



Improving Learning Performance Through Evaluation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program in Schools

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ABSTRACT

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Education in Indonesia faces significant challenges related to student nutritional needs, which impact concentration and motivation to learn. The Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City aims to improve student nutritional status and support learning. This study aims to evaluate the impact of the MBG Program on student learning quality, focusing on concentration, motivation, and engagement. The method used was a qualitative case study approach, involving observation, interviews, and documentation. The results showed that the MBG Program had a positive impact on student concentration and attendance, but faced challenges related to menu incompatibility with student preferences and issues with hygiene and food quality. Menu adjustments and hygiene monitoring are crucial to improve the program's effectiveness. This study contributes to understanding how nutrition programs can support learning. It emphasizes the importance of menu adjustments and regular evaluation in improving the success of similar programs in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a key pillar of national development, encompassing more than simply imparting knowledge (Chen et al., 2025). It involves character building, developing individual potential, and providing opportunities for everyone to optimize their quality of life. However, a major challenge faced by many countries, including Indonesia, is meeting students' basic needs, such as adequate nutrition. As part of education, adequate nutrition directly impacts students' cognitive abilities, concentration, and enthusiasm for learning (Ergashevna et al., 2024). Several studies have shown that inadequate nutritional intake can hinder students' intellectual development and lead to a decline in the overall quality of education (Shenia et al., 2025). Against this backdrop,

nutritional intervention programs in education, such as the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG), are crucial to maximize students' potential. This research is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of these programs, thus contributing to improving the quality of education in Indonesia.

Indonesian society, particularly in certain regions, faces the problem of inadequate nutrition, particularly among students. Data shows that approximately 41% of students experience hunger during the learning process, which disrupts their concentration (Shenia et al., 2025). The availability of nutritious food in schools is expected to address this issue, but no study has systematically evaluated its impact on the quality of student learning (Sliwa et al., 2023). Many programs aim to improve nutritional status, but their effectiveness and sustainability are often questioned. Considering these challenges, this study aims to evaluate the impact of the Free Nutritious Meal Program implemented at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City. This research is expected to provide clearer insights into the program's effectiveness in supporting the learning process at the school.

Field observations indicate a mixed response from the community to the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program in schools. At Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School, for example, the program has run well in previous years, but opinions differ regarding its effectiveness and impact. Some view the program as a positive step that can ease the economic burden on parents, especially low-income families, as they no longer need to worry about providing breakfast for their children. However, on the other hand, there have been several complaints about the menu served, which sometimes does not align with students' dietary habits, leading to some students experiencing side effects such as vomiting or loss of appetite. This phenomenon indicates that, despite the program's noble intentions, its implementation still needs to be evaluated to ensure greater effectiveness and targeted effectiveness.

Several previous studies have examined various nutrition interventions implemented in schools in Indonesia, including the Free Nutritional Meal Program. A study by Agustini & Mulyani (2025) showed that providing nutritious meals in schools can improve learning concentration and reduce health problems such as stunting. However, there is a lack of in-depth studies evaluating the direct impact of this program on the quality of student learning. Meanwhile, another study by Desi Pristiwanti et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of education that focuses not only on cognitive aspects but also includes meeting students' basic needs, including adequate nutrition. However, most previous studies only examined the program's impact from a health perspective and did not specifically evaluate how this program can improve the learning process in schools.

While some studies have suggested that nutrition interventions have a positive impact on children's health, a research gap remains in examining the direct relationship between providing nutritious meals and improving the quality of education in schools. Previous research has generally focused on students' physical health, but little has examined its impact on cognitive aspects and learning motivation (Shenia et al., 2025). This study aims to bridge this gap by evaluating the extent to which the Free Nutritional Meal Program contributes to students' learning, motivation, and concentration. This research will make an important contribution to understanding whether this program is truly effective in supporting educational quality and what needs to be improved to increase the success of similar programs in the future.

