



Free nutritious school meals: Effects on student well-being and learning

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Abstract. Students in many parts of Indonesia continue to face challenges such as hunger, low concentration, and unequal access to adequate nutrition, which negatively affect learning readiness and academic engagement. This study examines the implementation of the Free Nutritious School Meal Program and its implications for student well-being and learning in a public vocational high school in Bengkulu City, Indonesia. The study addresses the urgency of understanding how school feeding policies are operationalized at the school level to respond to students' nutritional and learning needs. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The study involved purposively selected participants, including school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. The findings indicate that the program has been implemented through structured stages of

preparation, distribution, supervision, and evaluation, contributing to improved student energy levels, learning engagement, healthy behaviors, and discipline. However, challenges related to logistics, staffing, infrastructure, and communication with food providers were identified. The study recommends strengthening school management capacity, improving infrastructure, and developing evidence-based monitoring systems to enhance program sustainability and effectiveness.

Introduction

Ideally, educational systems are expected to provide learning environments in which students' basic physiological needs are adequately met, enabling them to participate fully in cognitive, social, and academic activities. The quality of education in many developing countries, including Indonesia, remains a major concern due to persistent structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic challenges. Educational quality is not only determined by curriculum and teaching practices but also by broader systemic components, including student health, learning conditions, and social support mechanisms. Weaknesses in Indonesia's education system continue to undermine learning outcomes, especially among students from vulnerable backgrounds (Rafsanjani & Rozaq, 2024). Contemporary perspectives on educational quality emphasize the interaction between inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes, in which learner readiness, teacher competence, and supportive learning environments play decisive roles (Aithal & Maiya, 2023; Kusmawan, 2025; Wondimu & Gonfa, 2025).

In practice, however, many students still experience hunger, low concentration, fatigue, and unequal

access to adequate nutrition, which directly affect their readiness to learn and academic engagement. Student well-being has gained increasing recognition as a fundamental prerequisite for effective learning. Educational theory, particularly Maslow's hierarchy of needs, posits that physiological and safety needs must be met before learners can engage in higher-order cognitive processes and motivation. Hunger, malnutrition, and poor health directly weaken students' attention, stamina, emotional regulation, and academic performance (Kumari, 2024; Widana et al., 2023). Thus, educational policies that neglect students' basic nutritional needs risk undermining even the most well-designed curricular and pedagogical reforms. Field reports from Indonesia indicate that nutritional disparities among secondary and vocational students remain prevalent, particularly in schools serving low- and middle-income communities, underscoring the urgency of school-based nutrition interventions.

School feeding programs are among the most widely used policy instruments for addressing this challenge. Free nutritious school meals serve not only as a nutrition intervention but also as a social protection mechanism, reducing food insecurity, supporting equity, and enhancing school participation. International evidence demonstrates that such programs significantly improve dietary quality, micronutrient intake, school attendance, and learning outcomes. Countries such as China, Brazil, India, and Ghana have successfully implemented large-scale school meal programs that integrate nutritional standards with educational and social policy objectives (Ma et al., 2025; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2023; Robert & Gaddis, 2025; Tandoh et al., 2022).

However, most previous studies have predominantly focused on nutritional and health outcomes, such as calorie intake, micronutrient sufficiency, or attendance rates, with limited attention to how school meal policies are implemented at the school level and embedded within daily educational practices. From a policy implementation perspective, however, the effectiveness of school feeding programs depends not only on national regulations but also on how these policies are operationalized at the school level. Public policy theory emphasizes that implementation is shaped by institutional capacity, inter-organizational coordination, leadership, communication, and monitoring systems. Well-designed free meal policies may face serious obstacles related to logistics, resources, and governance when implemented in real school settings (Ng et al., 2022).

Despite Indonesia's growing commitment to integrating nutrition and education through free nutritious school meal programs, empirical evidence on school-level implementation processes and their implications for student well-being and learning remains limited. Nutritional problems such as anemia, inadequate dietary diversity, and unhealthy eating patterns continue to affect many students, weakening their physical endurance, concentration, and academic engagement. Although previous studies have demonstrated positive associations between school meals, food security, and academic performance (Carlisle et al., 2023; Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023) These studies rarely examine how implementation dynamics, school management practices, and educational integration shape program outcomes.

