

# Meeting Students' Basic Needs Through a Free Nutritious Meal Program at School



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The effectiveness of school-based nutrition intervention programs in improving students' readiness to learn continues to yield mixed results, particularly when implemented in educational settings with heterogeneous social characteristics.

**Objective:** This study aims to analyze the fulfillment of students' basic needs through the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) and its implications for learning readiness and the learning climate at MTs Hidayatullah, Temanggung Regency, Central Java.

**Method:** This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. Participants included eight students, four teachers who also served as homeroom teachers, the school principal, and the program coordinator, all selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations in 10 classes (grades VII–IX), in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model through continuous data reduction, data presentation, and drawing of conclusions.

**Results:** The results indicate that the MBG Program contributes to meeting students' physiological needs by providing meals during school hours and reducing distractions caused by hunger. However, its impact on learning concentration, attendance, learning behavior, and emotional well-being has not yet shown significant and consistent changes.

**Conclusion:** These findings suggest that meeting physiological needs is insufficient to enhance student engagement in learning without the support of psychosocial factors and a broader learning environment.

**Keywords:** Free Nutritious Meal Program, Fulfillment of Basic Needs, Learning Environment, Student Behavior, Education Policy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The issues of malnutrition and stunting remain serious challenges for Indonesia in its efforts to build high-quality human resources. According to the results of *the 2024 Indonesia Status Survey*, the national prevalence of stunting stands at 19.8%, meaning that millions of children under the age of five are experiencing physical growth and cognitive development delays due to chronic malnutrition (Health Development Policy Agency, 2025). Organizations such as UNICEF also emphasize that stunting is closely linked to impaired cognitive function, reduced learning ability, and lower future productivity potential (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2025). This situation underscores the importance of early nutritional intervention strategies and the sustained fulfillment of students' basic needs within the formal education system.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government under the leadership of President Prabowo Subianto has launched the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program in Schools, with the aim of helping to meet students' daily nutritional needs, particularly in areas vulnerable to malnutrition. This program is part of the strategic initiative to improve the quality of human resources (Kemenkeu, 2025). This program is designed as a policy strategy to strengthen schoolchildren's nutrition, thereby contributing to their readiness to learn, emotional stability, and conducive behavior patterns at school (kemendikdasmen 2025). However, the official policy documents available to date have not yet formulated specific and measurable operational objectives for the program, including clear achievement indicators for implementers at the school level.

Various international studies on school feeding programs have yielded mixed results. A global meta-analysis found that school nutrition interventions can improve children's attendance and engagement in learning activities in many low- and middle-income countries (Utami, Qawlam, and Putri 2024). Research in several local contexts also indicates that similar programs can influence student learning motivation and engagement in the medium term, although the impact on academic outcomes is not always consistent (Midiksa et al. 2024). In Indonesia itself, preliminary empirical studies on the implementation of this program show varying results and implementation barriers across different schools, indicating that the program's effectiveness is not yet uniform and that its potential contribution to student behavior and the learning climate requires further evaluation.

According to Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* theory, physiological needs are the most basic needs that must be met before individuals can reach higher levels of needs such as safety, social affiliation, and self-actualization, which correlate with meaningful learning processes (Anisyah Rahmadania 2023). In an educational context, meeting students' basic needs, including adequate intake of nutritious food, serves as a foundation that influences their learning motivation and engagement at school. Educational studies indicate that Maslow's theory can be used to understand student learning motivation, where the fulfillment of physiological needs serves as a prerequisite for achieving higher-level needs closely linked to engagement and academic achievement (Kurniawati and Sleman 2021). In Indonesia, early empirical studies on the implementation of this program have shown varying results and implementation challenges across different schools, indicating that the program's effectiveness is not yet uniform and that its potential contribution to student behavior and the learning climate requires further evaluation (Furkan et al. 2025).

This study aims to empirically examine the fulfillment of students' basic needs through the Free Nutritious Meals Program in schools and its relationship to behavior, emotions, and the learning climate. Furthermore, this study evaluates the extent to which the lack of clarity regarding the program's operational objectives

may affect the effectiveness of implementation at the school level and classroom dynamics. Using Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* framework and a public policy analysis perspective, this study not only assesses the intervention's impact on students', but also offers an academic critique of policy designs that have not explicitly formulated objectives and success indicators (Maslow and Green 1943).

