

BEYOND COMPLIANCE: A HOLISTIC EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S HEALTHY SCHOOL CANTEEN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

School canteens are essential in providing healthy food and drink choices for students. In an era where childhood obesity and poor nutrition are rising concerns, ensuring that school environments promote healthy eating is more critical than ever. This study evaluates the implementation of the Department of Education's Health School Canteen Policy, focusing on the awareness, and compliance level among key stakeholders within the school environments. With rising concerns about childhood obesity and poor nutrition, this research underscores the critical role of school canteens in promoting healthy eating habits.

Findings revealed that while there is a general high awareness of the policy's components. The study identifies significant challenges in adhering to sodium intake guidelines, cultural preferences, and resistance from students towards healthier options. A positive correlation between stakeholder awareness and adherence to policy guidelines highlights the necessity of ongoing education training. Furthermore, the role of school head is emphasized as crucial for effective communication and monitoring to the policy. The study concludes with practical recommendations aimed at addressing barriers to healthy food provision in school canteens, ultimately contributing to improved students health outcomes and the successful promotion of healthy eating habits.

Keyword : *school canteen, healthy food, drink choices, childhood obesity, poor nutrition, healthy school canteen policy, stakeholder awareness, compliance level, sodium intake guidelines, cultural preferences, healthier options, education training, effective communication, health outcomes*

School canteens are essential in providing healthy food and drink choices for students. In an era where childhood obesity and poor nutrition are rising concerns, ensuring that school environments promote healthy eating is more critical than ever. Given the vital role that school environments play in shaping children's dietary habits and overall health, it is essential to explore the awareness, understanding, and compliance levels regarding healthy school canteen policies among key school stakeholders. Additionally, this study investigates the relationship between stakeholders' awareness and their adherence to the policy, evaluates the role of school leadership in supporting its implementation, and examines effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Healthy school canteen policies and their implementation have been a subject of interest in various studies. The successful implementation of a school canteen policy is more probable when a school concentrates both on the service aspect and the educational element of the policy and when there is a collective emphasis on healthy eating

throughout the entire school community (McPherson et al., 2020). In addition, adequate financing, efficient communication and management of the policy, and favorable attitudes from stakeholders were some of the most commonly cited factors that facilitated the implementation of the policy (Ronto et al., 2020). Furthermore, facilitating the execution of school food and nutrition policies should be a global priority to promote healthier dietary habits among children and adolescents (McIsaac et al., 2019). Such policies can improve equitable access, resources, and support for healthy eating.

Despite the recognized importance of healthy school canteens, significant gaps remain in implementing the Department of Education's Healthy School Canteen Policy. Empirical data indicates that most foods and beverages available in the school canteens do not comply with national and regional standards (Babashahi et al., 2021). As mandated by the Department of Education, the color-coding of food items in the canteen changes daily based on specific guidelines outlined in DepEd Order. The green category includes foods and drinks that should always be available in the canteen. The yellow category includes foods and drinks that should be served carefully. And the red category includes foods and drinks not recommended in the canteen menu, yet this is often overlooked or inconsistently applied in many schools. In the Philippines, national experts recommend that a healthy food plate for Filipino adults must include 33% of vegetables, however, the average Filipino consumes only 9.5% (DOST-FNRI, 2021). In local contexts, these challenges are even more pronounced. Compliance with healthy canteen policies was generally low, with guidelines for product provision rarely followed, and children often prefer non-healthy food options (Lawlis et al., 2019). Canteen staff frequently encounter resistance from students accustomed to unhealthy food choices, making it difficult to enforce the policy effectively (Azizan et al., 2021).

