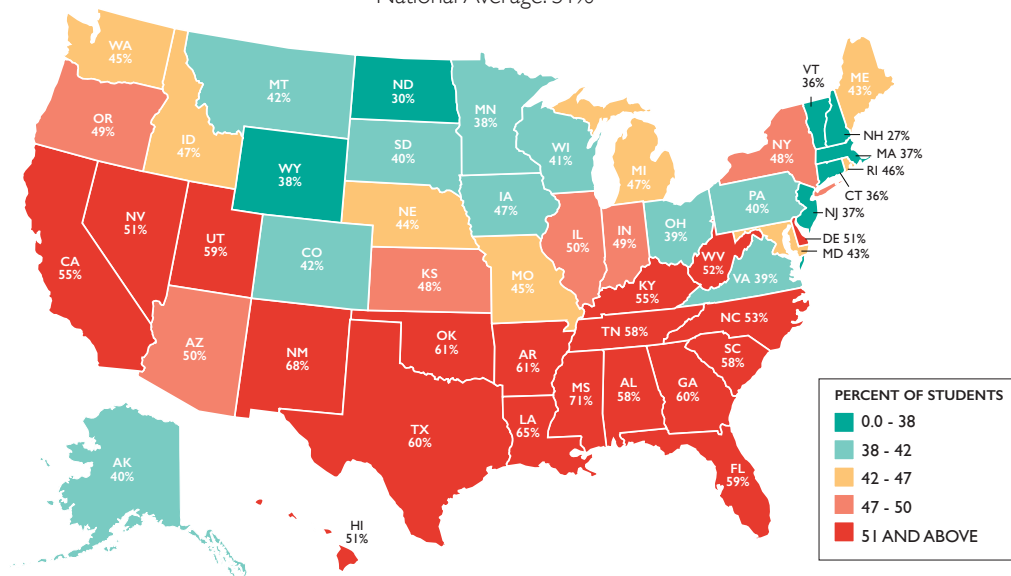
Research Bulletin

**A NEW MAJORITY**

Low Income Students Now a Majority  
In the Nation's Public Schools

January, 2015

**PERCENT OF LOW INCOME STUDENTS IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2013**  
National Average: 51%



SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION | [SOUTHERNEDUCATION.ORG](http://SOUTHERNEDUCATION.ORG)

Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data

For the first time in recent history, a majority of the schoolchildren attending the nation's public schools come from low income families. The latest data collected from the states by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), evidence that 51 percent of the students across the nation's public schools were low income in 2013.

The pattern was spread across the nation. Half or more of the public schoolchildren in 21 states were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, a benefit available only to families living in poverty or near-poverty in 2013.<sup>1</sup> In 19 other states, low income students constituted between 40 percent and 49 percent of the states' public school enrollment. In other words, very high proportions of low income students were evident in four-fifths of the 50 states in 2013 (See Appendix 1).

This defining moment in enrollment in public education in the United States comes as a consequence of a steadily growing trend that has persisted over several decades. In 1989, less than 32 percent of the nation's public school students were low-income. By 2000, the national rate as compiled and calculated by NCES had increased to over 38 percent. By 2006, the national rate was 42 percent and, after the Great Recession, the rate climbed in 2011 to 48 percent. NCES data shows that in 2012 the rate of low income students was barely below one-half—49.6 percent. In 2013, the rate crossed the threshold of one half so that in 2013 low income students became a new majority in the nation's public schools.

While found in large proportions throughout the United States, the numbers of low income students attending public schools in the South and in the West are extraordinarily high. Thirteen of the 21 states with a majority of low income students in 2013 were located in the South, and six of the other 21 states were in the West.

Mississippi led the nation with the highest rate: 71 percent, almost three out of every four public school children in Mississippi, were low-income. The nation's second highest rate was found in New Mexico, where 68 percent of all public school students were low income in 2013.

Southern states comprised 12 of the next 14 states with the highest rates of low income students. Louisiana's rate was 65 percent in 2013, followed by Arkansas and Oklahoma with 61 percent. (Had it been granted statehood, the District of Columbia with a rate of 61 percent would have ranked among this group and would have made the total count 22 states with a majority of low income students.) Following were Texas and Georgia, where 60 percent of their public schoolchildren were low income.