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a *field research* design to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in schools meets students' basic needs, as well as its implications for behavior, emotional well-being, and the learning environment. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to capture social reality contextually, particularly when examining the implementation of public policy in the complex and dynamic educational environment (Elva and Murhayati 2025). Field studies provide researchers with the opportunity to directly observe program implementation practices and interactions that arise in daily learning processes, ensuring that research findings remain grounded in the social context where the policy is implemented (Ilhami et al. 2024).

This study was conducted at MTs Hidayatullah in Temanggung Regency, Central Java, as one of the junior high schools participating in and implementing the Free Nutritious Meals Program in accordance with applicable policies. This school was selected because its student body comprises students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, making it relevant for examining the relationship between the fulfillment of students' basic needs and their learning behavior, emotional well-being, and the learning climate within the school environment. The research site was selected through purposive sampling, taking into account the alignment of the school's institutional context with the study's focus and objectives, particularly in observing program implementation within a regular school setting.

Research informants were selected using *purposive sampling*, which involves the deliberate selection of participants based on their direct experience and involvement in the implementation of the MBG Program. The study included 15 informants, comprising 8 students enrolled in the MBG Program, 4 classroom teachers who also served as homeroom teachers, 1 school principal, and 2 program coordinators. The selection of informants was conducted in stages until the data reached *saturation*, that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded significant new information related to the research focus. The *purposive sampling* technique was chosen because it emphasizes the relevance of informants to the research focus within a qualitative context, ensuring that the collected data is rich and in-depth (Novalia 2024). This approach aligns with qualitative research practices in the field of education, which prioritize data depth over statistical representativeness (Fadli, 2021).

To clarify the characteristics of the study participants, the informants' profiles are presented in the following table.

**Table 1** Participant Characteristics

No	Informant Category	Number	Description
1	Students receiving MBG	8	Active students receiving the program
2	Classroom teachers	4	Teachers involved in supervision and instruction as well as homeroom teachers
3	Principal	1	Person in charge of school policy
4	MBG Implementation Coordinator at the School	2	Technical program implementation manager

This study also took research ethics into account because it involved school-aged participants. Before data collection began, the researcher first obtained official permission from the school and communicated the research objectives to all participants through approval from the ethics committee at MTs Hidayatullah (approval number 412), while parental/guardian consent was obtained for the students serving as research informants. The participants' identities were kept confidential by using codes or initials to protect the informants' privacy during the research process and the reporting of research results (Elva & Murhayati, 2025).

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques: observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. During the observations, the researcher recorded student behavior, classroom atmosphere, social interactions, and learning dynamics throughout the implementation of the MBG Program. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the perspectives of students, teachers, school principals, and program implementers regarding the benefits, behavioral changes, students' emotional states, and challenges in implementing the program. Meanwhile, the document review involved analyzing program guidelines, school activity reports, documentation of MBG implementation, and relevant policy documents.

Data triangulation is carried out operationally through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and temporal triangulation. Source triangulation is conducted by comparing information obtained from students, teachers, school principals, and program coordinators. Methodological triangulation is conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to ensure data consistency. Temporal triangulation is conducted by collecting data at different times to assess the stability of the information obtained. In addition to triangulation, this study also applied data credibility procedures through *member checking* and *peer debriefing*. *Member checking* was conducted by asking several informants to review the interview summaries to ensure they aligned with their intended experiences, while *peer debriefing* was conducted through discussions with fellow researchers or academic advisors to reduce the subjectivity of data interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis model developed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification. The analysis process was conducted simultaneously starting from the data collection stage, allowing researchers to continuously identify themes, patterns, and relationships between categories (Saadah et al., 2022).

The research analytical framework is based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as a conceptual foundation for understanding the fulfillment of students' physiological needs through the MBG Program (Maslow and Green 1943). However, this study also acknowledges the limitations of this theory, particularly the criticism regarding the hierarchical nature of needs, which is considered not always linear and universal across all sociocultural contexts. Therefore, Maslow's theory is used contextually as an interpretive tool, not as a single deterministic framework. Additionally, this study integrates a public policy analysis perspective using George C. Edwards III's policy implementation model, which emphasizes aspects of communication, resources, implementer dispositions, and bureaucratic structure in program implementation (Suprayitno et al., 2024). This framework is used to examine how the design and implementation of the MBG Program are carried out in the school environment, as well as the factors that influence the effectiveness of its implementation.