In several schools across different regions of Indonesia, the Free Nutritious School Meal Program has been implemented since mid 2025 as part of a national policy initiative to improve student health and educational quality (Aziz et al., 2025; Nurwakhid & Fridiyanti, 2025). Initial observations indicate that while students benefit from nutritionally regulated meals, the program continues to face challenges related to management capacity, supervision, and integration into schools' educational cultures. These challenges may limit the program's potential to support not only students' physical health but also character development, cleanliness practices, and learning awareness, three dimensions that are particularly important for learners in secondary and vocational education contexts.

Different from previous studies that primarily assess nutritional outcomes, this study emphasizes the implementation dimension of policy at the school level and examines the program's role as an educational and character-building instrument. This study offers a new perspective by positioning the Free Nutritious School Meal Program not merely as a welfare intervention but as an integral component of school culture that supports discipline, hygiene, responsibility, and learning readiness.

This study adopts a school-based policy implementation framework that links program management with educational and well-being outcomes. The Free Nutritious School Meal Program is viewed as a multi-dimensional intervention that operates through four interrelated components: preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. When effectively managed, these components can positively affect students' physical well-being, discipline, cleanliness, and learning motivation, thereby strengthening their academic and vocational readiness.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine how schools prepare, implement, monitor, and evaluate the Free Nutritious School Meal Program; analyze how the program is utilized as an educational tool to promote student well-being, healthy habits, and learning awareness; and identify key challenges and constraints encountered in its implementation. By addressing the existing research gap, this study contributes to the international discourse on school feeding policies by integrating analysis of policy implementation with educational and character development outcomes. This study addresses three main problems: the limited understanding of how the Free Nutritious School Meal Program is implemented at the school level in Indonesia, the unclear role of the program as an educational and character-building instrument, and the managerial and operational challenges that may hinder its effectiveness and sustainability.

Method

Research Method and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the implementation of the Free Nutritious School Meal Program and its implications for student well-being and learning. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social and institutional phenomena within their natural settings and enables the capture of participants' perspectives, experiences, and meanings attached to the program (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The descriptive orientation of the study aimed to provide a systematic, factual account of how the program operates in practice, without manipulating variables.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predefined criteria, including direct involvement in program planning, implementation, or supervision, or experience as program beneficiaries. The participants included the school principal (policy decision maker), the vice principal for student affairs (program coordinator), three homeroom teachers (implementation and supervision), nine students from Grades 10–12 (program beneficiaries), one student representative, and one parent representative. This composition ensured representation of policy, management, instructional, student, and family perspectives.

Research Setting and Timeline

The research was conducted in a public vocational high school in Bengkulu City, Indonesia, which has implemented the Free Nutritious School Meal Program since mid 2025. Data collection took place over approximately two months, from October to November 2025. The school was selected because it represents a typical vocational education setting where students' physical well-being, discipline, and learning readiness are closely linked to their future professional competencies.

Research Procedures

The research procedure is in accordance with the image in Image 1.

