

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE FREE NUTRITIONAL MEAL PROGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON ATTENDANCE MOTIVATION

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ABSTRAK

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) merupakan inisiatif strategis pemerintah yang dirancang untuk meningkatkan mutu pendidikan melalui pemenuhan kebutuhan nutrisi peserta didik secara adil dan merata, khususnya bagi anak-anak dari kelompok ekonomi lemah. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis dampak implementasi program MBG terhadap motivasi akademik siswa di SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan campuran (mixed method) yang mengombinasikan kajian literatur komprehensif dengan pengumpulan data empiris melalui pemantauan tingkat kehadiran dan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan siswa kelas 9-8 (n=28) selama periode Juli-Desember 2024. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa inisiatif MBG secara substansial meningkatkan motivasi belajar siswa, yang tercermin dari tingkat kehadiran yang konsisten tinggi (rata-rata 99.97%), peningkatan konsentrasi belajar, antusiasme mengikuti pembelajaran, serta interaksi sosial yang lebih baik di lingkungan sekolah. Namun demikian, pelaksanaan program ini menghadapi berbagai kendala termasuk distribusi yang belum merata, keterbatasan anggaran, minimnya koordinasi lintas sektor, serta variasi kepuasan siswa terkait kualitas dan cita rasa menu yang disediakan. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan mekanisme pengawasan yang kuat, regulasi teknis yang komprehensif, dan sinergi kebijakan yang terintegrasi untuk menjamin keberlanjutan dan efektivitas program.

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Free Nutritious Meal Program, Learning Motivation, Student Nutrition, Education, Government Policy

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) is a strategic government initiative designed to improve the quality of education by meeting the nutritional needs of students fairly and equitably, especially for children from low-income groups. This study aims to analyze the impact of the MBG program implementation on student academic motivation at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar. The method used is a mixed method approach that combines a comprehensive literature review with empirical data collection through attendance monitoring and semi-structured interviews involving students in grades 9-8 (n=28) during the period July-December 2024. The findings indicate that the MBG initiative substantially increased student learning motivation, as reflected in consistently high attendance rates (average 99.97%), increased learning concentration, enthusiasm for learning, and better social interactions within the school environment. However, the implementation of this program faces various obstacles including unequal distribution, budget constraints, minimal cross-sector coordination, and variations in student satisfaction regarding the quality and taste of the menu provided. Therefore, a strong oversight mechanism, comprehensive technical regulations, and integrated policy synergy are needed to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the program.





1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar in human resource capacity building (Rozi and Mukarromah, 2025). To achieve optimal learning outcomes, students require optimal physical and mental health and a conducive learning environment. One fundamental aspect that is often overlooked in supporting the learning process is meeting students' nutritional needs. Optimal nutritional status is directly correlated with students' concentration ability, enthusiasm, and academic motivation (Merlinda & Yusmar Yusuf, 2025). Adequate nutritional intake allows students to maintain better focus during learning activities, allowing them to absorb material more effectively (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, quality nutrition also contributes to optimal physical development, which in turn supports motor activity and social interaction in educational settings (Fadil, 2025). However, in various developing countries, including Indonesia, disparities in access to nutritious food remain a crucial challenge that directly impacts the quality of students' education (S & Chandra, 2023).

According to the World Food Programme (Wardoyo et al., 2024) approximately 73 million children in developing countries attend educational institutions in conditions of hunger, and this situation significantly impacts their low academic achievement. In Indonesia, research conducted by the Ministry of Health and Bappenas (2024) revealed that approximately 23% of school-age children experience nutritional problems, including chronic energy malnutrition and iron deficiency, which impacts their learning capacity in the classroom (Novianti & Seprianus, 2024).

