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The role of school principals in implementing the free nutritious meal program: a case study from indonesian elementary education

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ABSTRACT

School nutrition programs are increasingly recognized as strategies for improving children's health and learning readiness. In Indonesia, the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) was introduced to address nutritional deficiencies among elementary school students. However, research on school leadership in managing such programs remains limited. This study examines the role of school principals in implementing the MBG program and its perceived contribution to student health and learning readiness. A qualitative descriptive case study was conducted at State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving the principal, six teachers, one Nutrition Program Implementation Unit (SPPG) officer, and several students. Thematic analysis using the Miles and Huberman interactive model revealed four major themes. First, collaborative leadership practices were reflected in the principal's coordination of implementation teams, distribution schedules, stakeholder communication, and engagement with teachers, parents, and SPPG officers. Second, supervisory practices included monitoring food quality, student discipline, cleanliness, and implementation procedures to ensure program quality. Third, several implementation challenges were identified, including limited storage facilities, food distribution delays, repetitive menus, communication barriers, and limited monitoring systems. Fourth, according to teacher and student reports, the MBG program positively influenced attendance, concentration, discipline, motivation, perceived health, and learning readiness. This study contributes to the limited literature on school leadership in nutrition program implementation and highlights the importance of collaborative leadership, adequate infrastructure, and continuous monitoring in sustaining program effectiveness.

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Introduction

School nutrition has become a global concern because children's nutritional status significantly affects physical growth, cognitive development, learning concentration, and academic achievement. Students with inadequate nutrition are more likely to experience health problems, low learning motivation, absenteeism, and declining academic performance. For this reason, many countries have implemented school feeding programs as part of broader educational and public health policies aimed at improving children's well-being and educational readiness. In Indonesia, the government introduced the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi

Gratis/MBG) to address nutritional challenges among school-aged children and to support the development of healthy and productive students (Wang & Young, 2021).

The successful implementation of school nutrition programs requires not only adequate resources but also effective school leadership. School principals play a strategic role in organizing, coordinating, supervising, and evaluating school-based programs. Collaborative school leadership emphasizes stakeholder engagement, communication, coordination, and shared responsibility in achieving organizational goals (Gashe, 2026; Mawela et al., 2020). In the context of the MBG program, principals are expected to coordinate teachers, nutrition officers, parents, and related institutions while ensuring that the program is implemented effectively and sustainably. Because school nutrition programs involve multiple stakeholders, collaborative leadership is essential for facilitating communication, strengthening cooperation, and supporting effective program implementation.

Previous studies have shown that school feeding programs positively influence student attendance, learning concentration, health conditions, and social behavior (Barnabas & Bavorova, 2024; Bliznashka et al., 2025). Other studies have emphasized that collaborative school leadership, characterized by stakeholder engagement, communication, coordination, and supervision, contributes significantly to the successful implementation of school programs and educational quality (Machado et al., 2022). However, previous studies have primarily focused on the nutritional outcomes and policy implementation of school feeding programs, while limited attention has been given to the role of collaborative school leadership in supporting program effectiveness. Existing research has demonstrated the benefits of school nutrition programs for students' health and educational outcomes, yet little is known about how school principals coordinate stakeholders, supervise implementation processes, and address operational challenges during program execution, particularly in Indonesian elementary schools. Furthermore, empirical evidence examining the relationship between collaborative school leadership, program implementation, and students' health and learning readiness remains limited. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how principals contribute to the successful implementation of school-based nutrition programs through coordination, supervision, and stakeholder engagement (Machado et al., 2022).

At State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu, the MBG program was implemented as part of efforts to improve students' nutritional intake and learning readiness. Preliminary observations indicated that before the implementation of the program, several students experienced nutritional problems and irregular attendance. After the program was introduced, teachers observed improvements in student participation, classroom concentration, and discipline during learning activities. Nevertheless, the implementation process also encountered several challenges, including delays in food distribution, limited facilities, communication barriers, and limited menu variations (Mazenda et al., 2025).