With this research approach and procedures, the methods employed are expected to yield valid, credible, and contextually relevant data to address the research focus

on meeting students' basic needs through the Free Nutritious Meals Program in schools. The systematic data collection and analysis process allowed the researcher to obtain a comprehensive empirical picture of the dynamics of program implementation and its implications for behavior, emotional well-being, and the school learning climate. Furthermore, the findings of this study are presented and discussed in the results and discussion section.

## RESULTS

Research findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program has brought about changes that, while not statistically significant, remain relevant within the educational context regarding several analyzed aspects: the fulfillment of students' basic needs, learning behavior, students' emotional well-being, and the school's learning environment. Observations and interviews with students and teachers indicate that although students receive nutritious meals on a regular basis, noticeable changes in learning behavior and classroom engagement have not yet been observed. These results are consistent with the findings of a *systematic review* stating that school-based Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) programs can consistently improve student attendance and certain health aspects, but evidence regarding improvements in academic achievement or specific behaviors may vary depending on the context and design of the program implementation.

## DISCUSSION

### **Meeting Students' Physiological Needs and Enhancing Their Readiness to Learn Through a Free Nutritious Meal Program**

Field findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has not yet had a significant impact on meeting students' basic needs or on their overall readiness to learn. Based on observations of 10 classes, comprising four 7th-grade classes, three 8th-grade classes, and three 9th-grade classes, the learning process generally proceeded in a conducive manner, and most students were still able to follow the lessons well. However, the researcher still observed some students who appeared drowsy, lacked focus, and occasionally asked to leave the classroom during lessons. These findings do not suggest that such conditions represent a dominant situation or have become part of the school's learning culture; rather, they indicate that even after the implementation of the MBG Program, some students have not yet experienced a tangible improvement in their readiness to learn. Interview results with teachers also showed that the program has not yet brought about significant changes in students' focus on learning or academic performance in the classroom. Thus, meeting nutritional needs through the MBG program has not yet directly resulted in an overall improvement in the quality of student learning.

Although it has not yet shown significant academic changes, this study found limited changes in the rhythm of students' activities during class. Teachers reported that before the MBG program was implemented, some students tended to lose focus and rush to the cafeteria as recess approached due to hunger felt during class. After the program began, this behavior decreased, resulting in a slightly more stable classroom atmosphere until recess. However, these changes were situational and did not yet indicate a substantive transformation in learning behavior. In this context, the MBG program appears to function more in reducing mild physiological distractions than in directly improving student learning motivation or academic achievement. This finding aligns with the research (Bundy et al., 2009), which explains that *school feeding programs* tend to have a more consistent impact on student

comfort and learning participation than on direct improvements in academic achievement.

Interviews with students also revealed that most students responded positively to the MBG Program because it helped reduce their spending on snacks and kept them full while at school. However, the program's impact on student motivation and engagement in learning remains relatively limited. Only three out of eight students stated that they became more enthusiastic about coming to school after the MBG program was implemented. However, observation results indicate that this enthusiasm is not directly reflected in classroom learning outcomes, such as improved focus, academic participation, or student performance. In other words, the emergence of enjoyment and enthusiasm for the program has not been directly correlated with an increase in the quality of students' academic engagement during the learning process. Additionally, some female students felt the meal portions were sufficiently filling, while the majority of male students assessed that the portions still did not meet their needs. School attendance data also indicates a decrease in the number of students absent following the program's implementation, but the percentage remains relatively small and does not exceed five percent. This suggests that meeting physiological needs through the MBG program has not yet become a dominant factor consistently influencing student attendance or learning behavior.

The fulfillment of physiological needs through the MBG Program can essentially be understood as one of the initial prerequisites for supporting students' learning motivation and engagement at school. However, research findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that meeting students' nutritional needs does not automatically lead to an increase in their readiness to learn or academic engagement. This finding suggests that the relationship between the fulfillment of physiological needs and learning motivation does not follow a linear path, as assumed by the hierarchical structure in Maslow's theory. In the context of junior high school students in the early adolescent phase, learning motivation and behavior are influenced not only by nutritional needs but also by psychological factors, emotional states, social environments, and the dynamics of adolescent development. Thus, while physiological needs are indeed a fundamental prerequisite, they are not the sole factor determining the quality of students' learning engagement.

