

## **School Lunch Programs and their Role in Childhood Nutrition**

**Dr. Danesh B Potdar**, Assistant Professor Department of Pediatrics KIMS, Karad, Email:  
drdanesh\_potdar@rediffmail.com

**Dr. Prashant P Shah**, Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatrics, KIMS, Krishna Vishwa Vidyapeeth,  
Karad, Maharashtra, Email: doc.pshah@gmail.com

**Mrs. Komal Sawant**, Dietitian Krishna Institute of Medical Sciences, Krishna Vishwa Vidyapeeth,  
Karad, Maharashtra, India.

**Abstract:** This research explores the multifaceted role of school lunch programs in childhood nutrition, delving into their historical context, adherence to nutritional guidelines, impact on food security, contributions to academic performance, and the accommodation of diverse dietary needs. The findings underscore the pivotal role of these programs in promoting the well-being and development of students by providing balanced and nutritious meals. Key discoveries include the positive correlation between nutrition and academic achievement, the programs' impact on mitigating food insecurity, and the importance of accommodating diverse dietary needs for creating inclusive environments. Identified challenges, such as budgetary constraints, present opportunities for program improvement through community engagement, technology integration, and policy advocacy. This comprehensive examination emphasizes the critical significance of school lunch programs in shaping childhood nutrition and highlights the need for ongoing support and innovation in addressing challenges and optimizing their impact.

**Keywords:** Childhood Nutrition, Nutritional Guidelines, Food Security, Academic Performance, Diverse Dietary Needs, Historical Context, Evolution, Balanced Meals, Cognitive Development

### **I. Introduction**

Childhood nutrition is a critical determinant of overall health and well-being, with far-reaching implications for academic performance and lifelong habits. Among the various factors influencing children's nutrition, school lunch programs play a central role in providing access to balanced and nutritious meals [1]. School lunch programs play a pivotal role in shaping the nutritional landscape of childhood, with far-reaching implications for physical and cognitive development. These programs are designed to adhere to established nutritional guidelines, often

recommended by health authorities, ensuring that students receive well-balanced meals that encompass essential nutrients. The meals provided by school lunch programs offer a consistent source of nourishment, particularly crucial for students who may lack access to balanced nutrition at home [2]. Beyond addressing hunger, these programs also tackle food insecurity, acting as a vital resource for students who rely on school meals as a primary source of nutrition. The impact of school lunch programs extends beyond the lunchroom, influencing academic performance. Proper nutrition has been consistently linked to improved cognitive function and academic achievement. By providing nutrient-rich foods, these programs contribute to students' ability to concentrate, learn, and excel in the classroom. Some school lunch initiatives go beyond meal provision and incorporate educational components, offering opportunities for students to learn about nutrition and cultivate healthy eating habits. This educational aspect can foster a lifelong understanding of the importance of making nutritious food choices. School lunch programs also cater to the diverse dietary needs of students, accommodating allergies, medical conditions, and cultural preferences [3].

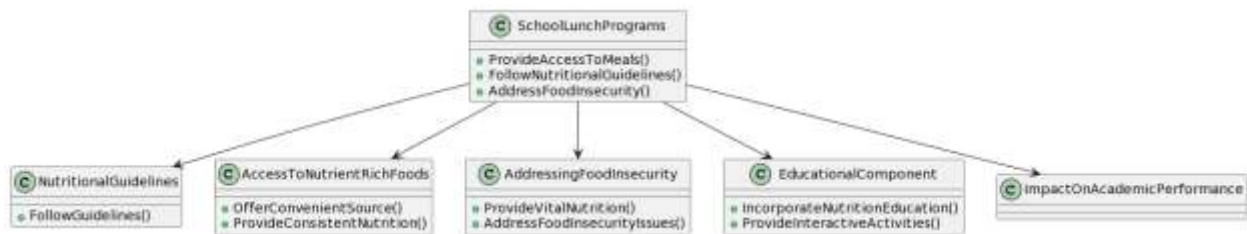


Figure 1 Block Depicting the Classification of School Program initiatives

By doing so, they create an inclusive environment that ensures every child has access to safe and appropriate meals. Beyond the immediate impact on individual students, these programs contribute to broader public health goals by helping to prevent and reduce childhood obesity. Through the promotion of balanced meals and healthy choices, school lunch programs play a role in instilling habits that may positively influence lifelong well-being. As educational institutions continue to evolve, understanding the significance of these programs becomes imperative for policymakers, educators, and researchers. This research paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of school lunch programs in shaping childhood nutrition, considering their historical development [4], adherence to nutritional guidelines, impact on food security, and

educational components. By examining these aspects, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on childhood nutrition and provide insights that can inform policy decisions, program enhancements, and further research endeavors.