Based on these conditions, this study aims to examine the role of school principals in managing the MBG program and to analyze its contribution to improving children's health and learning readiness at State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu. The study focuses on the principal's role as coordinator and supervisor in implementing the program, the challenges encountered during implementation, and the program's impact on students' health and learning readiness. The research questions addressed in this study are: (1) How does the school principal manage the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG)? (2) What are the principal's roles as coordinator and supervisor in implementing the program? (3) What challenges are encountered during program implementation? and (4) How does the MBG program contribute to improving students' health and learning readiness?

This study contributes to the literature on school leadership and school nutrition programs by examining how collaborative school leadership supports the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) in an Indonesian elementary school. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on nutritional outcomes or policy implementation, this study highlights the principal's role in coordinating stakeholders, supervising program implementation, addressing operational challenges, and supporting students' health and learning readiness. The findings provide practical insights for school leaders, policymakers, and educational institutions regarding effective leadership strategies for managing school-based nutrition programs and promoting student well-being.

This study is based on the concept of collaborative school leadership in managing school nutrition programs (Sliwka et al., 2026). The conceptual framework explains that the principal's leadership role as coordinator and supervisor influences the effectiveness of the MBG program, which subsequently contributes to students' health and learning readiness. The principal performs coordinating functions through communication, stakeholder collaboration, team organization, and program planning. Supervisory functions are carried out through monitoring, evaluation, quality control, and discipline management during program implementation. Effective

collaborative leadership supports successful program implementation despite existing challenges such as limited facilities, communication barriers, menu variations, and food distribution delays. Previous studies have shown that leadership practices characterized by coordination, supervision, and stakeholder engagement are important factors in the successful implementation of school nutrition programs (Machado et al., 2022). Therefore, successful implementation of the MBG program is expected to improve students' nutritional conditions, attendance, concentration, discipline, motivation, and overall learning readiness. The study assumes that the principal's roles in coordination and supervision influence the effectiveness of the MBG program, which in turn contributes to students' health and learning readiness. The relationship among these elements is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design to examine the role of school principals in managing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. The study was conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year, particularly during the implementation period of the MBG program. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interactions related to the implementation of the MBG program within its natural setting (Robinson et al., 2024; Sturm et al., 2021).

The participants of this study consisted of one school principal, six teachers, one officer from the Nutrition Program Implementation Unit (SPPG), and twelve students from grades 4 and 5. Students were selected based on their regular participation in the MBG program and their willingness to participate in the study with parental consent. Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on their roles, experiences, and level of involvement in the program.

Researcher Positionality was considered to enhance the transparency of the qualitative research process. The first author is a graduate student in the Master's Program in Educational Management at Universitas Bengkulu and had no prior professional relationship with the participating school. The research team was not involved in the design, implementation, or evaluation of the MBG program at the study site. This position helped reduce potential bias and encouraged participants to provide responses more openly during interviews and observations.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation analysis. Interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information regarding planning, coordination, supervision, implementation challenges, and the perceived impact of the program (Dalglish & Mcmahon, 2020). Observations focused on food distribution activities, supervision practices, student participation, and school routines during meal implementation. Documentation analysis included school reports, distribution schedules, meeting notes, photographs, and evaluation records related to the MBG program.

The research instruments consisted of interview guidelines, observation sheets, field notes, and documentation checklists developed based on the research objectives and conceptual framework of the study. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with participants' consent to ensure data accuracy and completeness. Data analysis employed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was conducted through a systematic coding process. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation records were reviewed repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. During the initial coding stage, meaningful statements were identified and assigned preliminary codes such as stakeholder communication, food distribution monitoring, student discipline, distribution delays, menu repetition, and improved learning concentration.

Second, axial coding was conducted by grouping related codes into broader categories. For example, stakeholder communication and team organization were grouped under principal coordination, while food quality monitoring and discipline supervision were categorized as principal supervision. Similarly, distribution delays, limited facilities, and menu repetition were grouped as implementation challenges, whereas improved attendance, concentration, motivation, and health were categorized as program outcomes. Finally, themes were developed by identifying patterns and relationships among categories.