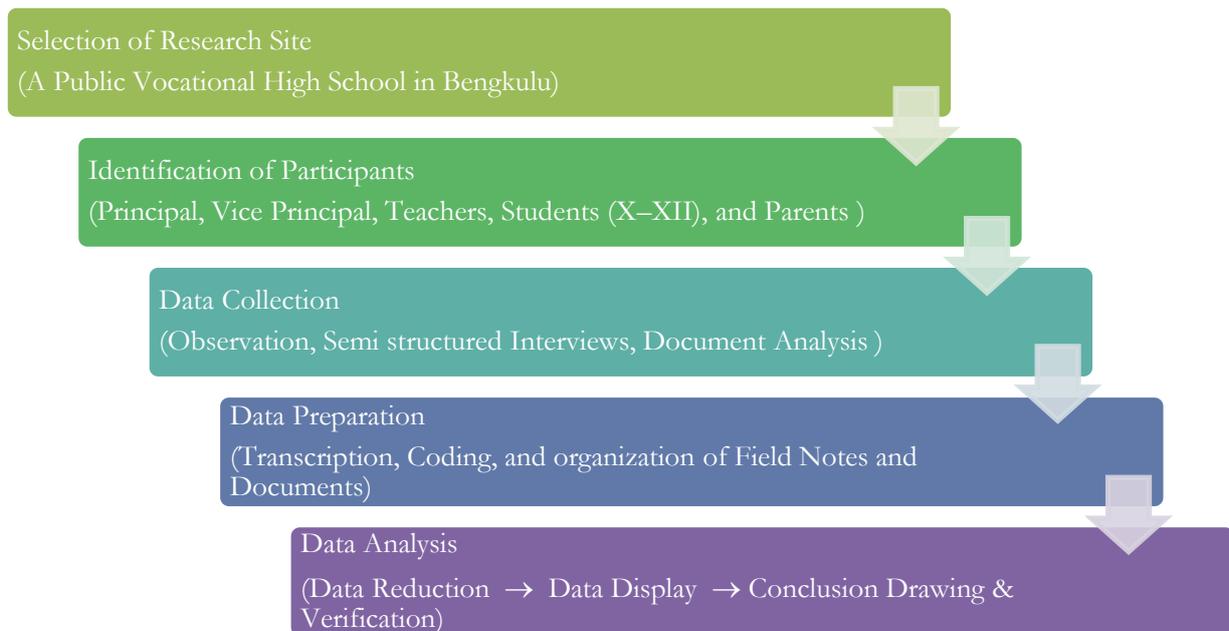


Image 1. Research Procedures

Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments

Data collection followed a sequential procedure consisting of a pre-field stage, field data collection, data analysis, and result validation, as illustrated in Image 1 and described narratively in this section. During the pre-field stage, the researcher prepared instruments and coordinated access with the school. Field data collection involved observation, interviews, and document analysis. Data analysis and validation were conducted concurrently and iteratively until findings were finalized. Prior to data collection, this study received ethical approval from the school authority and formal permission from the school principal. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and parental consent was secured for student participants. Participant identities were anonymized using codes, and all data were stored securely to maintain confidentiality.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observation was conducted to capture the everyday implementation of the meal program, including food distribution, student participation, hygiene practices, and integration into school routines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences and perceptions. The interview and observation guides were developed based on a comprehensive literature review and were reviewed by two qualitative research experts to ensure content relevance, clarity, and validity before field implementation. All interviews were audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by repetition of responses across participants and the absence of new emerging themes. Document analysis complemented interview and observational data by examining memoranda of understanding, monthly reports, photographs, and administrative records. In line with qualitative research principles, the researcher served as the primary data collection instrument. To maintain reflexivity and minimize subjective bias, the researcher kept reflective field notes and engaged in peer debriefing with academic supervisors throughout the analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking. Transferability was supported through rich contextual descriptions, while dependability and confirmability were ensured through systematic documentation and peer review (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Results and Discussion

Preparation, Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation of the Free Nutritious School Meal Program

The findings show that schools implementing the Free Nutritious School Meal Program have established a multi-stage operational system consisting of program preparation, meal distribution, supervision, and evaluation. This presentation follows the sequential stages of the research method, ensuring coherence between data collection procedures and the reporting of results. During preparation, schools coordinated with external food providers and nutrition experts to ensure menus met dietary standards. In addition, schools conducted internal coordination meetings to align the meal schedule with the academic timetable, classroom activities, and break periods, so that food distribution did not disrupt instructional time. Teachers and administrative staff were assigned specific responsibilities related to scheduling, supervision, logistics, and student discipline during meal times.