This research brings novelty by focusing on evaluating the Free Nutritious Meal Program, which involves educational aspects, not just students' physical health. By examining diverse phenomena in the field, this research is crucial in revealing how nutritious food can affect students' motivation, concentration, and engagement in the learning process. Considering that education is not only about imparting knowledge, but also about creating optimal conditions for students to learn, this program has the potential to be a solution to addressing nutrition issues while supporting the quality of education in Indonesia. This research is crucial in providing useful recommendations for policymakers in improving the implementation of similar programs in the future.

The research question is how the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School can affect students' learning processes. Does providing free nutritious food improve students' concentration and motivation to learn, and reduce nutritional problems that can impair their cognitive abilities? This study argues that by improving the quality of the food provided and adapting it to students' preferences, this program will not only improve students' nutritional status but also support their success in learning. This research will contribute to creating a more holistic education system that considers nutrition as a crucial factor in learning.

From an educational management perspective, program evaluation, such as the MBG, is crucial to ensure that program objectives are effectively achieved. As part of educational management, this evaluation encompasses multiple dimensions, including planning, implementation, monitoring, and program adjustments to better suit student needs (Nurul Azzahra et al., 2025). In this context, schools, teachers, and local governments need to collaborate in managing this program to ensure that it not only addresses nutritional issues but also supports the overall quality of learning. Through a structured evaluation,

the results of this study will provide insights into existing successes and shortcomings, as well as provide recommendations for future program improvement.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand in-depth the phenomena occurring during the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City. The case study approach allows researchers to analyze specific events in a natural context and gain more comprehensive insights into the program's implementation. According to Creswell (2014) in Ardiansyah et al. (2023), case studies provide an opportunity to explore phenomena in a real-world context and in greater depth through descriptive interpretation. Therefore, the case study approach was chosen because it aligned with the research objective of evaluating the program's implementation, focusing on local conditions at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School.

This research was conducted at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School, located in Jambi City, specifically on Jl. Enggano Perumnas, Handil Jaya Village, Jelutung District, Jambi City. This location was chosen based on the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) at the school. This school was chosen because it has become an exemplary example of a nutrition program focused on improving student well-being, and its success can provide insights for developing similar policies in other schools. Furthermore, this location allows for direct access to the implementation of programs relevant to the research topic.

In this study, data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted in a participatory manner, with the researcher directly involved in the observation process to obtain authentic data regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program at the school. Interviews were conducted with relevant parties such as teachers, the principal, parents, and the students themselves to gain a broader perspective on the program. According to Creswell (2014), interviews in qualitative research can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, depending on the need to gather more in-depth information. Furthermore, documentation was used to collect written data related to program implementation, such as reports, meal distribution schedules, and other supporting data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study indicate that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City has had a positive impact on the learning process, particularly in improving student concentration and attendance. However, the program still faces several challenges, including the inconsistency of the menu with the tastes of students, particularly those from the upper-middle class, who prefer "tasty" foods such as those containing fat or sugar. This results in only 35% to 45% of the food portions served being consumed. Students generally prefer menu items such as crispy chicken, fruit, and milk, while items such as eggs, catfish, and nuts are often unpopular and thrown away. In terms of cleanliness, there have been several complaints regarding food quality and hygiene, such as the discovery of fingerprints on food and bacteria on fruit. Nevertheless, parents support the program because it can help families' finances and guarantee nutrition for their children. Suggested improvements include improving the quality and variety of menus, stricter supervision of food hygiene and presentation, and adjusting the program's targeting to focus more on schools with real needs, such as public schools or those with low-income backgrounds.

Free Nutritious Meal Program

The Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) is a government initiative aimed at providing nutritious meals to students, particularly those from underprivileged families, to improve their nutritional status. At Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City, the MBG Program is implemented with attention to food quality and hygiene, as well as adherence to government-set nutritional standards. The menu includes protein sources such as meat, eggs, and fish, as well as vegetables and fruits for snacks. The program's primary goal is to reduce stunting rates, improve student concentration, and support academic achievement. However, despite widespread support for the program, challenges remain regarding menu items that do not meet student tastes, impacting its effectiveness.

