



ABSTRACT

The School Feeding Program (SFP) is a vital initiative aimed at improving the overall well-being of students by providing nutritious meals in schools. This program has significant implications for pupils' retention and attendance, especially in developing regions like Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Adopting a descriptive survey design, the research aimed to explore the extent to which the SFP influences school enrolment, attendance,

SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAM AND ITS IMPLICATION ON PUPILS' RETENTION AND ATTENDANCE IN AKWANGA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF NASARAWA STATE, NIGERIA

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Introduction

The School Feeding Programme (SFP) is a strategic intervention designed to provide free meals to children in schools, particularly at the lower basic education level, to address issues of malnutrition, low enrollment, and poor retention rates. Originating in the United Kingdom and the United States during the 1930s, SFPs initially aimed to enhance the physical and cognitive growth of children (Locke et al, 2024).

Over time, the scope of these programs has evolved, aligning with global initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and regional strategies such as the Comprehensive



academic achievement, and the challenges faced in its implementation. A sample of 148 pupils from 15 schools through simple random sampling was selected for the study. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire, and the reliability was tested using the Cronbach method. The study found a positive correlation between the school feeding programme and increased school enrolment, improved pupil attendance, and enhanced academic performance. Pupils were more punctual, had better attendance, and showed improvements in both curricular and extracurricular activities. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, poor cooking facilities, insufficient classrooms, and negative parental attitudes were identified as hindrances to the programme's effective implementation. The study recommends the provision of adequate funding, the involvement of qualified personnel in planning and evaluation, and the establishment of a monitoring system to ensure the programme's success. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the effectiveness of school feeding programmes in promoting educational outcomes in Nigeria and highlights the need for further policy improvements to address the challenges identified.

Keywords: School Feeding Programme, pupil retention, attendance, academic performance, education policy, challenges.

African Agriculture Development Programme and the Millennium Hunger Task Force. These initiatives linked school feeding to broader objectives, including agricultural development through the use of locally sourced food (Oyetayo et al, 2024). The concept of school feeding programs involves providing food to children through schools to improve their nutritional status and foster educational outcomes. (Agu et al., 2023). School feeding programs are implemented in two main forms: in-school meals and take-home rations. School meals have historically been more popular, including options like full meals or high-energy biscuits designed to increase school enrollment, retention, and reduce disparities related to gender and socioeconomic factors.

The programs serve as a social safety net, particularly for children from impoverished backgrounds, while supporting national development goals by encouraging education (Barnabas et al, 2024). In Nigeria, poverty and food insecurity remain significant barriers to education, especially in rural areas where families often lack the resources to send their children to school. The high rate of poverty, exacerbated by limited access to basic needs, compels many children to engage in income-generating activities or household chores



instead of attending school. Addressing this issue requires interventions that target both children and their households, as hunger and poverty impact the ability of families to prioritize education.

In Nigeria, the Federal Government launched the Home-Grown School Feeding and Health Programme in 2005 under the Federal Ministry of Education. This initiative aimed to provide daily nutritious meals to school children, enhance their health, and boost school attendance and retention rates. The program emphasized sourcing food locally, thereby benefiting farmers and addressing malnutrition among children. Although the funding responsibilities were shared between the Federal, State, and Local Governments, the local and state authorities bore the larger financial burden (Okah et al, 2023). The program's objectives extend beyond improving nutrition to addressing disparities in school enrollment and retention. Malnutrition among Nigerian children has been a persistent issue, with data indicating high rates of stunting, underweight, and deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals. School feeding programs aim to mitigate these issues, improving children's overall health and creating incentives for parents to send their children to school, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Ibrahim et al, 2023).

The program has seen successful implementation in several states, including Nasarawa, where it began in 2016. The initiative in Nasarawa serves thousands of primary school pupils daily, focusing on children in grades one through three. By providing consistent, nutritious meals, the program has demonstrated its potential to enhance school participation and cognitive development (Dennis et al, 2021). These programs have also shown reductions in parasitic infections, improvements in hemoglobin levels, and better vitamin intake among participants. However, the implementation of the program faced numerous challenges. Ten out of the twelve pilot states, along with the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), withdrew from the initiative due to disputes over fund disbursement between the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and the participating states. Consequently, the program was sustained only in Osun and Kano States (Abay et al, 2021). The program focuses on primary school pupils from grades one to three, with cooks recruited from local communities and trained to deliver quality meals. This approach not only provides children with nutritious food but also supports local economies and fosters community engagement.