This study examines the common assumption that school nutrition programs automatically improve students' physical condition and readiness to learn. The results indicate that nutritional interventions are indeed necessary, but they are not sufficient to produce significant changes, especially when the program's operational objectives are not clearly defined and its success indicators are not regularly assessed. Program implementation in schools remains more focused on food distribution than on evaluating the impact on students' learning conditions. Consequently, program success tends to be measured by the execution of food distribution, rather than by substantive changes in students' learning behaviors or academic development. This finding reinforces the results of the study (Spill et al., 2024), which indicates that the impact of school meal programs on students' non-academic aspects tends to be inconsistent if not accompanied by a comprehensive program design, ongoing evaluation, and integration with students' real needs within the school environment.

Unlike most previous studies on *school feeding programs*, which have generally focused on elementary school students and identified the fulfillment of physiological needs as a factor directly correlated with improved concentration and academic achievement, this study presents different findings in the context of the Madrasah Tsanawiyah at the Islamic Boarding School. At the elementary school level, meeting nutritional needs is often positioned as the primary factor influencing learning readiness because students of this age are still highly dependent on basic biological

conditions. However, in the context of MTs students in early adolescence, this study found that meeting physiological needs does not automatically translate into increased academic engagement in the classroom. Although some students reported feeling more enthusiastic about coming to school following the implementation of the MBG Program, observations indicated that this enthusiasm was not directly reflected in improved focus during learning, classroom participation, or academic performance. These findings suggest that during adolescence, students' learning behaviors are more influenced by psychosocial dynamics, personal motivation, peer group environments, and emotional states than by physiological factors alone.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies in the finding that the effectiveness of school feeding programs at the MTs level is more contextual and non-linear, contrary to what is often assumed in *school feeding* research at the elementary school level. This study demonstrates that the success of the MBG program cannot be measured solely by the fulfillment of students' nutritional needs, but must also consider adolescent developmental characteristics, the learning environment, and the program's connection to students' psychosocial conditions. Additionally, this study highlights a gap between the normative policy objectives and the reality of implementation at the school level. Conceptually, the MBG program is designed as a form of student welfare intervention to support a more optimal learning process. However, in practice, the program's implementation has not been fully integrated with strategies to improve the quality of student learning and is not supported by evaluation mechanisms that specifically measure the relationship between the MBG program and changes in students' learning focus, classroom participation, or academic readiness.

Based on these findings, this study confirms that the Free Nutritious Meal Program at MTs Hidayatullah has not yet shown significant results in directly improving students' readiness to learn or their academic performance. The program's impact is more evident in the reduction of mild physiological distractions and the creation of a relatively more stable learning environment during school hours. Therefore, the Free Nutritious Meal Program should be understood not as a standalone solution for improving student learning quality, but rather as part of a student welfare policy whose effectiveness heavily depends on the implementation design, program evaluation, and its connection to students' psychosocial conditions and the school learning environment.

### **The Socio-Emotional Dimensions of the Free Nutritious Meal Program and Their Relationship to Student Learning Behavior**

Empirical findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the socio-emotional dimension of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) has not yet brought about significant changes in students' social relationships, emotional well-being, or learning behaviors. Based on interviews with eight students, most expressed satisfaction with the program because it provides them with meals during school hours and helps reduce their spending on snacks. However, this positive response was not automatically followed by an increase in social closeness among students. One student stated that he felt "quite happy with the MBG program, but did not feel closer to his friends" (Student 3, interview, November 2025). Observations also showed that students tended to eat at their own desks rather than engaging in collective eating activities. Teachers also assessed students' emotional states during lessons as relatively "unremarkable" and noted no significant changes in their enthusiasm for learning.

On the other hand, the MBG program continues to provide practical benefits for students. Three out of eight students reported being able to save on their daily expenses and even set aside some money for savings since the program began.

However, the study also found mixed reactions to the program. Some students began to feel bored with certain menu variations, while three out of four male students felt that the food portions still did not meet their needs. In fact, one student joked that he “would be happier if the MBG program were simply replaced with cash” (Student 5, interview, November 2025). This statement indicates that students have different preferences and expectations regarding the form of assistance provided by schools and the government. This finding supports studies on *school meal acceptance*, which explain that the effectiveness of school meal programs is influenced by food quality, menu variety, and student preferences (FAO 2013).