The major themes generated from the analysis were: (1) collaborative leadership through coordination and stakeholder engagement, (2) supervisory practices in ensuring program quality, (3) challenges in implementing the MBG program, and (4) contributions of the MBG program to students' health and learning readiness. This coding process facilitated the reduction, organization, and interpretation of qualitative data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation (Berthelsen, 2024; Dehcheshmeh et al., 2022). To enhance the transparency of the analysis process, Table 1 presents examples of how participants' statements were coded, categorized, and developed into themes.

Table 1. Example of the Coding Process

Sample Statement	Initial Code	Category (Axial Code)	Theme
"Regular coordination meetings were conducted..."	coordination meetings	principal coordination	collaborative leadership through coordination and stakeholder engagement
"The principal regularly monitored food quality..."	food quality monitoring	principal supervision	Supervisory practices in ensuring program quality
"Food distribution was sometimes delayed..."	distribution delays	implementation challenges	Challenges in program implementation
"Students became more focused during lessons..."	improved concentration	program outcomes	Contributions to students' health and learning readiness

The reduced data were then organized and presented descriptively to facilitate interpretation and identify emerging themes. Conclusions were drawn based on recurring patterns, relationships, and interpretations derived from the data analysis process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was also conducted by confirming selected findings with participants to improve the credibility and consistency of the interpretations. This study focuses specifically on the implementation of the MBG program in one public elementary school; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to schools with different social, economic, or geographical contexts.

Results and Discussions

Result

Collaborative Leadership Through Coordination and Stakeholder Engagement

The findings of this study revealed that the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu was strongly influenced by the leadership role of the school principal. The principal acts as both coordinator and supervisor throughout the implementation process. In the coordination process, the principal organized implementation teams, arranged food distribution schedules,

communicated with teachers and Nutrition Program Implementation Unit (SPPG) officers, and coordinated with parents and related institutions (Dehcheshmeh et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2022). Teachers reported that regular coordination meetings facilitated smoother implementation of the MBG program by improving communication and task distribution among stakeholders. As explained by the principal (P1), "Regular coordination meetings were conducted to ensure that food distribution, student supervision, and communication among stakeholders could run effectively." This finding indicates that coordination functioned not only as an administrative activity but also as a mechanism for strengthening stakeholder engagement and supporting collaborative leadership practices during program implementation (Ndoungue et al., 2024; Villar, 2024).

Supervisory Practices in Ensuring Program Quality

The study also found that supervision activities were conducted directly by the principal during the implementation of the program. The principal monitored food quality, student discipline, cleanliness, and distribution procedures during meal activities. Observation results showed that teachers and students demonstrated more orderly behavior during meal distribution when supervision was carried out consistently. Monitoring activities were supported by simple evaluation records and reports prepared by teachers and school staff. One teacher stated, "The principal regularly monitored the implementation process and reminded teachers to maintain discipline and cleanliness during meal activities." This supervision encouraged teachers and students to follow program procedures more consistently (Shiferaw & Wedi, 2025).

Challenges in Implementing the MBG Program

Several implementation challenges were identified during the study. These included delays in food distribution caused by transportation and weather conditions, limited facilities for food storage, monotonous menus, communication barriers among stakeholders, and limited monitoring systems (Skevas et al., 2025; Stuhlman et al., 2022). Some teachers also reported difficulties balancing teaching responsibilities with supervision duties during meal activities.

In addition, several students expressed dissatisfaction with repetitive menus and expected more diverse food options. Teachers emphasized the importance of continuous supervision in maintaining implementation quality and student discipline. One teacher (T3) explained that "The principal regularly monitored the implementation process and reminded teachers to maintain discipline and cleanliness during meal activities." This finding suggests that supervision played an important role in ensuring compliance with program procedures and maintaining consistent implementation standards.