The objectives of Nigeria's National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme include improving the health and nutritional status of schoolchildren, increasing enrollment and retention rates, and enhancing learning outcomes. These objectives align with the broader goals of Universal Basic Education. Evidence from similar programs worldwide underscores the critical role of nutrition in cognitive and intellectual development, particularly during early childhood (Oyuru, 2023). Malnutrition during periods of rapid



brain growth can have irreversible effects on intellectual capacity, responsiveness to stimuli, and overall learning potential. By providing adequate nutrition, SFPs help mitigate these risks, creating an environment conducive to better academic performance and long-term developmental outcomes.

Despite the potential benefits, the impact of the SFP on primary school enrollment, retention, and academic performance in specific areas, such as the Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, remains under-researched. This study seeks to evaluate the program's effectiveness in this region, exploring its role in improving access to education and addressing disparities in educational outcomes. Access to education is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and initiatives like the SFP play a crucial role in actualizing this right. However, understanding the nuanced effects of such programs requires localized research to inform future policy and implementation strategies (Agbade et al, 2023). The significance of school feeding extends beyond its immediate nutritional benefits. These outcomes contribute to the broader socio-economic development of communities, making SFPs a vital component of educational reform and poverty alleviation. While challenges related to funding, implementation, and sustainability persist, the potential of SFPs to transform the lives of children and their families underscores the need for continuous investment and innovation in this area.

Statement of the Problem

Primary education is a right of every child of school age from 4 to 11 years. Pupils are taught at this level to acquire the literacy that will prepare them for the next level of education. For any educational system to be efficient, there should be a smooth transition of pupils from one level to another, or 100% retention, completion, and a good educational performance rate. Enrolment and completion rates is low in developing countries and thus contribute to high illiteracy levels. The major problem that plagues most school children in primary school especially in low-income areas is poverty. The Free School Feeding Programme was implemented by the government to address malnutrition and increase enrolment rates in primary schools. However, despite the implementation of this programme, enrolment rates have remained low in the Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. There are concerns about the effectiveness of the programme in achieving its goals and whether it has been able to address the challenges of low enrolment rates, retention, and academic performance in the primary education sector. However, the impact of this programme on primary school enrolment remains unclear. Therefore, this study seeks to determine the influence of the free school feeding



programme on primary school pupils' enrolment, retention, and academic performance in Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.

The specific objectives of this study are to;

1. Determine the effect of the School Feeding Programme on the rate of pupils' enrolment in Akwanga L.G.A, Nasarawa State.
2. Determine the effects of the School Feeding Programme on the attendance of pupils in Akwanga L.G.A, Nasarawa State.
3. Determine the effect of the School Feeding Programme on academic performance
4. To examine the challenges of the School Feeding Programme in Akwanga L.G.A, Nasarawa State.
5. Examine the effective strategies needed for effective implementation of the school feeding programme in Akwanga L.G.A, Nasarawa state.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the School Feeding Programme affected School Enrolment in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?
2. What is the extent to which the School Feeding Program has affected pupils' attendance rate in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?
3. To what extent has the school feeding programme affected pupils' academic performance in Akwanga, L.G.A., Nasarawa State
4. What are the challenges of the School Feeding Programme in Nasarawa State?
5. What are the strategies needed for effective implementation of the school feeding programme in Akwanga L.G.A., Nasarawa State?

Materials and Methods

The study employed a descriptive survey design to assess the impact of the School Feeding Programme on pupils' school enrolment, retention, and academic performance in Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. The descriptive survey method was selected as it allows for effective data collection, summarization, presentation, and interpretation to provide clarity on the subject under investigation.

The population for this study comprised all pupils in selected primary grades one to three in public schools within Akwanga L.G.A., Nasarawa State. From the total number of public primary schools in the area, 15 schools were randomly selected using a simple random sampling technique. In total, 148 pupils were selected to participate in the study, all from the schools operating under the School Feeding Programme.



To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the data collection instrument, a questionnaire was developed by the researcher and validated by an expert in the Department of Home Economics. Following expert feedback, the final version of the instrument was used for data collection. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. A random sample of 20 respondents, who were not part of the main study population, completed the questionnaires. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using the Cronbach method, which provided an estimate of 0.88 internal consistency. The data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using frequency counts, mean scores, and standard deviation. A cut-off point of 2.50 was used to categorize responses, with a mean score above 2.50 considered as agreement and below 2.50 considered as disagreement.

Results

The findings of the study are presented in tables below according to the research questions, which guided the study.