Interviews with the school principal revealed full support for the implementation of the MBG Program. The principal emphasized that the program is significantly beneficial in supporting the learning process, as it has significantly improved student attendance and concentration. However, he also suggested that the quality and variety of the menu be improved to better suit student preferences, especially since some menu items are less popular, resulting in food waste. Interviews with teachers reinforced this view, stating that while

the program contributed to students' health and concentration, its effectiveness was hampered by a mismatch between the food preferences of students, particularly those from middle- to upper-middle-class families. Teachers noted that only 35% to 45% of the provided food portions were actually consumed, indicating a gap between the program's objectives and students' needs.

Direct field observations revealed that while the MBG Program met established nutritional standards, challenges persisted related to food hygiene and the menu's inconsistency with students' preferences. Some students complained about food hygiene, such as the presence of bacteria on fruit and fingerprints on food. Furthermore, although the menu met nutritional standards, its presentation was unappealing to students. Many students preferred more "tasty" or familiar foods, such as crispy chicken and fresh fruit, to less appealing items, such as boiled eggs and catfish. This suggests that the program's success hinges not only on meeting nutritional standards, but also on factors such as taste and food hygiene.



Figure 1: Process of Making Free Nutritious Meals

Based on Figure 1, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) can be seen through the menu serving procedure which involves several important stages, starting from menu preparation, selecting quality food ingredients, and ensuring cleanliness at every stage of production. The menu served must meet nutritional standards set by the government, in order to provide maximum benefits for students. In the context of the learning process, evaluation of this program is essential to ensure that the main objectives of the program, namely improving students' nutritional status and supporting learning concentration, are achieved effectively. Therefore, it is important to continuously assess the quality and sustainability of this program, so that it can have a greater positive impact on students, both in terms of health and academic achievement.

Table 1. MBG Menu

School	Meals	Snacks
SMP Ahmad Dahlan	Meat, Boiled Egg, Boiled Potato, Chicken Katsu, Catfish, Vegetable Soup.	ranges, Grapes, Nuts, Milk, Melon, Watermelon, and Kates

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City serves a menu that meets government-set nutritional standards. The school has responded positively to the program's sustainability, but some menu items did not meet students' tastes. In response, the school provided feedback to the program provider to improve menu variety and quality, specifically tailoring it to student preferences. This will make the program more effective in improving health and supporting student learning.

Learning Process

Learning is an interactive process between students and teachers, through which students acquire knowledge, skills, character, and attitudes that shape their personality and beliefs. In the context of this research, learning focuses not only on knowledge transfer but also involves other factors such as life skills, character development, and the important role of nutrition in supporting students' cognitive abilities. The Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City aims to improve the quality of learning by ensuring students receive adequate nutrition, which has the potential to improve their concentration and academic performance. Therefore, learning at this school is not only related to intellectual processes but also to physical factors that support students' thinking abilities.

Interviews with the principal revealed that the school fully supports the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG) as part of efforts to improve the quality of learning. The principal emphasized that this program helps improve students' health, which in turn positively impacts their concentration and engagement in learning. However, he also noted that there are challenges in matching the menu to students' tastes. Most students, especially those from middle- to upper-middle-class families, prefer "tastier" or more familiar foods, such as fatty and sweet foods. Therefore, even though the nutritional quality is adequate, menus that do not meet students' tastes impact the program's success.

Interviews with teachers revealed that while the program is considered beneficial for students' health, its effectiveness in improving student concentration and participation in learning is still limited. Teachers felt the program was very helpful for students from low-income families, but for students from more economically well-off families, the menus presented were less appealing. Students tended to prefer foods they considered tastier and more filling, such as fast food. Teachers also noted that the mismatch between the

menus provided and students' tastes resulted in many meals being left unfinished. Nevertheless, they recognized the importance of good nutrition to support students' immune systems and concentration.

Direct field observations showed that although the menus served in the MBG Program met government-set nutritional standards, challenges still arose related to student tastes and food hygiene. Researchers found that menu items such as boiled eggs, catfish, and nuts were less popular with students, while they were more attracted to items like crispy chicken and fresh fruit. Furthermore, several complaints related to food hygiene were also raised, such as fingerprints on food and the unsuitable quality of the fruit served. Researchers suggest that program providers pay more attention to food quality and hygiene and try to adapt the menu to students' tastes to make this program more effective.