Although most participants perceived the MBG program positively, several participants reported experiences that differed from the dominant view. Some teachers expressed concerns regarding the additional supervision responsibilities during meal activities, while several students reported dissatisfaction with repetitive menus. These findings suggest that the implementation of the MBG program was not uniformly experienced by all participants and highlight areas that require further improvement to enhance program effectiveness and participant satisfaction.

Although the program was generally implemented successfully, participants identified several operational challenges. One teacher (T4) explained that "Sometimes food distribution was delayed because transportation conditions were not always supportive." Similarly, a student participant (S2) reported that "Students occasionally complained about repetitive menus and expected more variety in the meals provided." These findings indicate that logistical constraints and menu limitations remained important challenges affecting participant satisfaction and implementation effectiveness.

Contributions of the MBG Program to Students' Health and Learning Readiness

Despite these challenges, the MBG program showed positive impacts on students' health and learning readiness. Teachers observed improvements in student attendance, learning concentration, discipline, and classroom participation after the implementation of the program. Students also appeared more active and enthusiastic during learning activities. School records indicated a decrease in absenteeism and improved student participation during classroom instruction.

One teacher (T2) stated that "Students became more enthusiastic and focused during classroom learning after participating in the MBG program." Several students also reported feeling healthier and more motivated to attend school regularly. These findings suggest that the MBG program contributed not only to students' nutritional well-being but also to their engagement and participation in learning activities. Table 2 presents a summary of the major findings related to the implementation of the MBG program.

Table 2. Summary of Findings on the Implementation of the MBG Program

Theme	Supporting Participants	Key Findings
Collaborative Leadership Through Coordination and Stakeholder Engagement	Principal, Teachers, SPPG Officer	Coordination meetings, stakeholder communication, team organization, and collaboration facilitated program implementation.
Supervisory Practices in Ensuring Program Quality	Principal, Teachers	Regular monitoring of food quality, student discipline, cleanliness, and implementation procedures supported program effectiveness.
Challenges in Implementing the MBG Program	Teachers, Students, SPPG Officer	Delays in food distribution, limited facilities, repetitive menus, communication barriers, and monitoring limitations affected implementation.
Contributions of the MBG Program to Students' Health and Learning Readiness	Teachers, Students	Improvements were observed in attendance, concentration, motivation, discipline, classroom participation, and perceived health conditions.



Figure 2. Overview of the Findings on MBG Program Implementation

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

This study found that the successful implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at State Elementary School No. 22 Central Bengkulu was strongly influenced by the leadership role of the school principal. The principal acts as both coordinator and supervisor by organizing implementation teams, coordinating with teachers and Nutrition Program Implementation Unit (SPPG) officers, managing food distribution, and monitoring program implementation. The findings also showed that the MBG program positively contributed to students' health, attendance, learning concentration, discipline, motivation, and social interaction. However, several implementation challenges were identified, including limited facilities, delays in food distribution, communication barriers, monotonous menus, and limited monitoring systems (Carducci et al., 2024; Sando et al., 2025).

Comparison with Prior Literature

The findings support previous studies emphasizing that collaborative leadership contributes significantly to school effectiveness and organizational quality. The principal's ability to coordinate stakeholders and maintain implementation quality reflects collaborative leadership characteristics, particularly communication, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Similar studies have shown that effective school leadership strengthens institutional commitment and improves school program implementation. The prominence of coordination and stakeholder engagement may be explained by the collaborative nature of the MBG program. Unlike routine

instructional activities, the implementation of school nutrition programs requires continuous interaction among principals, teachers, SPPG officers, parents, and students. Consequently, effective program implementation depends on the principal's ability to facilitate communication, coordinate responsibilities, and build stakeholder commitment. This finding suggests that collaborative leadership functions as an important mechanism for managing complex school-based programs involving multiple actors and responsibilities.