During implementation, meals were distributed daily to all participating students according to a fixed schedule. The meals were nutritionally balanced, consisting of carbohydrates, protein, vegetables, and fruit, and were designed to meet the recommended daily intake for adolescents. Observations indicated that most students consistently participated in the program, and meal consumption rates were high. In several instances, teachers reported that students who previously skipped breakfast were more physically active and attentive during lessons after the program was introduced. This finding indicates a direct link between nutritional intake and learning readiness, reinforcing the program's functional impact beyond food provision. The presence of standardized portions and meal packaging also helped regulate fairness and reduce social stigma among students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Monitoring was conducted by teachers and school administrators who supervised food distribution, hygiene practices, and student behavior. In addition to direct supervision, schools introduced simple control mechanisms, such as attendance logs during meal times, meal acceptance records, and informal student feedback on taste and portion size. Documentation such as attendance lists, menu records, supplier reports, and delivery schedules was systematically maintained, enabling schools to track operational consistency and identify recurring problems such as delays or shortages. Evaluation activities were carried out primarily through regular staff meetings and teacher and student feedback. These evaluations focused on food quality, distribution efficiency, student participation, and hygiene conditions. However, the findings reveal that evaluation practices remained largely qualitative and administrative, with systematic, data-based tools such as nutritional impact tracking, learning outcome comparisons, and digital reporting systems still limited. This constitutes an important limitation of the current implementation model.

In addition to internal monitoring, the evaluation process incorporated feedback from program beneficiaries. Feedback was collected from 10 parent representatives and 30 students to assess satisfaction and identify complaints related to the Free Nutritious School Meal Program. The

results indicate that the majority of parents expressed high satisfaction, particularly regarding food quality, portion adequacy, and perceived improvements in students' energy levels. A smaller proportion reported neutral responses related to menu variation, while only a few raised complaints concerning delivery delays. Student feedback similarly showed high satisfaction, with most students reporting improved focus and stamina during lessons. These satisfaction patterns suggest a positive reception of the program and identify operational areas requiring refinement.

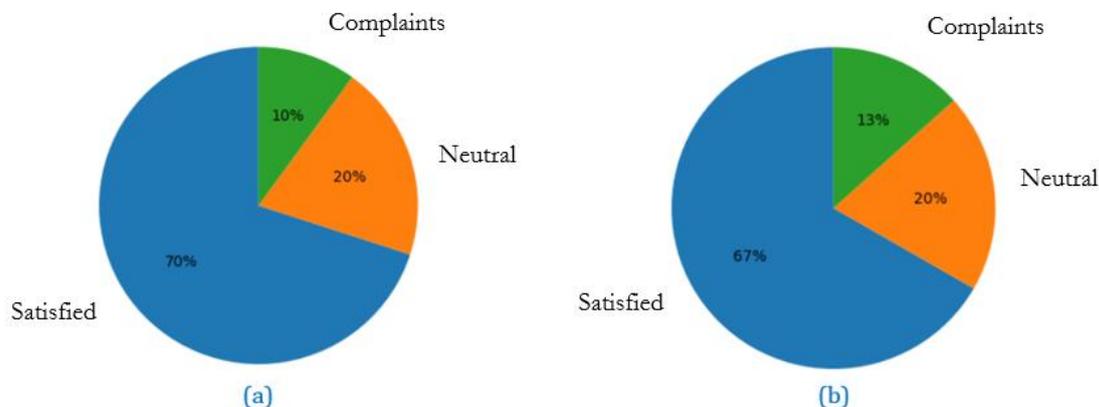


Image 2. (a) Parent Satisfaction with the Free Nutritious School Meal Program; (b) Student Satisfaction with the Free Nutritious School Meal Program.

These satisfaction patterns reinforce earlier qualitative findings that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program has met its primary objectives in supporting student well-being, while also highlighting specific areas such as menu diversity and service consistency that warrant further improvement. The findings demonstrate that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program is implemented through a structured multi-stage system comprising preparation, delivery, supervision, and evaluation. This reflects the core principles of public policy implementation theory, which emphasizes that effective policy execution depends on clear role distribution, inter-organizational coordination, and operational routines (Syarien & Samarah, 2023; Xinyu, 2023). The coordination between schools, food providers, and nutrition experts observed in this study aligns with the collaborative governance model, which holds that complex social policies such as school nutrition require cooperation across institutional boundaries to ensure quality and sustainability (Aivalli et al., 2024; Nugroho et al., 2025). The alignment of meal schedules with the academic timetable further supports organizational integration theory in education, which posits that non-instructional programs must be embedded within school routines to avoid disrupting core learning activities. By integrating meal distribution into daily school operations, schools ensured that the nutrition intervention supported rather than interrupted instructional continuity. This is consistent with previous studies showing that school feeding programs are more effective when synchronized with school schedules and classroom activities (Fair et al., 2023).