### **A. Background**

The concept of school lunch programs has a rich historical background, dating back to the early 20th century when concerns about child malnutrition prompted the implementation of organized feeding programs in schools. Over the decades, these programs have evolved in response to changing societal needs, nutritional sciences, and educational paradigms. The historical context encompasses legislative milestones, policy shifts, and societal attitudes towards childhood nutrition [5]. Understanding this background is crucial for contextualizing the current state of school lunch programs and appreciating the challenges and opportunities they face in meeting the nutritional needs of today's diverse student populations.

### **B. Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for conducting this research lies in the pivotal role that school lunch programs play in influencing the nutritional landscape of childhood. While there is a wealth of literature on childhood nutrition, a focused exploration of the specific contributions, challenges, and opportunities presented by school lunch programs is warranted. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of school lunches on food security, academic performance, and the cultivation of lifelong healthy habits [6]. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy decisions, program implementation, and future research initiatives, ultimately contributing to the advancement of childhood nutrition strategies.

### **C. Objectives:**

The objectives of this research are threefold:

1. To critically assess the historical development and evolution of school lunch programs, examining key milestones, policy shifts, and societal influences.

2. To analyze the current state of school lunch programs, focusing on their adherence to nutritional guidelines, impact on food security, and contributions to academic performance and cognitive development.
3. To explore the educational components integrated into school lunch programs and their role in promoting healthy eating habits, as well as to investigate how these programs accommodate diverse dietary needs.

## **II. Literature Review**

The literature survey on School Lunch Programs for Childhood Nutrition encompasses a diverse range of studies exploring the impact of various interventions and policies on the dietary habits, nutritional status, and overall health of school-aged children. One seminal study sets the stage by revealing that Americans, including children [7], often fail to meet federal dietary recommendations, underscoring the need for effective nutrition programs. The role of school meal standards is investigated, demonstrating that the implementation of new standards positively influences food selection and consumption while minimizing waste. Addressing factors influencing eating behaviors, researchers delve into identifying key determinants among primary school children. Meanwhile, studies shed light on the positive impact of these programs, particularly in increasing fruit consumption without contributing to excess plate waste. The intersection of food insecurity and participation in food assistance programs is explored, emphasizing the importance of support mechanisms for vulnerable populations [8]. Focus on the types of foods offered and consumed within school meals offers insights into the nutritional content of school-provided meals. The broader socio-economic context is considered, arguing that income alone may not be sufficient in understanding parenting and child development, highlighting the need for multifaceted interventions. Introducing policy-based interventions as a means to prevent overweight and obesity in schools [9]. Several studies examine the impact of school breakfast programs, revealing associations with a lower body mass index, challenging the notion that school meals contribute to unhealthy weight. The importance of incorporating material hardship into models of income associations is emphasized, underlining the need for holistic approaches to address the complexities of child nutrition [10]. The literature survey extends beyond the school environment. Investigations into point-of-purchase interventions showcase the potential of in-person supermarket education to influence healthy food choices.

Rural disparities in the distribution of policies supporting healthy eating in secondary schools are highlighted, shedding light on regional variations in implementing nutrition-related interventions [11].