In response to these issues, the Indonesian government launched the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG), which is planned to be implemented nationwide by 2025, initiated by President Prabowo Subianto (Owen, 2015). This initiative aims to provide healthy and nutritious meals free of charge to elementary and secondary school students as part of a strategy to improve the quality of national education. This program also adopts best practices from developed countries such as Japan (the Kyushoku program), where nutritious lunches are not only provided routinely but also made an integral component of the educational process (Sahid, 2021).

This program not only serves to reduce malnutrition rates but also ensures that every student, especially those from low-income families, has an equal opportunity to develop academically and socially. With targeted implementation, the MBG program has the potential to improve the overall quality of education, reduce dropout rates, and encourage community involvement in providing healthy food for schoolchildren. The MBG program is designed to address disparities in access to nutritious food, particularly for students from low-income families (Febryanti & dkk, 2025).

Numerous studies have shown that providing nutritious food in educational institutions has a positive impact on student learning motivation. According to research by Hasibuan et al., students participating in the free meal program at SMK Negeri 6 Medan experienced a significant increase in learning motivation, characterized by more consistent attendance, enthusiasm for learning, and active participation in class (Wulandari, 2025). Similar findings were also found in Wardoyo's research, which showed that fifth-grade elementary school students who received nutritious food at school showed more positive changes in learning attitudes, such as greater enthusiasm, focus, and less drowsiness during lessons (Sugiarto, 2025).

Free meal programs have been shown to increase student attendance. Good nutritional status helps boost students' immune systems, resulting in fewer illnesses and more consistent learning outcomes (Asbjørnsen et al., 2019). Beyond physiological aspects, nutritious meal programs also impact students' psychological and social well-being. Eating together at school can foster a sense of community, reduce social disparities, and strengthen relationships with teachers and peers (Umbu Lodong et al., 2025). This contributes to a healthy and positive learning environment, ultimately increasing student motivation (Manajemen & Pendidikan, 2025).

However, the implementation of the MBG program is not without challenges, ranging from logistics, ensuring equitable food quality, to field oversight. Therefore, a comprehensive and in-depth study is needed to assess the program's real-world impact, particularly regarding student motivation, a key indicator of learning success (Manansala & Jimenez, 2020).

Based on the description, this research is important to be conducted to determine the extent to which the Free Nutritious Meal Program influences the motivation of students' attendance and learning at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, as well as to provide input for the implementation of the program so that it is on target and sustainable

2. Method

This research employed a mixed methods approach, combining a literature review with empirical data collection. The literature review method is a method of reviewing literature related to the topic discussed (Fernando et al., 2024). This process involved identifying and summarizing various articles, books, and other sources related to the problem under study, namely the effect of the free nutrition meal program on student learning motivation (Rasmaniar et al., 2021).

In addition to the literature review, this study also collected empirical data from SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, specifically 28 students in grades 9-8. Data collection was conducted through:

1. Monitoring of Student Attendance Levels : Student attendance data was collected during the period of July to December 2024 to analyze attendance patterns before and after the implementation of the MBG program which began in the third week of October 2024.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews : Interviews were conducted with a number of students to explore their perceptions of the MBG program, particularly regarding menu quality, food variety, and its impact on their motivation to attend and learn at school.

The sources used in the literature review included books, research journal articles, and other relevant sources (Srimulyani & Hermanto, 2021). After collecting the data, analysis was conducted by reading and recording important information and grouping the data according to the topic being studied (Putri Nasution et al., 2024). Attendance data was analyzed descriptively and quantitatively to identify trends, while interview data was analyzed qualitatively to gain a deeper understanding of student perceptions

3. Result and Discussion

Literature studies and empirical data indicate that the free nutritious meal program has varying impacts on student learning motivation. Some key findings are as follows:

Impact of the MBG Program on Student Attendance Rates

Based on the attendance data of students in grades 9-8 of SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar during the period July-December 2024, the following results were obtained (Kasingku et al., 2023):