The provision of nutritionally balanced meals and the high participation rate observed in this study confirm earlier evidence that universal or near-universal school meal programs reduce food insecurity and increase student engagement (Burkhart et al., 2024). The reported increase in students' physical energy and classroom attentiveness is also supported by nutrition learning theory, which links adequate caloric intake and micronutrient sufficiency to improved cognitive functioning and attention span (Ober et al., 2024; Wahyuniar & Pustakasari, 2025). In particular, adolescents who previously skipped meals benefited most, reinforcing the argument that school meals play a compensatory role for students from food-insecure households. The use of standardized portions and uniform meal packaging also contributed to social equity within the school environment. According to social inclusion theory, visible differences in food access can generate stigma and undermine students' sense of belonging (Peterson et al., 2022). By providing

identical meals to all students, the program minimized socioeconomic labeling and promoted dignity, consistent with international best practices in universal school feeding (Orta-Aleman et al., 2024).

Importantly, including satisfaction and complaint feedback from parents and students strengthens the program's evaluation dimension. The predominance of positive responses across both groups indicates a high level of user acceptance, a key indicator of policy effectiveness from a service quality and stakeholder satisfaction perspective. Public service evaluation theory emphasizes that beneficiary satisfaction reflects not only service outcomes but also perceived fairness, reliability, and responsiveness of program delivery (Asawawibul et al., 2025; Rolando, 2025). Parents' satisfaction suggests that the program has succeeded in addressing concerns related to child nutrition and daily energy needs, while students' satisfaction reflects the program's relevance to their lived school experience. At the same time, the presence of neutral responses and limited complaints, primarily regarding menu variety, taste preferences, and occasional delivery delays, underscores the importance of incorporating beneficiary feedback into continuous program improvement mechanisms.

Monitoring practices through supervision, attendance logs, documentation, and informal feedback reflect the street-level bureaucracy framework, where frontline actors such as teachers and school administrators play a critical role in translating policy into practice (Sholeh, 2023). The inclusion of feedback from parents and students indicates an emerging form of participatory evaluation that has been shown to enhance accountability and program legitimacy in school-based interventions. However, despite these positive developments, the limited use of systematic, data-driven evaluation tools suggests the program is still operating primarily at the administrative compliance level rather than at the level of outcome-based management. This finding aligns with performance management theory, which distinguishes between monitoring inputs and outputs (such as meals delivered and participation rates) and evaluating outcomes and impacts (such as nutritional status, learning achievement, and long-term behavior change) (Mardiantu, 2024). While satisfaction surveys provide valuable perceptual data, they should be complemented by structured nutritional assessments and learning outcome measurements to generate more robust evidence of program effectiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program has achieved a high degree of operational institutionalization and stakeholder acceptance at the school level, but has not yet reached the stage of evidence-based governance. Strengthening digital reporting systems, integrating beneficiary feedback into formal evaluation frameworks, and developing indicators that link nutrition to learning outcomes would enable schools to move beyond implementation compliance toward performance-oriented and participatory program management, as recommended in global school feeding frameworks (Fathi et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2022). The novelty of this study lies in its empirical demonstration of how policy implementation processes at the school level shape not only nutritional outcomes but also educational practices and school culture.

The Free Nutritious Meal Program as an Educational Instrument

The findings further indicate that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program functioned not merely as a nutrition intervention but as an educational and character-building mechanism embedded in daily school life. Teachers routinely used meal times to reinforce discipline, hygiene, responsibility, and cooperation. Students practiced orderly queuing, handwashing, waste management, and shared responsibility, which gradually became part of school culture. This demonstrates how the program operates as a hidden curriculum, transmitting values through routine institutional practices rather than through formal instruction.