Area	Methodology	Key Findings	Challenges	Pros	Cons	Application
School Meal Standards	Experimental	Implementation positively influences food selection and consumption while minimizing waste.	Compliance issues Resistance to change	Improved dietary choices Reduced waste	Potential for resistance Cost implications	School Nutrition Programs
Factors Influencing Eating	Cross-sectional Survey	Identification of key determinants among primary school children.	Subject to recall bias Limited generalizability	Insight into influencing factors Basis for targeted interventions	Limited generalizability Lack of causal inference	Childhood Eating Behavior
Food Insecurity and	Cross-sectional Analysis	Participation in food assistance programs reduces the risk of	Limited data on long-term outcomes Potential stigma associated with assistance	Positive impact on vulnerable populations Addressing nutritional	Limited long-term data Potential for stigmatization	Food Assistance Programs

		overweigh t in food- insecure girls.	programs	disparities		
Types of Foods in School	Observati onal Study	Analysis of types of foods offered and consumed within school meals.	Variability in school menu compositionLi mited generalizabilit y	Insight into nutritional content of school mealsBasis for policy improvement s	Limited generalizabilit yLack of information on individual dietary habits	School Nutritio n Policies
Socio- economy c Context	Longitudi nal Study	Incorporati on of material hardship into models of income association s with parenting and child developme nt.	Complex interplay of factorsChallen ges in quantifying material hardship	Holistic understandin g of socio- economic factorsIdenti fication of nuanced relationships	Complexity may limit generalizabilit yDifficulty in isolating specific factors	Childho od Socio- econom ic Factors
Policy- based Intervent ions	Policy Analysis	Introduc tion of policy- based	Policy implementatio n challengesPote	Systemic approach to obesity preventionPo	Potential for resistance and non- complianceRes	School Obesity Prevent ion

		interventions for preventing overweight and obesity in schools.	potential resistance from stakeholders	potential for broad impact	resource-intensive implementation	Policies
School Breakfast Programs	Various	School breakfast program participation associated with a lower body mass index.	Variability in program implementation Selection bias	Positive impact on BMI Potential for improved nutritional intake	Varied program effectiveness Potential for unintended consequences	School Nutrition Programs
Material Hardship in	Cross-sectional Analysis	Incorporating material hardship into models of income associations with parenting and child development.	Subject to self-reporting bias Potential confounding factors	Comprehensive understanding of income and material hardship Identification of unique challenges in child development	Reliance on self-reported data Difficulty in isolating specific impacts	Childhood Socio-economic Factors

Point-of-Purchase Interventions	Experimental Study	Point-of-purchase interventions impact healthy food purchases.	Limited long-term data on sustained impactPotential for selection bias	Potential for immediate behavior changePractical approach to influencing food choices	Limited long-term sustainability dataPotential for external factors influencing behavior change	Public Health Interventions
Rural Disparities in Policies	Cross-sectional Analysis	Disparities in the distribution of policies supporting healthy eating in secondary schools are influenced by rural settings.	Generalizability to urban settingsLimited understanding of specific regional challenges	Recognition of regional variations in implementing nutrition-related interventions Basis for targeted interventions in rural areas	Limited applicability to urban settingsMay not account for all regional variations	School Nutrition Policies
Population-level Policy	Longitudinal Study	Impact assessment of a population-level school food and	Time lag in observing policy effectsDifficulty in isolating policy impact	Population-level impact assessmentInsights into long-term effects of policy	Time-intensive researchPotential confounding factors in population-level studies	Public Health Policy Evaluation



		nutrition policy on dietary intake and body weights of children.		interventions		
Sugar-sweetened Beverage	Quasi-Experimental Study	Banning sugar-sweetened beverages in middle schools reduces in-school access and purchasing	Potential for unintended consequences External factors influencing beverage consumption	Reduction in in-school access and purchasing of sugary beverages Potential for improved health outcomes	Varied effectiveness across schools Potential for backlash from students and stakeholders	School Beverage Policies
School Health Guidelines	Policy Guidance	Comprehensive guidelines to promote healthy eating and physical activity in schools.	Variability in implementation and adherence Resource constraints	Holistic guidance for schools Framework for creating healthier school environments	Potential for variation in interpretation and implementation Resource-intensive implementation	School Health Promotion

**Table 1. Summarizes the Review of Literature of Various Authors**

Policy-level interventions are explored, assessing the impact of a population-level school food and nutrition policy on the dietary intake and body weights of children. Studies examine the

effects of banning sugar-sweetened beverages in middle schools, revealing a reduction in in-school access and purchasing without a significant decrease in overall consumption.