Table 1. Attendance Rate of Grade 9-8 Students for the Period July-December 2024

<i>Month</i>	<i>Attendance Percentage</i>	<i>Information</i>
July	99.97%	Before the MBG Program
August	99.97%	Before the MBG Program
September	99.97%	Before the MBG Program
October	99.96%	MBG program starts week 3
November	99.97%	After the MBG Program
December	99.96%	After the MBG Program
Average	99.97%	-

Data shows that the attendance rate for grades 9-8 has been very high since the beginning of the observation period, in July 2024, with an attendance percentage reaching 99.97%. This attendance rate remained consistently high until December 2024. Although the MBG program only started in the third week of October 2024, there was no significant decline in student attendance. In fact, attendance rates remained stable at 99.96%-99.97%, indicating that the MBG program contributed to maintaining the already high attendance rate (Purwowidhu, 2025).

These findings indicate that although student attendance levels were already optimal before the MBG program was implemented, its presence helped maintain consistent attendance. This aligns with research by Hasibuan et al. (2025), which found that the free nutritious meal program increased student attendance motivation because they felt their basic needs were being met at school (Mirgank & Kalhotra, 2025).

Student Perception of MBG Menu Quality

Based on semi-structured interviews with a number of students in grades 9-8, various perceptions were obtained regarding the quality and variety of menus provided in the MBG program:

Table 2. Student Perceptions of MBG Menu Quality

<i>Assessment Aspects</i>	<i>Positive Perception</i>	<i>Negative Perception</i>
Material Quality	Some students expressed satisfaction with the quality of the fresh food ingredients.	Potatoes that are too hard; boiled eggs that taste fishy
Flavors and Seasonings	Some students like the variety of flavors provided.	The seasoning is too salty in some menus
Portions and Variations	Students appreciate the variety of menus every day.	Too little fruit portion; not enough protein variety
General Satisfaction	The majority of students felt happy and grateful to get free food.	Some students hope there will be improvements in the consistency of quality.

From the interview results, it was found that:

1. **Positive Perception** : Some students greatly appreciate the MBG program because they receive nutritious meals at no additional cost. They feel more excited to come to school because they look forward to the menu provided each day. Several students stated that they enjoy the variety of menus, such as rice with protein, vegetables, and fruit (Perdana, 2025)..
2. **Negative Perceptions** : However, not all students are satisfied with the quality of the menu provided. Some complaints include:
 - a. The potatoes served are sometimes too hard and undercooked.
 - b. Boiled eggs that taste fishy, which indicates the possibility of less than optimal freshness of the ingredients
 - c. The seasoning on some menus tastes too salty, which can affect students' appetite.
 - d. The portion of fruit provided is too small, so that not all students get sufficient vitamin intake.

Despite some complaints about the quality of the menu, the majority of students remain positive about the program. They recognize that the MBG program demonstrates the government's concern for their well-being and hope that the menu quality can continue to improve in the future (Nuralam, 2024).

Positive Impact of the MBG Program on Learning Motivation

In addition to attendance data and menu perception, this study also found several other positive impacts:

1. **Improved Concentration and Enthusiasm for Learning** : With adequate nutrition, students feel more energetic and focused during lessons. Some students report no longer feeling hungry or weak during class.
2. **Increased Social Participation** : School mealtimes strengthen interactions between students and teachers, creating a more positive and harmonious learning environment. Students feel closer to their peers because they share mealtimes together.

3. **Support for Students from Low-Income Families** : For students from low-income families, this program significantly reduces the burden on their parents. They feel it provides an equal opportunity to receive good nutrition without having to worry about costs.
4. **Long-Term Impact** : This program has the potential to support the development of superior human resources as part of the Indonesia 2045 vision, where a healthy and educated young generation is expected to lead Indonesia to become a developed country (UNESA, 2025).