The findings indicate that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program functions not merely as a nutrition intervention but as a pedagogical and character-building mechanism embedded in daily school life. This supports the concept of the hidden curriculum, which suggests that schools transmit values, norms, and behaviors not only through formal instruction but also through routines, rituals, and institutional practices (Matorevhu & Madzamba, 2022). By structuring meal times around discipline, hygiene, cooperation, and responsibility, schools transformed eating into a learning experience that reinforced moral and social development. The observed routines, such as orderly queuing, handwashing, waste management, and shared responsibility, align closely with social learning theory, which posits that individuals acquire behaviors through observation, repetition, and reinforcement within a social environment (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022; Mujahidah, 2023). This extends previous research by demonstrating the pedagogical value of school feeding programs, not only their nutritional impact.

The increased awareness of balanced nutrition among students further supports findings from school-based nutrition education research, which shows that regular exposure to healthy meals improves dietary knowledge and long-term eating behavior (James et al., 2022; Jansen & Schyns, 2023; Mahaardhika & Utari, 2023). The fact that students began to avoid junk food and adopt healthier choices at home indicates that the program had a spillover effect, reinforcing the notion that school feeding initiatives can shape lifestyle habits beyond the classroom. The improvement in students' energy levels, attentiveness, and classroom engagement is strongly supported by nutrition cognition theory, which links adequate caloric and micronutrient intake with improved brain function, attention, and emotional regulation (Kanellopoulos et al., 2023; Puri et al., 2023). In particular, adolescents who previously skipped meals benefited the most, confirming that school meals reduce inequalities in learning readiness caused by household food insecurity (Djan et al., 2025; Heflin et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the view that school feeding is not simply a welfare policy but a learning support intervention. The reduction in disruptive behavior and increased participation, especially in vocational and practical activities, can also be interpreted through self-regulation theory, which suggests that stable physiological states improve emotional control, persistence, and task engagement (Loksa et al., 2022). When students are no longer distracted by hunger or fatigue, they are better able to focus on cognitively and physically demanding learning tasks.

The emergence of collective responsibility and peer cooperation reflects principles of school climate and community theory, which emphasize that shared norms and collaborative routines strengthen social cohesion and student engagement. By organizing eating as a communal and rule-governed activity, the program fostered a sense of belonging and mutual accountability, reinforcing the idea that health and learning are shared institutional goals. Overall, these findings extend existing school feeding literature by demonstrating that Free Nutritious School Meal Programs can function as integrated educational interventions, simultaneously supporting nutrition, character education, classroom behavior, and learning readiness. This positions school meals not merely as supportive services, but as core components of holistic educational development.

Challenges in Implementing the Free Nutritious School Meal Program

Several challenges were identified in the implementation of the Free Nutritious School Meal Program. Logistical issues included delays in food delivery, inconsistent portion sizes, and occasional menu repetition, which sometimes reduced student satisfaction and increased food waste. In some cases, meals arrived close to or after the scheduled eating time, disrupting class schedules and forcing teachers to adjust instructional plans. Human resource limitations were also evident, as teachers were required to supervise meals in addition to their teaching duties. This additional workload occasionally led to fatigue and reduced their ability to focus on instructional

preparation. Schools also lacked dedicated staff for meal management, resulting in a heavy reliance on teaching personnel to handle logistical and disciplinary tasks during meal times.

Infrastructure constraints further affected program efficiency. Limited dining areas meant students had to eat in shifts or in classrooms, complicating supervision and cleaning. Waste management systems were not always adequate to handle the increased volume of food packaging and leftovers, sometimes leading to sanitation issues and unpleasant odors that interfered with the learning environment. Communication gaps between schools and food providers also posed challenges. At times, the meals delivered did not fully match the planned menus, particularly when suppliers faced shortages or substituted ingredients without prior notice. This weakened schools' ability to ensure nutritional consistency and undermined trust in the supply chain. Additionally, some students showed initial resistance to certain nutritious foods, particularly vegetables and unfamiliar menu items. This resistance sometimes led to uneaten food and required teachers to spend extra time encouraging students to eat properly.