Table 2. MBG Program

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Principal	"This program helps improve students' concentration, but some menu items are disliked by students and need improvement."	Program support, menu quality, impact on learning
Teachers	"The program's effectiveness is less than optimal because many students dislike the menu items served."	Menu mismatch with student tastes, program effectiveness, learning concentration
Students	"I prefer crispy chicken and fruit, but I don't like the eggs or catfish served."	Menu satisfaction, menu preferences, enthusiasm for food
Parents	"This program is very helpful for the family's finances, but I haven't seen a direct impact on children's concentration."	Program support, impact on learning concentration

This table shows that despite strong support for the MBG Program from all parties (principals, teachers, students, and parents), the effectiveness of this program is still influenced by factors such as menu suitability to student tastes and food hygiene. The principal suggested that the menu be served more varied and attractive, while teachers suggested that this program be more targeted, considering the menu's inconsistency with student preferences. Students prefer foods that are more familiar and tastier in their opinion, while parents provide support for this program from a financial perspective, although the impact on learning concentration has not been felt significantly. Therefore, to increase the success of the MBG Program, there is a need for evaluation of menu variety, improvement of hygiene, and adjustment of the program's targets to focus more on students who really need it.

Evaluation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) on Learning Support

Evaluation is a crucial process in education and related programs, including the Free Nutritional Meal Program (MBG), to ensure the program's success and sustainability. MBG evaluations aim to assess nutritional quality, food distribution, student enrollment, and its impact on academic achievement. Through regular evaluations, schools can refine menus, improve hygiene, and design additional interventions if needed. Furthermore, evaluations ensure budget transparency and accountability in program management, ensuring that the program's goals of improving nutrition and supporting the learning process are optimally achieved (Huljannah, 2021).

Interviews with the school principal revealed that regular evaluation of the MBG Program is essential to ensure its sustainability and relevance to students' needs. The principal revealed that the menus served must be continuously improved to meet students' nutritional needs and support their learning. As a school leader, he is particularly concerned about the quality of the food provided to students, as the program aims not only to improve nutritional status but also to increase student concentration and engagement in learning. Regular evaluation is a crucial step in maintaining the program's quality and ensuring its relevance and effectiveness.

In interviews with teachers, they revealed that although the MBG Program provides benefits to students' health, there are several aspects that need improvement, particularly regarding food quality and hygiene. Teachers hope that food providers can improve quality checks to ensure that the food served meets strict hygiene standards. Several issues identified, such as rotten fruit or unhygienic food, diminish the program's quality in the eyes of students. They also emphasized the importance of menu variety to prevent student boredom, which ultimately increases student interest and participation in consuming nutritious food.

Observations conducted on October 17, 2025, indicated that although the MBG Program at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School met nutritional standards, several challenges needed to be addressed. The menu served was indeed nutritious, but there were complaints from students and parents regarding the menu's inconsistency with student preferences. Some menu items, such as peanuts, eggs, and catfish, were unpopular with students, resulting in meals often being left unfinished. Furthermore, food hygiene issues, such as fingerprints on food and poor-quality fruit, were also identified. This suggests that while the program meets nutritional standards, food quality and hygiene need greater attention to improve its effectiveness.

From the interviews and observations, it can be concluded that although the MBG Program has provided positive benefits in improving students' nutritional status, several challenges need to be addressed to increase its effectiveness. The menu's inconsistency with students' tastes, particularly among students from middle- to upper-income families, has led to low consumption of the provided food. Furthermore, issues with food hygiene and quality have been identified, which have undermined students' confidence in the program. Therefore, evaluation and improvements are needed, such as increasing menu variety, improving food hygiene, and adjusting the program's targeting to better target students, particularly those in need. Further in-depth evaluation and rigorous quality control are essential to ensure the program's long-term success.