The highlighted issues underscore the necessity of conducting an in-depth study on the holistic evaluation of implementing a healthy school canteen policy. The significance of this study lies in its potential to address critical issues related to the implementation of the Department of Education's Healthy School Canteen Policy. By identifying the factors that influence successful policy adherence and the challenges faced by school stakeholders, this study aims to develop practical recommendations that can be applied in local school settings. Additionally, the study seeks to create an evidence-based framework that can guide future policy implementation efforts, ensuring that school canteens effectively promote healthy eating habits and combat issues like childhood obesity and malnutrition.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study led to the following conclusions:

The respondents' awareness of the Department of Education's Healthy School Canteen Policy is generally strong but not uniformly distributed across all policy components, such as sodium intake and condiment restrictions. This indicates that surface-level understanding may not be sufficient for full compliance, especially when cultural norms conflict with dietary guidelines.

Schools are also making significant efforts to comply with the policy, especially regarding broad standards like offering safe drinking water and promoting healthy diets. However, specific areas such as reducing sodium content and removing branded equipment reflect lower compliance, revealing practical and contextual challenges. These include difficulty in altering traditional food practices and the presence of existing marketing infrastructure in schools.

Additionally, the lack of significant differences in perception among various school roles suggests a coherent approach to policy enforcement. However, this homogeneity may also reflect limited role-specific insight or a top-down implementation model, where deeper operational issues are not fully surfaced or addressed at each level of responsibility.

It is also concluded that environmental and socioeconomic factors significantly hinder effective implementation. The presence of external food vendors, lack of financial resources, and inadequate facilities point to broader systemic issues beyond the school's control. These conditions reveal that successful policy implementation depends on internal awareness and commitment and coordinated support from external stakeholders, such as local governments and community members.

However, despite institutional compliance efforts, student and parent resistance to healthier food options persists due to long-standing dietary habits. This underscores the importance of embedding the policy within broader educational campaigns and community engagement strategies that target behavioral change, not just institutional practice.

Meanwhile, the statistically significant correlation between awareness and compliance reinforces the need to prioritize continuous training, especially in areas where knowledge gaps directly translate into weaker adherence. Increasing stakeholder understanding of the policy's finer details can effectively improve overall policy implementation.

Moreover, school leadership is a key enabler, though adaptive management needs strengthening. School administrators demonstrate strong leadership in communicating and overseeing the policy, which contributes positively to its execution. However, their comparatively lower effectiveness in adapting and evaluating canteen operations suggests that routine reflection and responsive management must be enhanced to sustain long-term effectiveness.

Furthermore, monitoring systems are established but require greater consistency and rigor. While monitoring and enforcement structures are in place and generally well-received, slight shortcomings in their consistent application may weaken their long-term impact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am writing to show my appreciation for the immense assistance with my research. The completion of my research paper would not have been possible without your contribution.

To begin, I would like to thank my School Head Sir Efren B. Martil , for he has provided me the gratification of nurturing my study. Your leadership motivates me to follow my pursuits.

To the School Heads: Sir Fernando M. Calo, Sir Gedeon Badic, Sir Gerard Lopez and Efren B. Martel. School nurses, and Teachers teachers for their patience, understanding, and support throughout my research study.

Furthermore, let me thank my Masters Classmate Ma'am Eden B. Serrano who offer her time and help. Thank you once again for your unwavering support and guidance. For the immense role you played in my research journey, I owe you my deepest thanks.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Ma. Teresa M. Real, Schools Division Superintendent, Division of Bayugan City for her support. Her relentless pursuit of educational value and the wellbeing of the students amplify the effectiveness of the research and the academic environment.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my adviser, Dr. Ramonito Tan, for his unwavering support and encouragement. Your expertise and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the subject and enhancing the overall quality of my work.

I sincerely appreciate my panelists for their valuable time, expertise, and constructive feedback, which have played a significant role in enhancing and refining this study.

Special acknowledgement to my Baby David for the love, patience, trust, encouragement, support and sacrifices throughout my Masters Journey. Your efforts are greatly valued.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my family and friends for their support and patience.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to God for providing His guidance, wisdom, and blessings throughout the course of this research. His mercy supported me through difficult moments, and his guidance directed me to the correct path for the successful completion of this study.

My heartfelt thanks go out to everyone mentioned above, as well as to those whose names may not be listed but whose contributions were just as important.

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