Research question 1: To what extent has the School Feeding Programme affected School Enrolment in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?

Table 1: Pupils' Responses on the Effect of School Feeding on Enrolment (n=148)

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
1	There is an increase in enrolment due to the provision of school meals	80	30	18	20	148	3.14	Accepted
2	School feeding encourages punctuality	90	30	20	8	148	3.36	Accepted
3	The school feeding programme helps to stabilize attendance in schools under study	80	30	20	18	148	3.67	accepted
4	The school feeding program has reduced the dropout rate of pupils	60	50	18	30	148	3.08	accepted

Source: Researchers' field survey, 2025

Table 1 showed that the pupils strongly agreed that free meals have brought more children into school, encouraged punctuality, and reduced dropout rates. The average responses (means between 3.08 and 3.67) all fell above the benchmark of 2.50, confirming that the School Feeding Programme plays a direct role in keeping children enrolled and in school.

Research Question 2: What is the extent to which the School Feeding Program has affected pupils' attendance rate in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?



Table 2: Pupils' Responses on the Effect of School Feeding on Attendance (n=148)

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
5	SPF has increased the attendance rate of the pupils	70	30	20	28	148	2.93	Accepted
6	Absenteeism of pupils from school has drastically reduced since the introduction of SPF	50	50	28	20	148	2.87	Accepted

Source: Researchers' field survey, 2025

Table 2 showed the earning of 2.89 to 2.73. Every item was agreed/ accepted as they had their mean above 2.50.

Research Question 3: To what extent has the school feeding programme affected pupils' academic performance in Akwanga L.G.A., Nasarawa state?

Table 3: Pupils' Responses on Academic Performance (n=148)

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
7	There is an improvement in pupils' performance in both curricular and extracurricular activities	90	30	20	8	148	3.36	Accepted
8	School feeding programs have helped to counteract the effects of poor nutrition found in students' homes.	80	30	20	18	148	3.67	accepted
9	The school feeding programme has helped to improve pupils' developmental (physical and intellectual growth) process	50	50	30	15	148	2.89	Accepted
10	SPF has increased the pupils' ability to concentrate	60	40	30	18	148	2.95	Accepted
11	Pupils' performance in the class test has improved	90	20	30	8	148	3.29	Accepted
12	Pupils' performance in the end-of-term and session exams has improved	80	30	20	18	148	3.29	Accepted
13	Pupils' performance in class tests/exams has nothing to do with SPF	39	20	70	28	148	2.35	REJECTED

Source: Researchers' field survey, 2025



Table 3 showed that the majority of the pupils acknowledged that the meals helped them focus better in class, grow stronger, and perform better in tests and exams. Interestingly, one item (that meals had “nothing to do with exam results”) was rejected, meaning the majority of pupils saw a clear connection between food and performance.

Research Question 4: What are the challenges of the School Feeding Programme in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?

Table 4: Pupils’ Observations of Challenges (n=148)

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	Decision
14	The school feeding fund is not delivered on time	125	23	-	-	148	3.84	Accepted
15	Poor cooking facilities affect the school feeding programme in my school	100	10	18	20	184	3.28	Accepted
16	Insufficient classrooms and furniture to cope with increased enrollment	100	38	10	-	148	3.5	Accepted
17	The instability of prices in the market affects the implementation of school feeding in my school	50	20	8	40	148	2.94	Accepted
18	In my school, parents have negative attitudes towards the school feeding programme	50	10	48	43	148	2.49	Rejected
19	Heavy workload for teachers	60	50	30	8	148	3.09	Accepted
20	There is no central place for the pupils to take their meals	90	30	20	8	148	3.36	Accepted
21	Pupils have no access to a good source of water after meals	70	20	30	10	148	2.82	Accepted
22	The quantity of food served is small	80	30	20	18	148	3.16	Accepted
23	Absence of a legal framework and policy to support the SPF	80	30	20	18	148	3.29	Accepted
24	Inability to effectively monitor the food preparation to ascertain the quality of food and the environment	50	50	30	15	148	2.89	Accepted

Source: Researchers’ field survey, 2025

Table 4 showed that the pupils reported that while they benefit from the meals, several issues undermine the program. These include delays in funding, overcrowded classrooms,



small food portions, and lack of clean water or eating spaces. On a positive note, pupils did not see their parents as unsupportive of the programme.

Research Question 5: What are the strategies needed for effective implementation of school feeding programme in Akwanga LGA, Nasarawa State?

