

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FREE SCHOOL LUNCH GOVERNANCE IN SELECTED COUNTRIES TO PREPARE A SUPERIOR GENERATION

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ABSTRACT

Free school lunch programs in several countries are generally intended to meet the balanced nutritional needs of beneficiaries while improving health and educational quality to prepare a superior generation. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with a thematic narrative approach and content analysis to identify and describe phenomena based on the research variables. The study concludes that the governance of free nutritious meal programs across countries shares several common features, while also differing according to each country's circumstances. A particularly important finding is that several developed countries have enacted statutory frameworks to ensure the continuity of these programs.

Keywords: free school lunch; governance; Free Nutritious Meals (MBG); superior generation

A. INTRODUCTION

Government intervention to ensure adequate nutrition is a public policy investment whose benefits may only become visible after five years or even several decades. Japan, for example, has operated its school lunch program, known as *kyushoku*, since 1889. The program has contributed to Japan's development as an advanced country with high-quality, competitive human resources who retain a strong national culture. Such a program is a long-term investment whose continuity must be guaranteed and should not be interrupted. Similar policies have also been implemented in the United States, Finland, Canada, Germany, France, Russia, Brazil, South Korea, and India.

Governance arrangements are dynamic and vary by country, but they generally aim to provide balanced and adequate nutrition so that children can grow and develop in good health, remain physically fit, and carry out daily activities, particularly learning. According to the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF, 2024), Finland provides free lunch to all students from preschool through upper secondary school, and the program has been guaranteed by law since 1948. In Japan, school lunch is integrated into the curriculum and culture-based character education. In France, school lunches consist of highly nutritious menus, often described as gourmet meals, with subsidies determined by parental income. In the United States, free school lunch programs serve low-income families through federal funding, although implementation varies among states, and the program is governed by legislation. In Germany, governance is more decentralized; many schools provide only light lunches, and free or subsidized meals are not evenly available across all federal states.

Indonesia implements the Free Nutritious Meals program, known as Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG), which began on 6 January 2025 under the administration of President Prabowo Subianto and is centrally managed by the National Nutrition Agency (Badan Gizi Nasional, BGN). Its implementation remains highly dynamic. Progress has been made, but serious issues still require resolution, including food poisoning incidents, corruption risks, governance weaknesses, and questions about sustainability because no specific statutory framework has yet been enacted.

Hadiningrat et al. (2025) argue that school-based Mini Nutrition Service and Fulfillment Units (Mini Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi, or Mini SPPGs) should be established to accelerate the coverage of nutrition provision and services for beneficiaries. Under this model, school administrators, village or urban ward governments, and other stakeholders would organize free nutritious meal services in coordination with the National Nutrition Agency.

The urgency of MBG is driven by continuing nutritional inadequacy, particularly among school-age children. Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA, 2024) indicate that nearly 70 percent of students do not eat breakfast before leaving for school because of financial constraints. Ministry of Health data also indicate that 56 percent of school-age children do not eat breakfast. At the beginning of 2025, Indonesia's stunting prevalence stood at 19.8 percent, based on the 2024 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) announced in May 2025, down from 21.5 percent in 2023. The government established a more ambitious reduction target of 18.8 percent in the 2025 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). Stunting and malnutrition in Indonesia are caused by chronic undernutrition from pregnancy through the first 1,000 days of life, compounded by inappropriate caregiving, poor sanitation, and recurrent infection. Contributing factors include inadequate intake of animal-source protein, limited maternal nutrition knowledge, poverty, and restricted access to clean water. These conditions demonstrate that Indonesia continues to face a triple burden of malnutrition: undernutrition, including stunting and wasting; overnutrition, including obesity; and micronutrient deficiencies.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Basic Concept of Free School Lunch Programs

Many countries have implemented free school lunch programs as social and educational policies intended to improve children's quality of life and support learning outcomes. Such programs generally focus not only on food provision, but also on governance dimensions such as budget certainty, mechanisms for involving private-sector and community partners, food quality and nutritional standards, procurement systems, and monitoring and evaluation. In the context of preparing a superior and competitive generation, the literature emphasizes that adequate nutrition can improve cognitive ability, learning concentration, school attendance, and long-term health. These effects ultimately contribute to productivity and the competitiveness of human resources through the health–education–productivity pathway. Good governance and sound management are therefore key determinants of sustainability and effectiveness, especially when implementation is expanded and involves many stakeholders.

2. Governance Models for School Food Programs

The governance of school food programs generally concerns how state responsibilities are divided between central and local levels and how coordination is established across the education, health, food and agriculture, finance, and procurement sectors. Frequently analyzed components include: (a) policy actors, including responsible ministries and agencies, local governments, and implementation partners; (b) the implementation chain, including needs planning, formulation of nutrition and menu standards, food procurement, distribution, and serving; (c) cross-sector coordination, including integration of nutrition and beneficiary-eligibility data, synchronization with school schedules, and support from school

health personnel where available; and (d) accountability, including periodic reporting, audits, and complaint mechanisms.