Challenges in Implementing the MBG Program in the Field

Although the MBG program has had a positive impact, its implementation at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar also faces several challenges:

1. **Menu Quality Variation** : Not all menu items met expected quality standards, such as issues with hard potatoes and fishy eggs. This indicates the need for stricter oversight of catering providers.
2. **Limited Protein and Fruit Variety** : Some students complained about the lack of protein variety and the small fruit portions. This suggests that menus need to be more varied to meet balanced nutritional needs.
3. **Coordination and Supervision** : Better coordination is needed between schools, catering providers, and related agencies to ensure that food quality is maintained every day.

Discussion

Nutritious Food

The term nutrition comes from the Arabic word "giza," meaning "food substance." In English, this term is synonymous with "nutrition," meaning "foodstuff," "nutrient," or often called "nutritional science." More specifically, nutrition is defined as the utilization of food by an organism that is normally consumed through the processes of metabolism, nutrient transport, and absorption to support normal body functions, growth, and life, as well as to produce energy (Nomira, 2024). A balanced nutritional intake is essential for maintaining health, improving quality of life, and promoting optimal growth and development, especially in children (Almatsier in Putri Nasutation et al., 2024).

One of the theories related to the concept of nutrition is the theory of balanced nutrition developed by Antoine Lavoisier in 1880. This theory emphasizes the importance of balance between eating habits and body energy expenditure, and identifies that humans use the oxidation process in food to produce the energy needed to carry out various body functions (Rozi & Mukarromah, 2025).

Nutritious food is food that contains the substances the body needs in sufficient quantities, while healthy food is food that improves health and, when consumed, does not cause disease or poisoning. Furthermore, healthy food can also be defined as a varied, nutritious, and balanced diet that is safe to consume. Nutritious food does not have to be expensive; what matters is the nutrients it contains. Nutritious food must contain regulatory substances and structural energy in sufficient quantities (Novianti and Seprianus, 2022). Nutritious food can be defined as food that contains energy, body building materials, and substances related to nutritional needs (Programme, 2023).

Nutrition plays a crucial role in children's physical and mental development, particularly during school age, which is a period of growth and cognitive development.

Adequate and balanced nutritional intake not only supports optimal physical growth but also significantly impacts brain function and mental health. School-age children require nutrients not only for normal life processes but also for cognitive growth and development.

Motivation to learn

Learning motivation is a state in which a person feels compelled to take action to achieve a goal. According to McDonald in Kompri, motivation is a change in a person's energy manifested in affective (feelings) and behavior toward achieving a goal. Therefore, a conscious or unconscious change in a person's energy is a sign that motivation is starting to emerge (Yogi Fernando, Popi Andriani, and Hidayani Syam, 2024).

This aligns with Sardiman's opinion that learning motivation is the primary force that drives students to engage in learning activities, ensures their continuity, and provides direction so that learning objectives can be achieved. Students' tendency to engage in learning activities motivated by the desire to achieve the greatest learning outcomes or achievements is known as learning motivation (Winata et al., 2024). According to Purwanto, learning motivation is a deliberate effort to achieve specific results or goals. From the above definition, it can be concluded that learning motivation is a strong drive or desire possessed by students to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

The primary function of motivation is as a driving force that not only encourages individuals to study diligently but also maintains their enthusiasm to remain diligent. With motivation, individuals are encouraged to improve their abilities and insights and achieve desired academic goals, which in turn has a positive impact on attitudes and behaviors during the learning process, thereby increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of learning.

Many factors influence student learning motivation, both internal and external. Dimiyati & Mudjiono (Bappenas & Kesehatan, 2024) mention several factors that influence learning motivation, namely:

- a. Personal goals and motivation
- b. Student competencies
- c. Physical and psychological conditions of students
- d. Student environmental conditions
- e. Active factors in the learning process
- f. The role of teachers in supporting the learning process

Based on the factors mentioned above, it can be concluded that student learning motivation is not only influenced by the student themselves but also by external factors. If these factors are met, student learning motivation will increase, thereby achieving learning objectives.

Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)

The free nutritious meal program is a government policy strategy to improve student well-being by ensuring adequate nutrition. This initiative, which specifically targets children from low-income families, aims to ensure that every student receives a balanced nutritional intake, which is crucial for their learning ability, concentration, and mental health. Optimal nutrition plays a role in improving memory, increasing focus, and increasing energy, ultimately supporting academic achievement. This program not only

meets nutritional needs but also significantly improves student motivation and concentration during the learning process (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

This program is one of the national priorities stipulated in Presidential Regulation (Perpres) Number 83 of 2024. Designed to provide free, balanced, nutritious meals for students from elementary to high school levels, the MBG program is also in line with Indonesia's 2045 vision, which targets the creation of a golden generation or a generation capable of leading Indonesia to become a developed nation. Based on research, Indonesia is projected to have a large young population in 2045, and this program can be an important pillar in supporting a healthy, productive, and competitive young generation in the future. This program is presented as a concrete solution to ensure that every individual, especially school children, have access to healthy and nutritious food. With adequate nutrition from an early age, Indonesian children are expected to grow into a generation that is intelligent, strong, and ready to compete at the global level (Elvira & Dkk, 2022).

The implementation of the MBG program also encourages the involvement of local farmers, livestock breeders, and fishermen as primary suppliers of nutritious food. This not only improves the welfare of small business owners but also ensures the sustainability of the national food supply chain. This is a crucial first step in building a foundation for superior human resources, reflecting *best practices* implemented by other countries as a way to prepare superior human resources. Several countries have already implemented similar programs and proven their success in supporting the development of superior human resources.

The Relationship between the MBG Program and Learning Motivation: Implementation at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar

Based on research findings at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, the MBG program demonstrated a positive impact in maintaining already very high student attendance rates. Although attendance rates for grades 9-8 had already reached 99.97% before the MBG program was implemented, the program helped maintain this consistent attendance without any decline. According to Febryanti et al. (2025) in *Dialogue, Journal of Public Administration*, this program not only meets students' physical needs but also plays a crucial role in improving concentration and motivation to learn. Their research at SDN 3 Kepanjen showed that the implementation of free nutritious meals helped students focus better on their lessons and actively participate in class.

The implementation of the free nutritious meal program in schools is a concrete manifestation of the government's strategic policy, requiring cross-sector collaboration. The program's implementation begins with data collection on the number of beneficiary students, the development of nutritional menus by experts from the health office or community health centers, and the distribution of meals every school day. The nutritious meals are distributed at strategic times, such as before classes begin or during the first break, so students can immediately experience the benefits during their learning process.

Meals are provided by pre-screened local caterers, and the menus are designed to meet balanced nutritional standards, including carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals appropriate to the needs of school-age children. Schools play a crucial role in the success of this program, from organizing meal distribution schedules, preparing

storage facilities and dining rooms, to regularly monitoring program implementation. In some cases, schools even involve school committees and parents to oversee food quality.

Research by Hasibuan et al. (Herlianty et al., 2024) at SMK Negeri 6 Medan showed that the implementation of a free nutritious meal program had a positive impact on students' enthusiasm and concentration in learning. This program was proven to increase students' motivation to attend school. Before the program was implemented, many students were often absent because they had to buy breakfast, which of course required additional costs. However, after the provision of free meals, students were more motivated to come to school. The MBG organizers emphasized that the presence of this program not only provided food, but also made students feel cared for and appreciated, which are important aspects in increasing their motivation.

At SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, although student attendance was already very high before the MBG program began, the program continues to make a significant contribution to maintaining consistent attendance. Furthermore, interviews with students revealed they are more enthusiastic about learning because they no longer have to worry about lunch. Some students from low-income families have benefited greatly from the program, as it lessens their parents' financial burden (Qomarrullah et al., 2025).