Table 5: Pupils' Suggestions for Strengthening SFP (n=148)

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	N	$\frac{\Sigma X}{N}$	Decision
25	Rapid capacity building	90	30	15	13	148	3.33	Accepted
26	Adequate funding should be provided to the programme	60	50	28	10	148	30.0	Accepted
27	Qualified home economists, nutritionists, dietitians, and caterers should be involved in planning and evaluation of SPF	70	60	10	8	148	3.29	Accepted
28	SPF should be well guided by a menu that reflects a balanced and nutritious meal for Growth and repair of damaged tissue	60	10	48	43	148	2.76	Accepted
29	A committee/supervising team should be set up to ensure optimum Coordination of food supply, storage, and distribution across schools, especially in remote areas	60	50	30	8	148	3.09	Accepted

Source: Researchers' field survey, 2025

Table 5 showed that pupils emphasized that the programme should be properly funded, monitored, and guided by professionals who understand children's nutritional needs. They also suggested that balanced menus and proper supervision would help improve the quality of the meals provided.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Akwanga LGA has had a positive influence on pupils' enrolment, attendance, and academic performance. Pupils overwhelmingly reported that free meals encouraged punctuality, reduced absenteeism, improved concentration, and even raised performance in tests and exams. These results align with a wide body of evidence across Nigeria and beyond, yet they also highlight persistent systemic weaknesses.



The study found that meals attract more children to school and stabilize attendance. This is consistent with findings from Adelaja (2019), who reported that enrolment increased significantly in schools under the Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSFP) in South-West Nigeria. Similarly, Ojo (2021) argued that parents in low-income communities are more likely to enroll their children when meals are assured, as it reduces household feeding costs. The current study echoes these insights, with pupils in Akwanga confirming that the daily meals serve as a direct motivation for attending school.

However, some scholars have cautioned that the initial surge in enrolment linked to feeding programmes may not be sustained if funding becomes irregular. For instance, Abay et al. (2021), studying Ghana's school feeding scheme, observed that inconsistent meal provision led to fluctuations in attendance. This study found similar risks: pupils highlighted challenges such as delayed funding and small food portions, which could undermine long-term attendance gains if not addressed.

Pupils in Akwanga connected better nutrition with improved learning outcomes, particularly concentration and test performance. This aligns with Oyetayo et al. (2024), who reported that well-fed pupils in Ekiti State demonstrated superior performance in mathematics and reading comprehension. Likewise, Adelman et al. (2008) in their cross-country analysis found that meals improved both cognitive function and educational attainment among children in sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet, the relationship between feeding and academic performance is not universally straightforward. In Ethiopia, Abebe (2022) found that while feeding programmes improved attendance, there was little measurable difference in examination outcomes compared to non-beneficiaries. This contradiction suggests that while nutrition is necessary for learning, it may not be sufficient on its own—other inputs like teacher quality, classroom resources, and home learning environments also play crucial roles. The current study reflects this complexity: although pupils perceived an improvement, systemic issues like overcrowded classrooms and inadequate infrastructure may dilute the programme's full academic impact.

The challenges identified in this study—including funding delays, lack of cooking facilities, and poor monitoring—mirror those noted by Adebayo and Akinbile (2020), who found that administrative bottlenecks often cripple the HGSFP in Nigeria. Similarly, in Kenya, Mwangi (2021) highlighted that local corruption and weak monitoring mechanisms led to food shortages and poor-quality meals. The pupils' testimonies in this study therefore reinforce what past research has consistently shown: the success of feeding programmes depends as much on effective governance as it does on nutritional planning.

Interestingly, pupils in Akwanga did not perceive parents as barriers to the programme, a finding that contrasts with Adeola (2018), who noted parental indifference in some



communities. This difference could be explained by contextual variations—parents in Akwanga may view the programme as essential given current economic hardships, whereas in other contexts, cultural or attitudinal factors may play a larger role.

The strategies suggested by pupils—such as involving nutritionists, ensuring balanced menus, and establishing monitoring committees—are strikingly similar to recommendations from prior studies. For instance, Oyeyemi (2022) emphasized the role of nutritionists in tailoring meals to local dietary needs, while UNICEF (2020) stressed community participation and school-level monitoring as key to sustainability. The convergence of these findings suggests that the voices of pupils are not only valid but aligned with expert consensus, underlining the need for policy actors to listen directly to beneficiaries.