In addition to affecting students’ social experiences, meeting nutritional needs through the MBG program has not consistently led to improvements in students’ readiness to learn, behavior, or emotional stability in the classroom. Some teachers observed that certain students appeared calmer and were less likely to complain of hunger after receiving food; however, this was not accompanied by significant changes in students’ concentration, participation in learning, or disciplinary behavior. Researchers still find significant variation among students in terms of focus and engagement in learning. This suggests that the relationship between meeting nutritional needs and learning behavior is complex and non-linear.

The fulfillment of physiological needs through the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) can essentially be understood as one of the foundational elements in supporting students’ psychological and social needs. However, findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the fulfillment of nutritional needs has not automatically led to significant changes in students’ behavior or emotional state. This situation indicates that the relationship between the fulfillment of basic needs and learning engagement does not proceed linearly, as assumed by the hierarchical structure in Maslow’s theory. Therefore, the fulfillment of basic needs in this study is understood as *a necessary condition* but not yet *a sufficient condition* for improving the quality of students’ learning engagement. This finding aligns with the study (Utami et al., 2024), which explains that the impact of school meal programs on learning readiness is greatly influenced by contextual factors and students’ emotional states.

Unlike studies on *school feeding programs* for elementary school students, which view school meal programs as tools for enhancing learning enthusiasm and social interaction, this study shows that the socio-emotional impact of the MBG Program on MTs students is more individual, pragmatic, and contextual. During early adolescence, students do not automatically build social closeness or emotional engagement through the school feeding program; rather, they perceive the program as practical support during school activities (Ramadhan et al., 2025). Although some students feel happier and more enthusiastic about coming to school, observations indicate that this does not directly translate into increased academic participation or improved classroom behavior. These findings suggest that the behavior and emotions of adolescent students are more influenced by psychosocial dynamics and individual experiences than by physiological factors alone.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies in the finding that the implementation of the MBG Program at the MTs level exhibits different socio-emotional dynamics compared to the dominant assumption, in *school feeding* research at the elementary school level. This study indicates that the success of school nutrition programs is determined not only by food provision but also by the learning environment, students’ psychosocial conditions, and the clarity of policy implementation at the school level. These findings suggest that the implementation of the MBG Program remains more focused on food distribution than on integrating the program to enhance student engagement in learning and their socio-emotional development.

## Challenges in Implementing the Free Nutritious Meals Program to Meet Students' Basic Needs

The implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program at MTs Hidayatullah indicates that meeting students' basic needs through nutritional interventions still faces various contextual challenges at the school level. Based on interviews with eight students, four teachers who also serve as homeroom teachers, and field observations, the MBG program has been administratively implemented in accordance with established procedures. However, the program's impact on students' learning behavior, emotional well-being, and engagement at school remains limited and varies among students. These findings suggest that the program's effectiveness is not uniform, as it is influenced by students' characteristics, eating habits, and individual responses to the program.

One of the challenges identified relates to students' acceptance of the food provided. According to the school's MBG coordinator, approximately 25% to 40% of students sometimes do not finish the food served, although this percentage never exceeds 50% of the total student body. This situation is generally influenced by students' preferences for certain types of side dishes. When the menu served aligns with the majority of students' tastes, the food tends to be completely consumed with no leftovers. Conversely, if the side dishes provided are less popular, some students choose not to finish their meals. This finding indicates that the success of meeting physiological needs through the school meal program depends not only on food availability but also on the alignment of the menu with students' habits and preferences. These findings align with studies on *school meal acceptance*, which explain that the effectiveness of school meal programs is influenced by menu quality, food variety, and the level of student acceptance of the food provided (Dedy et al., 2026).

In addition, school attendance data shows a decrease of approximately 5% in the number of absent students following the implementation of the MBG Program. However, interviews with teachers indicate that this change cannot yet be directly attributed to the program. Student absenteeism is still largely influenced by other factors, such as health conditions and family obligations. Thus, the MBG program cannot yet be positioned as the primary factor consistently driving increased student attendance at school. These findings demonstrate that the relationship between meeting nutritional needs and school participation is complex and influenced by broader social factors.

Regarding learning behavior, the teacher noted that even before the MBG program was implemented, students did not typically become overly rowdy just before recess. The observed changes were more closely related to the school cafeteria, which became quieter after the program began. Before the MBG program was implemented, some students would usually rush straight to the cafeteria as soon as the teacher ended class to avoid waiting in line to buy food. After the program began, this behavior started to decrease because students no longer relied on the cafeteria to get food during break time. However, the teacher emphasized that this change was not accompanied by a significant improvement in students' focus on learning, academic performance, or discipline in class. Students' learning conditions were generally assessed as remaining "average," just as they were before the program began. These findings suggest that the program's impact is more practical and situational in nature rather than resulting in substantive changes in learning behavior.