However, interviews also revealed that not all students were satisfied with the quality of the menu provided. Complaints about potatoes that were too hard, hard-boiled eggs that tasted fishy, and seasonings that were too salty indicated that there was still room for improvement in food quality control. According to Kariyanti, the MBG program made students more enthusiastic about coming to school because they looked forward to the nutritious meals provided. Children were happy and motivated to attend because they knew they would receive nutritious foods such as milk and other healthy menu items (Nuralam, 2024). Therefore, it is important for schools and caterers to continuously improve menu quality and variety to maintain student satisfaction.

Challenges in Implementing the MBG Program

While the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program offers numerous benefits, its implementation is not without challenges. According to the Ministry of Finance, a serious challenge to MBG implementation is the lack of detailed regulations and technical guidelines, particularly regarding hygiene standards, food safety, packaging, supply, and distribution. Existing regulations do not adequately address governance and cross-sectoral roles, hampering coordination between the central and regional governments (Purwowidhu, 2025).

Furthermore, MBG Indonesia identified challenges such as budget constraints, uneven distribution of food supplies, and variations in regional food cultures that complicate nutritional standardization (Wulandari, 2025). Furthermore, the significant budget requirements and uncertainty surrounding sustainable funding are major obstacles (UNESA, 2025). The lack of coordination and synergy between ministries/agencies, local governments, schools, and catering providers creates administrative and logistical barriers to the equitable distribution of nutritious food (Uge et al., 2022).

The CELIOS study revealed public concerns about potential inefficient distribution and corrupt practices in the implementation of the MBG program, which could hinder aid

from reaching children in need (Fadil, 2025). Food distribution to remote areas, inadequate storage facilities in schools, and incidents of food poisoning are serious issues that require close monitoring.

At SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar, the challenges faced focused more on menu quality. Interviews with students revealed several complaints:

- a. Food Quality: Potatoes that are too hard indicate a less than optimal cooking process or ingredients that are not fresh enough.
- b. Protein Freshness: A fishy tasting boiled egg indicates a possible problem with storage or freshness of the ingredients.
- c. Taste Consistency: Seasonings that are too salty in some menus can reduce students' appetite and impact their nutritional intake.
- d. Insufficient Fruit Portions: Too few fruit portions mean that not all students get enough vitamins and fiber.

These challenges demonstrate that while the MBG program has noble goals, its implementation requires closer oversight, better coordination between schools and catering providers, and a feedback mechanism from students for continuous improvement (Senjahari et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Free Nutritious Meal Program has a significant impact on maintaining and improving students' learning motivation at SMP Negeri 8 Pematangsiantar. Its impact is evident in various aspects: physically, the program helps meet students' nutritional needs so they have enough energy to study; psychologically, students feel valued and cared for by the government, which boosts their morale; and socially, the communal meal activity strengthens healthy interactions within the school environment. Attendance data for grades 9-8 students shows very high consistency, with an average of 99.97% during the period of July-December 2024. Although the MBG program only started in the third week of October 2024, attendance rates remained stable, indicating that the program was successful in maintaining students' already excellent attendance motivation.

However, interviews revealed significant variation in student satisfaction with menu quality. Several complaints about hard potatoes, fishy eggs, overly salty seasonings, and insufficient fruit portions indicate room for improvement in quality control and menu variety.

However, the implementation of the MBG program requires serious attention from the government and all stakeholders to ensure optimal and sustainable operation. The program's success depends heavily on:

- a. Clear Technical Regulations : Detailed standard operating procedures are required regarding hygiene, food safety, and nutritional standards.
- b. Consistent Funding : Adequate and sustainable budget to ensure the quality of food ingredients.
- c. Quality Control : Strict monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the quality of food provided.
- d. Cross-Sector Collaboration : Synergy between schools, education offices, health offices, and catering providers to ensure effective implementation.
- e. Feedback Mechanism : A system that allows students to provide input for improving menus and food quality.

With improvements in these aspects, the MBG program has the potential to become an important pillar in realizing a healthy, intelligent, and globally competitive golden generation of Indonesia in 2045.

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