Taken together, the findings of this study affirm the central role of school feeding programmes in advancing education, but they also caution against simplistic assumptions. Yes, meals attract children to school and help them focus, but without addressing structural problems—funding, infrastructure, governance—the long-term impact may be undermined. This study adds to the literature by foregrounding pupils' own voices, a perspective often underrepresented in school feeding research, which tends to rely more on teacher or administrator reports. By centering children's experiences, the study highlights the immediacy of their needs and the practical wisdom they bring to shaping effective interventions.

This study makes a unique contribution by foregrounding the *voices of pupils themselves* in evaluating the School Feeding Programme in Akwanga, Nasarawa State. While most prior studies have relied heavily on the perspectives of teachers, administrators, or policymakers, this research directly captured children's lived experiences of school feeding. By treating pupils as active stakeholders, the study not only provides fresh insights into how the programme affects enrolment, attendance, and performance, but also documents children's own suggestions for improvement. This bottom-up approach enriches the literature and highlights the value of engaging beneficiaries in programme design and evaluation.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that should be acknowledged:

1. *Scope of Study:* The research was limited to 15 schools in Akwanga LGA, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across Nasarawa State or Nigeria as a whole.
2. *Self-Reported Data:* The study relied on pupils' self-reported perceptions, which may be subject to bias or exaggeration. Triangulation with teachers, parents, and objective attendance/academic records would strengthen the findings.



3. *Cross-Sectional Design*: Since data were collected at a single point in time, causal inferences between school feeding and academic outcomes cannot be firmly established. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into long-term effects.
4. *Limited Academic Performance Metrics*: Academic performance was assessed through pupils' perceptions rather than standardized test scores. Future research should combine subjective reports with objective performance data for greater reliability.

Conclusion

The study concludes that SFP promotes pupils' Academic Performance in selected public primary schools in Akwanga LGA of Nasarawa State. Moreover, the study also concluded that SFP has an impact on pupils' enrolment in selected public primary schools in Akwanga LGA. In addition, SFP has impacted pupils' Academic Performance and Retention in selected public primary schools in Akwanga LGA of Nasarawa State. In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the School Feeding Programme (SFP) in Akwanga Local Government Area of Nasarawa State has had a significant positive impact on pupils' retention and attendance rates. The findings revealed that the provision of school meals has contributed to increased enrolment, improved punctuality, and stabilized attendance, aligning with the broader objective of ensuring that more children stay in school and regularly attend classes. Additionally, the SFP has shown a positive effect on pupils' academic performance by addressing the nutritional deficiencies that hinder learning and development, particularly in rural areas. However, the study also highlighted several challenges hindering the program's effectiveness, such as delayed funding, inadequate cooking facilities, and insufficient monitoring systems. These issues, if not addressed, could undermine the long-term success of the SFP. To ensure its sustainability and effectiveness, the study suggests strategies such as capacity building, adequate funding, and the involvement of qualified professionals in meal planning and evaluation. Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the importance of strengthening and expanding the School Feeding Programme to enhance pupils' learning outcomes and retention in schools, while addressing the logistical and structural challenges to ensure its success in Akwanga Local Government Area.

Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:



- i. That the government should endeavor to sustain the SFP, to encourage pupils to concentrate on their studies, and to enhance pupils' Academic Performance in selected public primary schools in Akwanga LGA of Nasarawa State.
- ii. To encourage school enrolment, the state government should continue with the School Feeding Programme across the 21 Local Government Areas in the State.
- iii. That the government should extend the School Feeding Programme to cover up to Primary Six, to encourage the pupils.
- iv. Government should increase the funding, improve infrastructure to address and transform retention and attendance outcomes in the long run.

The findings of this study carry important implications for education and social policy in Nigeria:

- i. Strengthening Human Capital Investment: By improving attendance and learning outcomes, the School Feeding Programme should be recognized not just as a welfare scheme but as a strategic investment in Nigeria's future workforce.
- ii. Integration with Local Agriculture: Linking the feeding programme with local farmers can boost food security and rural economies, creating a win-win situation where schools and communities benefit simultaneously.
- iii. Institutionalizing Monitoring and Evaluation: Since pupils highlighted issues like small food portions and poor facilities, the government should establish independent monitoring committees at school and community levels to ensure accountability.
- iv. Sustainable Funding Mechanisms: The federal and state governments need to move beyond ad-hoc funding and embed the programme into statutory budgets. Predictable financing will reduce food shortages and restore pupils' confidence in the system.
- v. Child-Centered Policy Design: Policymakers should treat pupils not only as beneficiaries but as informants. Their feedback should be institutionalized into programme reviews, ensuring that policies remain responsive to the needs of children.

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