The fulfillment of physiological needs through the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) can essentially be understood as the initial foundation for supporting students' psychological and social needs. However, empirical findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the fulfillment of nutritional needs does not

automatically improve students' learning motivation, emotional stability, or academic engagement in the classroom. This situation demonstrates that the relationship between the fulfillment of basic needs and learning behavior does not proceed linearly, as assumed by the hierarchical structure in Maslow's theory. Therefore, the hierarchy of needs theory is used in this study contextually as an interpretive tool to understand students' experiences, rather than as a single deterministic framework. In this context, the fulfillment of physiological needs can be understood as *a necessary condition*, but it is not yet *a sufficient condition* for the formation of changes in students' learning behavior. Other factors, such as the family environment, adolescents' psychosocial conditions, patterns of social interaction, and the quality of learning, continue to have a more dominant influence on students' readiness and engagement in learning.

This study also shows that the implementation of the MBG program still faces limitations in terms of policy and program evaluation at the school level. Based on interviews with school principals, schools do not have specifically formulated program achievement indicators because the government, as the program organizer, has not provided detailed information regarding the operational objectives or success indicators of the MBG Program. This situation indicates that policy communication in program implementation has not been optimal. As a result, schools focus more on administrative aspects, such as food distribution, rather than evaluating the program's impact on students' learning behaviors and psychosocial conditions. These findings indicate a gap between the normative objectives of the policy and implementation practices at the school level.

The heterogeneous characteristics of students at MTs Hidayatullah also influenced the variation in responses to the program. In addition to coming from diverse social backgrounds, the school operates as a *boarding school*, meaning students come from various regions with different eating habits, upbringing, and social experiences. These conditions resulted in students' acceptance of the MBG program not being uniform. This finding supports research (Andreas et al. 2025; Fazri and Nabila 2025; Karomah et al. 2024) which explains that the effectiveness of school meal programs is greatly influenced by the school's social context and student characteristics.

Thus, this study confirms that the challenges in implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program lie not only in the technical aspects of food provision but also in the limitations of the policy design, the diversity of student characteristics, and the lack of clear indicators of program success at the school level. The MBG Program has the potential to support the fulfillment of students' basic needs, particularly in reducing students' dependence on school canteens and addressing their nutritional needs during school hours. However, the program's effectiveness in fostering changes in students' learning behaviors and emotional well-being remains limited and is significantly influenced by students' psychosocial conditions and the school learning environment.

### **The Impact of the Free Nutritious Meals Program on the Fulfillment of Basic Needs and the Design of Education Policy**

Research findings at MTs Hidayatullah indicate that the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) has contributed to meeting students' basic needs, particularly by providing food during school hours. However, this provision has not yet fully translated into significant changes in students' readiness to learn or their behavior. Based on observations and interviews, some students still do not finish the food provided due to preferences for certain side dishes, while others continue to exhibit fluctuating levels of focus and attendance. These conditions indicate that meeting

physiological needs through the school meal program has not automatically become a dominant factor in shaping student engagement in learning.

In the context of junior high school students in early adolescence, meeting nutritional needs cannot be understood in a linear manner as a single factor that directly enhances students' learning motivation or emotional stability. Research findings indicate that although some students feel more comfortable and are less distracted by hunger during lessons, this condition has not yet directly translated into improved academic participation or learning behavior in the classroom. Thus, the fulfillment of physiological needs through the MBG Program in this study is understood as a necessary *condition*, but not a *sufficient* condition, to produce comprehensive changes in students' learning behavior. Other factors, such as adolescents' psychosocial conditions, family environment, quality of learning, and social interactions, continue to have a more dominant influence on students' engagement in learning.

These findings are consistent with research on *school feeding programs*, which indicates that the impact of such programs on students' non-academic aspects tends to vary depending on the implementation context and student characteristics. A study conducted (Zenebe et al. 2018) shows that the influence of school feeding programs on student participation and learning comfort is significantly influenced by socioeconomic conditions as well as the students' educational environment. Meanwhile, (Spill et al. 2024) explains that the impact of school meal programs on student behavior and engagement tends to be inconsistent if program implementation is not accompanied by comprehensive policy design and continuous evaluation. The results of the study at MTs Hidayatullah reinforce these findings by showing that the impact of the MBG Program on the learning climate remains limited and contextual.

