



School Feeding Program

Impact on Health and Academic Performance of Schoolchildren

By Prof. Vicente C. Sinining,
PhD, PDCILM

Sina Gerard University | VCS Research

Abstract

The author investigated the impact of school feeding programs on the health and academic performance of children in the first nine years of basic education across selected districts in Rwanda's Northern Province. As students spend a substantial portion of their day at school, the provision of nutritious meals emerges as a vital strategy to counteract the growing incidence of hunger and malnutrition among school-aged children. The study analyzed school attendance records and academic performance metrics before and after the introduction of the feeding initiative. Drawing upon reports, empirical data, and national frameworks, the results demonstrate a significant positive shift in student health, attendance, and academic outcomes. The paper also articulates the rationale for embedding school feeding programs within national education and health policies, emphasizing their role in promoting dietary quality, regular school attendance, and overall academic achievement. Policy recommendations are presented to institutionalize feeding programs as a sustainable intervention against childhood hunger and its impact on educational outcomes.

Keywords: school feeding program, health, nutrition, school attendance, academic performance

1. Introduction

Education and health are two of the most critical pillars in human capital development. Among school-aged children, these two domains intersect most effectively through the implementation of school feeding programs (SFPs). Globally, undernutrition and food insecurity continue to affect millions of children, impeding their cognitive development and educational progress (FAO, 2022). In Rwanda, the Ministry of Education has recognized the need to integrate nutritional support into education systems, especially for vulnerable children in rural districts (MINEDUC, 2020).

The Northern Province of Rwanda, with its mixture of mountainous terrain and remote communities, presents significant barriers to food access and regular school attendance. This study aims to analyze the direct and indirect impacts of school feeding programs on the well-being and academic performance of learners in this region. It situates school feeding not only as a health intervention but as a systemic strategy to reduce educational inequality and improve learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing School Feeding

School feeding refers to the provision of food to children in educational institutions to improve health and education outcomes. These programs can take different forms: in-school meals, snacks, or take-home rations. The World Food Programme (WFP, 2022) outlines that SFPs function best when linked to local agriculture and health services, creating a multiplier effect that benefits communities.

2.2 Nutrition, Cognition, and Academic Performance

There is substantial evidence indicating that hunger inhibits concentration, shortens attention span, and reduces cognitive efficiency (Bundy et al., 2009). Poor nutrition affects memory and problem-solving ability, which are essential for learning (Drake et al., 2016). A meta-analysis by Kristjansson et al. (2016) concluded that school feeding had consistent positive effects on school participation and learning outcomes in low-income countries.

2.3 Rwandan Context

Rwanda's Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) prioritizes inclusive education and identifies nutrition as a critical factor in reducing dropout rates (MINEDUC, 2020). However, implementation has faced challenges, including logistical hurdles and resource constraints. Few studies have localized the analysis to district-level implementation in the Northern Province, which this paper aims to address.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The design included a quasi-experimental pre-post comparison using academic and health indicators, as well as focus groups and interviews.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Ten schools were randomly selected across Musanze, Burera, and Gicumbi districts. Data were collected in two phases: baseline (2019, before program implementation) and follow-up (2023). The sample comprised 1,200 students aged 6–15.

- **Quantitative Instruments:** Academic report cards, health check records, and attendance logs.
- **Qualitative Instruments:** Semi-structured interviews with school administrators, health workers, and parents; 6 focus group discussions.

3.3 Analysis Techniques

SPSS was used for descriptive and inferential statistics (t-tests and regressions), while NVivo software aided in thematic coding of qualitative data.

4. Results

4.1 Health Outcomes

Nutritional screenings showed that 42% of students were underweight in 2019. By 2023, this figure declined to 19%. BMI-for-age scores improved significantly (mean difference = 2.4, $p < 0.01$), indicating improved caloric and nutrient intake.

4.2 Attendance and Retention

The mean attendance rate increased from 81.4% in 2019 to 92.7% in 2023. Notably, the dropout rate reduced from 11.2% to 3.6%. Interviews confirmed that parents were more motivated to send children to school when meals were provided.

4.3 Academic Achievement

Average scores in mathematics and reading improved by 12.6% ($p < 0.05$). Teachers reported better student engagement and reduced behavioral issues linked to hunger.

Table 1. Summary of Key Indicators Before and After the School Feeding Program

| Indicator | Pre-Feeding (2019) | Post-Feeding (2023) | Improvement |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Underweight (%) | 42.0% | 19.0% | ↓ 23% |
| BMI-for-age score | 14.2 | 16.6 | +2.4 |
| Attendance Rate (%) | 81.4% | 92.7% | +11.3% |
| Dropout Rate (%) | 11.2% | 3.6% | ↓ 7.6% |
| Math & Reading Scores | 62.3% | 74.9% | +12.6% |

Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Feeding Program Comparison on Key Indicators

Figure 1. Changes in student outcomes before and after the implementation of the school feeding program. Improvements were seen across all indicators, particularly in attendance, nutritional status, and academic performance.

These results confirm that the school feeding initiative produced statistically and practically significant effects. Health screenings showed a marked decrease in underweight prevalence, while academic records evidenced a notable increase in learning outcomes. Improved attendance and lower dropout rates further suggest that meals act as both a nutritional and social incentive for school participation.

5. Discussion

The empirical data reinforces global findings on the benefits of school feeding programs. Improved nutrition leads to better health, which in turn enhances cognitive performance and academic engagement. In line with Maslow's hierarchy, meeting physiological needs enables children to function effectively at higher cognitive levels.

The reduction in dropout rates particularly among girls suggests that feeding programs also address gender disparities in education, potentially due to cultural norms where food security is prioritized for male children at home. Community engagement in preparing and sourcing food strengthened local ownership and reduced program costs.

Challenges included inconsistent food supply and insufficient kitchen facilities. Nevertheless, qualitative feedback highlighted a strong consensus among stakeholders on the program's value.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study finds a strong, positive impact of school feeding on health, attendance, and academic performance among schoolchildren in the Northern Province of Rwanda.

Recommendations:

- **Policy Integration:** Institutionalize school feeding within national education policies and budgets.
- **Nutrition Standards:** Adopt meal planning aligned with WHO dietary guidelines.
- **Community Involvement:** Leverage local agricultural production for sustainability.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Implement longitudinal tracking of health and academic indicators.
- **Gender Equity Focus:** Ensure meals are designed to retain girls and vulnerable children in schools.

School feeding should be recognized not just as a welfare activity but as a strategic investment in Rwanda's educational and socio-economic development.

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