The positive impacts of the MBG program on students' attendance, concentration, and motivation are also consistent with previous research indicating that school feeding programs improve student well-being and academic engagement (Ababa et al., 2021; Luis & Marinho, 2026). Adequate nutritional intake supports students' physical and cognitive development, which influences learning readiness and classroom participation (Bhatti & Arabia, 2026; Economos et al., 2025). However, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on nutritional outcomes, this study highlights the importance of school leadership practices in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of school nutrition programs in Indonesian elementary schools. The positive outcomes reported in this study may be attributed to the provision of regular nutritious meals that support students' physical well-being and learning readiness. Improved nutritional intake appears to enhance students' concentration, participation, and motivation during classroom activities. These findings indicate that school nutrition programs may contribute not only to health improvement but also to creating more favorable conditions for learning and academic engagement.

Contribution to School Leadership Theory

This study contributes to the literature on collaborative school leadership by demonstrating that coordination, stakeholder engagement, supervision, and monitoring are essential leadership practices in the implementation of school-based nutrition programs. The findings suggest that collaborative leadership extends beyond instructional activities and plays an important role in managing non-instructional programs that require cooperation among multiple stakeholders. In the context of the MBG program, collaborative leadership enabled principals to facilitate communication, address operational challenges, and maintain implementation quality. These findings expand the application of collaborative leadership theory to school nutrition programs and highlight its relevance for promoting students' health and learning readiness (Bhatti & Arabia, 2026; Purwadhi, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2024).

Practical Implications for Elementary Schools

The findings imply that successful implementation of school nutrition programs requires strong school leadership, effective stakeholder collaboration, infrastructure readiness, and continuous monitoring systems (Fathi et al., 2024). School principals should strengthen coordination with teachers, SPPG officers, parents, and related institutions to ensure smooth program implementation. Schools also need adequate facilities, reliable food distribution systems, and menu variations to improve program effectiveness and student satisfaction (Delaney et al., 2024; Sando et al., 2025). In addition, training programs related to nutrition management and program supervision may strengthen schools' institutional capacity in implementing sustainable nutrition programs (Daniel et al., 2026; Fathi et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted in only one public elementary school, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. In addition, the study relied primarily on participants' perceptions rather than objective measurements of students' nutritional improvement or academic performance. Therefore, future research should involve multiple schools across different regions, employ mixed-method approaches, and examine the relationship between leadership practices, nutritional outcomes, and students' academic achievement using both qualitative and quantitative data. Further studies may also investigate the long-term sustainability of the MBG program and explore the influence of government policy, parental involvement, and institutional support on program effectiveness (Rachmadewi et al., 2021).

Conclusions

This study examined the role of school principals in implementing the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) at a public elementary school in Indonesia. The study identified four key findings. First, collaborative leadership practices, particularly coordination and stakeholder engagement, played a crucial role in supporting the implementation of the MBG program. Second, supervisory practices, including monitoring food quality, student discipline, and implementation procedures, contributed to maintaining program quality and consistency. Third, several implementation challenges, such as food distribution delays, limited facilities, repetitive menus, communication barriers, and limited monitoring systems, affected program delivery and highlighted the need for continuous improvement. Fourth, according to teacher and student reports, the MBG program contributed positively to students' attendance, concentration, discipline, motivation, perceived health, and learning

readiness. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on collaborative school leadership by demonstrating that non-instructional programs such as school nutrition initiatives require leadership practices centered on coordination, stakeholder engagement, and shared responsibility. The findings suggest that collaborative leadership is an important mechanism for managing complex school-based programs involving multiple stakeholders. Practically, policymakers and school administrators should provide adequate storage facilities, strengthen transportation and distribution systems, improve menu variations, and develop more systematic monitoring mechanisms to support program sustainability and effectiveness. This study was limited to a single public elementary school and relied primarily on participants' perceptions. Therefore, future research should compare multiple schools across different regions, employ mixed-method approaches, and examine the relationship between leadership practices, program implementation, and objective indicators of student health and academic outcomes.

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