In contrast to studies on *school feeding programs* at the elementary school level, which show a more direct link between meeting nutritional needs and improved student motivation and academic performance (Barnabas, Bavorova, and Yakubu 2024), this study found that in the context of MTs, the program's impact is more pragmatic than transformational. Some students do feel happier coming to school because of the MBG program and are able to reduce their spending on snacks. However, observations show that these conditions have not yet tangibly influenced students' focus on learning, class participation, or academic performance. These findings suggest that in early adolescence, students' learning behaviors are more influenced by psychosocial dynamics and individual experiences than by physiological factors alone.

In addition to issues related to student conditions, this study also identified limitations in policy implementation at the school level. Based on interviews with school officials, the MBG Program is implemented in accordance with the administrative regulations established by the government; however, schools have not received detailed explanations regarding the program's operational objectives or success indicators in the context of student learning. This situation indicates that policy communication and program implementation mechanisms are not yet functioning optimally. Consequently, program implementation in schools is more focused on food distribution than on evaluating the program's impact on students' readiness to learn, behavior, and emotional well-being.

These findings reveal a gap between the normative objectives of the MBG Program and the reality of its implementation at the school level. Conceptually, the program was designed as part of efforts to improve student well-being and the quality of learning. However, in practice, the program's implementation has not been fully integrated with strategies to improve the learning environment or with systematic

evaluations of student progress. In the context of public policy implementation, the lack of clarity regarding success indicators and evaluation mechanisms has the potential to make it difficult to measure the program's effectiveness substantively (Ramadhan, Andriani, and Mariskha 2025) .

Thus, the findings of this study have important implications for the development of education and school nutrition policies. The Free Nutritious Meals Program should be viewed not merely as a nutrition intervention, but as part of a broader learning ecosystem. Meeting students' basic needs must be accompanied by clear policy objectives, a strengthened role for schools in program management, and integration with efforts to improve the learning environment . Without a clear and measurable policy framework, it will be difficult to fully realize the program's potential in supporting students' behavioral, emotional, and learning development.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) at MTs Hidayatullah in Temanggung Regency, Central Java, focusing on the fulfillment of students' basic needs and its implications for their readiness to learn, socio-emotional well-being, and the learning environment. MTs Hidayatullah is a junior high madrasah with a diverse student body, including a boarding school system that results in relatively heterogeneous social backgrounds and habits among students. The results indicate that the program contributes to meeting students' physiological needs through the provision of meals at school, although its implementation has not been fully consistent across all students. Regarding academic readiness and socio-emotional aspects, the impact of the MBG Program tends to be limited and uneven. Some students feel more comfortable and receive economic assistance, but this does not directly lead to significant improvements in academic concentration, classroom participation, or social interaction. Program implementation also remains focused on food distribution and has not been systematically integrated with the evaluation of the learning process at the school.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs cannot be understood in a linear and deterministic manner in the context of educational policy implementation. Meeting physiological needs through school meal programs has not automatically led to changes in students' motivation or learning behavior. Furthermore, this study also indicates that the effectiveness of the MBG Program's implementation is influenced by policy communication, program objective clarity, and evaluation mechanisms at the school level. In practice, program implementation remains more focused on food distribution than on systematically evaluating its impact on student learning development. Therefore, the MBG Program should be understood as part of a student well-being and learning ecosystem that requires integration with other supporting strategies within the school environment.

This study has several limitations that should be noted. The study was conducted at only one school location; therefore, the findings cannot yet be generalized to other schools with different social and cultural characteristics. Additionally, the limited number of student informants means that students' experiences and responses to the MBG Program do not fully represent the overall conditions of the student body. This study also relies on observational findings and subjective reports from informants, which may result in discrepancies between students' perceptions and actual conditions in the learning process. Therefore, future research is recommended to be conducted in a greater number of schools with diverse characteristics, using a broader sample of informants, and combining qualitative and quantitative approaches so that the impact of the MBG Program on students' learning readiness,

psychosocial conditions, and behavior can be analyzed more comprehensively and measurably.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author hereby declares that this research is free from conflicts of interest with any party

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