The challenges identified in this study reflect well-established patterns in the implementation of large-scale social and education policies. According to public policy implementation theory, the success of a program depends not only on policy design but also on resource availability, institutional capacity, and communication across implementing agencies (Sager & Gofen, 2022). The logistical problems observed, such as delivery delays, inconsistent portions, and menu repetition, indicate weaknesses in the supply chain and coordination mechanisms between schools and food providers. Human resource constraints further illustrate the concept of street-level bureaucracy (Chang & Brewer, 2023; Peeters & Campos, 2023; van Berkel et al., 2022), which explains how frontline workers such as teachers are often required to perform additional policy implementation tasks beyond their formal roles. The added responsibility of supervising meals increased teacher workload and sometimes reduced their capacity to focus on instructional preparation. This finding aligns with education management research showing that when teachers are burdened with administrative and non-teaching duties, instructional quality may be compromised (Tolibas & Lydia, 2022). The absence of dedicated meal management staff suggests that institutional structures have not yet been fully adapted to support the expanded scope of school responsibilities under the program. Infrastructure limitations, including inadequate dining areas and waste management facilities, highlight the importance of enabling conditions in program implementation. According to systems theory, organizations' policies can function effectively only when their physical, human, and procedural subsystems are aligned. Poor sanitation and overcrowded eating spaces not only reduced operational efficiency but also threatened the very health objectives of the program, consistent with findings from global school feeding evaluations (Cupertino et al., 2022).

Communication gaps between schools and suppliers also weakened program reliability. From a network governance perspective, effective public service delivery requires transparent information exchange and mutual accountability among all actors in the policy network (Birdayanthi et al., 2025; Eckersley et al., 2025). Unannounced menu substitutions and inconsistent deliveries undermined schools' ability to ensure nutritional standards and eroded trust in the system. This confirms earlier research showing that strong contractual oversight and real-time communication systems are critical for maintaining food quality and consistency in school feeding programs. Student resistance to certain nutritious foods reflects challenges identified in behavioral nutrition theory, which notes that eating habits are culturally and psychologically shaped and do not change immediately in response to new food environments (Neufeld et al., 2022). Without adequate nutrition education and gradual menu adaptation, food waste and rejection are likely, particularly when unfamiliar foods are introduced.

Financial and administrative rigidity limited schools' flexibility to adapt the program to local needs. This supports the argument for top-down policy rigidity, in which standardized contracts and budgeting systems limit innovation and responsiveness at the implementation level (Islam, 2025). Without flexible funding and adaptive procurement mechanisms, schools are constrained in optimizing the program to reflect student preferences and achieve nutritional effectiveness. Overall, the findings highlight a key limitation of the program: while policy objectives are clear, institutional capacity and enabling conditions remain uneven. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to implementation research by illustrating how operational constraints mediate policy outcomes in educational settings.

From an evaluative perspective, future improvements should focus on transitioning from administrative monitoring toward outcome-based assessment. This includes developing systematic indicators that link nutrition intake to learning engagement, attendance, and academic performance. Incorporating regular student and parent satisfaction surveys into formal evaluation frameworks would also strengthen participatory governance and enhance program legitimacy.

For future research, studies are recommended that adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impacts of free, nutritious school meal programs on student health, learning achievement, and behavioral outcomes. Comparative studies across regions or school types would also provide valuable insights into the contextual factors that influence program effectiveness. Such research would contribute to a stronger evidence base for refining school feeding policies and ensuring their sustained contribution to educational quality and human development.

Conclusion

This study shows that the Free Nutritious School Meal Program has been successfully implemented through structured stages of preparation, delivery, supervision, and basic evaluation, enabling schools to provide students with regular, nutritionally balanced meals. The program has contributed to improved student well-being, learning readiness, and classroom engagement, particularly among students who previously experienced hunger or irregular eating patterns. Moreover, meal routines have served as an educational medium, promoting discipline, hygiene, healthy habits, and collective responsibility, thereby strengthening both character formation and school culture. Despite these positive outcomes, the program still faces challenges related to logistics, infrastructure, staffing, communication with food providers, and the lack of data-based evaluation systems. These limitations reduce operational efficiency and constrain the program's long-term impact. Therefore, schools are encouraged to strengthen internal management and monitoring systems; teachers should continue integrating nutrition and character education into daily learning; food providers should improve service reliability and menu consistency; and policymakers should provide better infrastructure, staffing support, and flexible funding mechanisms. With these improvements, the Free Nutritious School Meal Program can more effectively support both student health and educational quality in a sustainable manner.

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