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<sup>1</sup> This update was developed and written by Steve Suitts, Vice President of the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) with the assistance of Pamela Barba, SEF Graphic Designer, and Katherine Dunn, SEF Program Director. It follows two SEF reports, [A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South's Public Schools \(2007\)](#) and [Update -A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South and Nation \(2013\)](#). Students are eligible for free meals at public schools if they live in households where the income is no more than 135 percent of the poverty threshold. They are eligible for reduced-price lunches if their household income is no more than 185 percent. In 2013, for example, a student in a household with a single parent with an annual income of less than \$19,669 was eligible for a free lunch or less than \$27,991 for a reduced-price meal in a public school.

## 21 STATES WITH A MAJORITY OF LOW INCOME STUDENTS: 2013

MISSISSIPPI	71%	ALABAMA	58%
NEW MEXICO	68%	CALIFORNIA	55%
LOUISIANA	65%	KENTUCKY	55%
ARKANSAS	61%	NORTH CAROLINA	53%
OKLAHOMA	61%	WEST VIRGINIA	52%
TEXAS	60%	DELAWARE	51%
GEORGIA	60%	NEVADA	51%
UTAH	59%	ARIZONA	51%
FLORIDA	59%	HAWAII	51%
SOUTH CAROLINA	58%	ILLINOIS	50%
TENNESSEE	58%		

Source: SEF Calculations of NCES Common Core of Data, 2013

Among the six Western states with a majority of low income students, Utah (59 percent) and California (55 percent) had especially high rates. Nevada, Arizona, and Hawaii were the remaining, high-ranking Western states. In each state, 51 percent of the public school children were low income in 2013. Altogether, 57 percent of students in the 15-state South were low income, as were 51 percent of the public school students in the 13-state West.

The two states outside the South and West with a majority of low income students attending public schools were Delaware (considered a Southern state in regional counts by the US Census) and Illinois in the Midwest.

In 2013, six other states appeared to be on the verge of reaching a majority of low income students in the near future, if current trends continue. In Indiana and Oregon, 49 percent of the public schoolchildren were low income. In New York and Kansas, the rates were 48 percent. In Idaho and Michigan, rates were 47 percent. New Hampshire was the state with the lowest percentage of low income students: 27 percent of its public school students were eligible for free and reduced lunches.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The development, implications and consequences of the trends behind these findings have been explored and reviewed in prior reports by the Southern Education Foundation, including an updated research report released in October 2013. (See especially pages 11-13 of [A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South's Public Schools \(2007\)](#) and pages 8-13 of Update [-A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South and Nation \(2013\)](#). A few of the observations from these reports, perhaps, bear repeating at this moment.

After low income children became a majority of the public school students in the Southern states in 2006, the SEF report observed: "Currently the South alone faces the implications and consequences of having a new majority of low income students in its public schools... the South also faces a new global economy that requires higher skills and knowledge from all who seek a decent living. In this brave, new world, the people and policymakers of Southern states must realize that continuing the current, uneven level of educational progress will be disastrous. They must understand more fully that today their future and their grandchildren's future are inextricably bound to the success or failure of low income students in the South. If this new majority of students fail in school, an entire state and an entire region will fail simply because there will be inadequate human capital in Southern states to build and sustain good jobs, an enjoyable quality of life, and a well-informed democracy. It is that simple."

In 2013, after reviewing the data, trends, and analysis of student support and achievement for low income students, the report concluded:

"No longer can we consider the problems and needs of low income students simply a matter of fairness... Their success or failure in the public schools will determine the entire body of human capital and educational potential that the nation will possess in the future. Without improving the educational support that the nation provides its low income students – students with the largest needs and usually with the least support -- the trends of the last decade will be prologue for a nation not at risk, but a nation in decline..."

"With huge, stubbornly unchanging gaps in learning, schools in the South and across the nation face the real danger of becoming entrenched, inadequately funded educational systems that enlarge the division in America between haves and have-nots and endanger the entire nation's prospects..."

"The trends of the last decade strongly suggest that little or nothing will change for the better if schools and communities continue to postpone addressing the primary question of education in America today: what does it take and what will be done to provide low income students with a good chance to succeed in public schools? It is a question of how, not where, to improve the education of a new majority of students."