Discussion

Research on the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City demonstrated a positive impact on student concentration and attendance, but also highlighted challenges in matching the menu to student preferences and food hygiene issues. This aligns with existing literature on the implementation of nutritious meal programs in schools. As explained by Febrianti (2025), similar programs implemented in several schools also encountered challenges in the mismatch between the menu provided and student preferences, particularly among middle- to upper-class students who prefer foods high in fat and sugar. Therefore, although the nutritional quality of the menu met standards, taste factors remained a challenge affecting the program's success. As explained by Sunaryati et al. (2024), the importance of matching the menu provided to student preferences cannot be underestimated, as this can influence consumption and its impact on health and learning.

Nevertheless, the MBG program at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School demonstrated the full support of the principal and teachers, who recognized the importance of food quality in supporting learning. This aligns with the view expressed by Murni (2021), who stated that effective learning depends not only on teaching methods but also on other supporting factors, including good nutrition. In her interview, the principal suggested improving the quality and variety of menus to better suit students' preferences. This finding aligns with research by Hecht (2023), which emphasized the importance of menu adjustments to increase student participation in learning activities. The theoretical implications of these findings suggest that learning quality is influenced not only by intellectual aspects but also by physical factors such as providing nutritious and appealing nutrition to students.

Furthermore, the challenges in food hygiene and quality identified in this study reflect the need to address the quality of the food preparation process, which also influences students' perceptions of the program. Observations showing issues such as fingerprints on food and poor fruit quality align with existing literature on the importance of quality control in nutritious food programs (Huljannah, 2021). Therefore, regular program evaluation is crucial to ensure that the program is running according to its objectives and focuses not only on nutritional aspects but also on hygiene and the quality of food preparation. The practical implication of these findings is the need to improve the quality control system in food provision, which will contribute to student trust in the program and increase success in achieving nutrition and health goals.

Based on the findings, there is a gap between the program's goal of providing nutritious food and the reality that many students do not finish the food served, especially if it does not suit their tastes. This indicates that although the MBG program has succeeded in providing nutritious food, the inconsistency with student preferences can be a barrier to achieving the program's goals. In accordance with the findings of Elsa Kaniawati et al. (2023), the success of an education or health program depends largely on how well it is tailored to the needs and preferences of its beneficiaries. In this regard, adapting menus to be more varied and attractive, and more tailored to student tastes, needs to be a primary focus for the program to be well-received by students and support their learning success.

The practical implication of this research is the crucial role of evaluation in the sustainability and effectiveness of the program, as well as the need to adapt menus to be more attractive and high-quality. Schools need to involve students, teachers, and parents in the evaluation process to obtain more comprehensive feedback and apply it to program improvements. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the Free Nutritious Meal Program should not only focus on meeting nutritional standards, but also on other factors that support program acceptance and success, such as food hygiene and menu variety. Regular evaluation involving various stakeholders is crucial to ensure the program remains relevant and provides maximum benefits to students in supporting learning and improving their nutritional status.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at Ahmad Dahlan Junior High School in Jambi City had a positive impact on student motivation, concentration, and attendance, while also helping to alleviate the financial burden on parents. However, the program faced challenges, particularly related to menus that did not match student preferences and issues

with hygiene and food quality, which led to significant food waste. These findings indicate that the success of the MBG Program depends not only on meeting nutritional standards but also on adapting menus to student preferences and monitoring food hygiene. Therefore, regular program evaluation and improvement are crucial to maximize benefits. This study also emphasizes the need for further research into the relationship between nutritional quality and improved student cognitive abilities and the role of menu adjustments in reducing food waste.

Scientifically, this study contributes to the understanding of how nutritious meal programs can support the learning process by demonstrating the importance of tailoring menus to student preferences in increasing program acceptance. A limitation of this study lies in its limited scope at a single school in Jambi City, which may not reflect conditions in other schools. Therefore, further research is needed with a broader scope, including in areas with different socioeconomic conditions, and to explore the long-term impact of the MBG Program on students' academic achievement and cognitive development. Future research should also consider other factors that may influence the program's success, such as parental involvement and students' socioeconomic status.

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