3. Financing Mechanisms and Budget Sustainability

Several financing patterns are used: (a) central-government funding or co-financing with local governments; (b) budget flexibility to accommodate food-price adjustments; and (c) mechanisms to protect the program from cost fluctuations when food prices rise. Policy sustainability is also influenced by public legitimacy, regulatory consistency, and the government's capacity to maintain service quality as program coverage expands. From a competitiveness perspective, sustainability means that the program remains consistent from year to year so that beneficiaries receive stable nutritional benefits.

4. Nutritional Standards, Menus, and Service Quality

The objective of preparing a superior generation requires adequate and balanced nutritional standards based on: (a) the use of dietary guidelines or nutrient targets; (b) seasonal menu variation; (c) oversight of nutritional content; and (d) training for food-service personnel. Service quality also includes food safety, hygienic serving practices, and food-waste management. Countries with documented standards and strong oversight mechanisms tend to achieve more consistent service quality.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Educational Impacts

Program effectiveness should be assessed through indicators such as attendance and absenteeism, participation and attendance completeness, learning performance or test scores where available, nutritional status such as wasting, stunting, or weight-based indicators, and medium- and long-term impacts. This assessment is important because program effects are shaped not only by the intervention itself, but also by supporting factors such as school infrastructure, implementation capacity, and the socioeconomic conditions of beneficiaries.

C. METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative design with a thematic narrative approach and content analysis. The analysis was organized according to the research themes and variables, namely the comparative governance of free school lunch programs in selected countries and their contribution to preparing a superior generation. In the comparative analysis, the authors identified and described both similarities and differences in the governance of free school lunch programs across countries.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis of free school lunch governance can be conducted across the following dimensions: (a) policy design, including objectives, standards, and regulation; (b) coordination and implementation across actors, including central–local roles and coordination mechanisms; (c) financing and expenditure procedures, including budget stability and price adjustments; (d) procurement and supply-chain management, including quality, safety, and continuity of supply; (e) monitoring and evaluation, including performance indicators, reporting, audits, and feedback; and (f) educational and health impacts that contribute to the readiness of a competitive generation.

Free school lunch in each country does not always mean a universal free meal for every student. Some countries implement subsidized or conditional, needs-based programs; some provide school feeding for vulnerable groups; and others combine free-meal elements with broader school nutrition schemes. The discussion below summarizes the school food governance arrangements most relevant to the concept of free school lunch.

1. Similarities in Free School Lunch Governance Across Countries

Based on the sources listed in the references, the main similarities in free school lunch governance can be summarized as follows:

- a. Balanced nutrition:** All countries establish nutritional standards to ensure adequate nutrient intake.
- b. Government involvement:** Central or local governments participate in funding, at least for students from low-income families.
- c. Health investment:** School lunch programs are treated as long-term investments in health and disease prevention, including the prevention of obesity.
- d. Educational investment:** School meals are often used as educational tools to introduce healthy foods and good eating habits.
- e. Penta-helix collaboration:** Programs involve collaboration among government, academia, industry, communities, and the media.

2. Differences in Free School Lunch Governance Across Countries

The main differences can be described as follows:

- a. Finland — universal and pioneering:** Finland provides free lunch to all students from preschool through upper secondary school regardless of parental income. The program has been guaranteed by law since 1948.
- b. Japan — kyushoku and character education:** The school lunch program, kyushoku, is closely integrated with the education curriculum and Shokuiku food education. Students help serve meals and clean the dining area, thereby developing responsibility and discipline. Parents usually pay for food ingredients, while schools cover facilities and personnel.
- c. France — gourmet meals and quality:** France is known for high-quality, multi-course menus and an emphasis on food culture. Meal costs are subsidized according to parental income.
- d. United States — targeted and needs-based:** The program focuses primarily on students from low-income families under the National School Lunch Act. It is federally funded, while implementation varies across states.
- e. Canada — fragmented:** Canada has historically been one of the OECD countries without a uniform national school lunch program; provision has often been local and dependent on school or non-governmental organization initiatives.
- f. Germany — decentralized:** Governance is decentralized. Many schools provide only light lunches, and free or subsidized programs are not evenly available across all federal states.
- g. Indonesia — centralized:** The Free Nutritious Meals program is managed by the National Nutrition Agency, which partners with foundations, business entities, micro, small, and medium enterprises, cooperatives, and other organizations to operate Nutrition Service and Fulfillment Units (SPPGs). Each unit serves approximately 1,000–3,000 people per day.

E. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

1. Conclusion

The comparison of free school lunch governance in selected countries shows both similarities and differences in policy design and implementation. Common features include an emphasis on balanced nutrition, government involvement, investment in health and education, and penta-helix collaboration. Differences include the categorization of beneficiaries, the size and structure of school lunch budgets, centralized versus decentralized management, statutory arrangements, the integration of character and cultural education into local curricula, and the involvement of local or state governments.

2. Recommendations

The study offers the following recommendations:

- a. For future researchers:** Examine the effects of clean and accountable governance on the effectiveness and achievement of free school lunch programs.

- b. For the Government of Indonesia:** Work with the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia to promptly prepare a National Nutrition Bill so that the MBG program can continue regardless of who serves as President.
- c. For the National Nutrition Agency:** Conduct continuous, rigorous monitoring and evaluation to support ongoing improvements, including the imposition of firm sanctions on individuals or organizations that violate program rules.

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