"Without fundamental improvements in how the South and the nation educate low income students, the trends that this report documents will ricochet across all aspects of American society for generations to come. As a wise American leader once reminded a troubled nation: 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.'"

It remains that simple – and yet that profound for the future of the South and the nation.

## APPENDIX 1

### STATE RANKINGS BY PERCENTAGE OF LOW INCOME STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: 2013

State	Rate		State	Rate
MISSISSIPPI	71%		RHODE ISLAND	46%
NEW MEXICO	68%		WASHINGTON	45%
LOUISIANA	65%		MISSOURI	45%
ARKANSAS	61%		NEBRASKA	44%
OKLAHOMA	61%		MAINE	43%
TEXAS	60%		MARYLAND	43%
GEORGIA	60%		MONTANA	42%
UTAH	59%		COLORADO	42%
FLORIDA	59%		WISCONSIN	41%
SOUTH CAROLINA	58%		PENNSYLVANIA	40%
TENNESSEE	58%		ALASKA	40%
ALABAMA	58%		IOWA	40%
CALIFORNIA	55%		SOUTH DAKOTA	40%
KENTUCKY	55%		OHIO	39%
NORTH CAROLINA	53%		VIRGINIA	39%
WEST VIRGINIA	52%		MINNESOTA	38%
DELAWARE	51%		WYOMING	38%
NEVADA	51%		MASSACHUSETTS	37%
ARIZONA	51%		NEW JERSEY	37%
HAWAII	51%		CONNECTICUT	36%
ILLINOIS	50%		VERMONT	36%
INDIANA	49%		NORTH DAKOTA	30%
OREGON	49%		NEW HAMPSHIRE	27%
NEW YORK	48%		50 States	51%
KANSAS	48%		DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	61%
IDAHO	47%		USA	51%
MICHIGAN	47%			

Source: SEF Calculations of NCES Common Core of Data, 2013

## APPENDIX 2

### PERCENTAGE OF LOW INCOME STUDENTS BY REGION AND BY STATE: 2013

State/Region	Free Lunch	Free/Reduced Lunch	State/Region	Free Lunch	Free/ Reduced Lunch
<b>SOUTH</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>MIDWEST</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>44%</b>
ALABAMA	51%	58%	ILLINOIS	44%	50%
ARKANSAS	52%	61%	INDIANA	41%	49%
FLORIDA	51%	59%	IOWA	33%	40%
GEORGIA	53%	60%	KANSAS	38%	48%
KENTUCKY	48%	55%	MICHIGAN	41%	47%
LOUISIANA	58%	65%	MINNESOTA	31%	38%
MARYLAND	36%	43%	MISSOURI	38%	45%
MISSISSIPPI	64%	71%	NEBRASKA	35%	44%
NORTH CAROLINA	47%	53%	NORTH DAKOTA	23%	30%
OKLAHOMA	51%	61%	OHIO	33%	39%
SOUTH CAROLINA	52%	58%	SOUTH DAKOTA	32%	40%
TENNESSEE	51%	58%	WISCONSIN	35%	41%
TEXAS	53%	60%			
VIRGINIA	32%	39%	<b>NORTHEAST</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>42%</b>
WEST VIRGINIA	47%	52%	CONNECTICUT	31%	36%
			DELAWARE	46%	51%
<b>WEST</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>51%</b>	MAINE	37%	43%
ALASKA	34%	40%	MASSACHUSETTS	32%	37%
ARIZONA	44%	51%	NEW HAMPSHIRE	22%	27%
CALIFORNIA	48%	55%	NEW JERSEY	31%	37%
COLORADO	34%	42%	NEW YORK	41%	48%
HAWAII	40%	51%	PENNSYLVANIA	35%	40%
IDAHO	38%	47%	RHODE ISLAND	40%	46%
MONTANA	34%	42%	VERMONT	31%	36%
NEVADA	44%	51%			
NEW MEXICO	62%	68%	<b>50 STATES</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>51%</b>
OREGON	42%	49%	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	58%	61%
UTAH	48%	59%	USA	44%	51%
WASHINGTON	38%	45%			
WYOMING	27%	38%			

Source: SEF Calculations of NCES Common Core of Data, 2013