### **III. Nutritional Guidelines and Standards**

#### **A. Established Nutritional Guidelines**

School lunch programs operate within a framework of established nutritional guidelines designed to ensure that meals contribute to the overall health and well-being of students. These guidelines are typically set by health authorities at national and regional levels and aim to provide a foundation for the development of well-balanced and nutritious menus. Emphasizing the importance of key food groups, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy, these guidelines are crafted to meet the unique nutritional needs of growing children. The goal is to provide meals that not only satisfy hunger but also contribute to the optimal physical and cognitive development of students.

In many countries, these guidelines are regularly updated to align with the latest scientific evidence on nutrition and health. They often incorporate considerations for portion sizes, nutrient content, and recommended daily allowances, taking into account the diversity of dietary requirements among the student population. The establishment of clear nutritional guidelines reflects a commitment to promoting healthy eating habits and preventing nutritional deficiencies among school-aged children.

#### **B. Compliance**

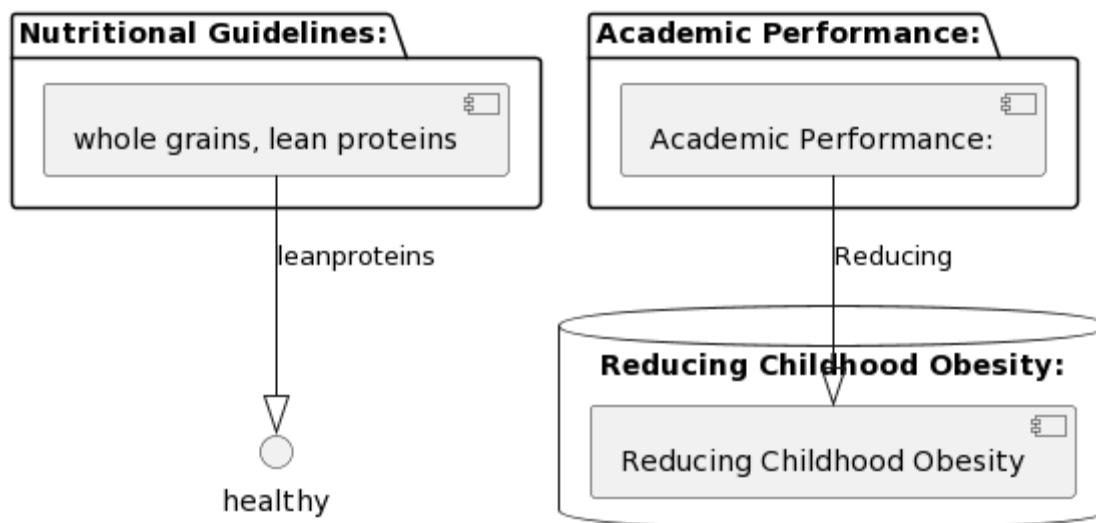
While nutritional guidelines serve as a blueprint for designing school lunch menus, the degree of compliance can vary, presenting challenges to the effective implementation of these standards. Compliance may be influenced by factors such as budget constraints, resource availability, and local preferences. Ensuring that meals meet the recommended nutritional standards while remaining appealing to students can be a delicate balance that school lunch programs strive to achieve.

**C. Logistical Issues**

may also arise from logistical issues, such as sourcing fresh and diverse ingredients, accommodating cultural preferences, and managing food allergies or dietary restrictions. Additionally, variations in the understanding and interpretation of nutritional guidelines among food service providers may impact the consistency and quality of meals offered across different schools.

**IV. Impact of School Lunch Programs on Food Security**

The impact of school lunch programs on food security is profound and multifaceted, addressing not only the immediate nutritional needs of students but also contributing to broader societal goals related to hunger alleviation and overall well-being. Here are several key aspects of how school lunch programs impact food security:



**Figure 2. Food Security standards in School Lunch Programs**

**A. Providing Regular and Nutritious Meals**

School lunch programs offer students a reliable source of regular and nutritious meals during the academic year. These meals are designed to meet nutritional guidelines, ensuring that students receive essential nutrients necessary for their growth, development, and overall health.

### **B. Alleviating Food Insecurity**

For many students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, school lunches represent a crucial source of daily nutrition. These programs act as a safety net, helping to alleviate food insecurity by providing meals that students may not have access to at home. This is especially significant during weekends or holidays when school meals may be extended to take-home options.

### **C. Reducing Health Disparities**

School lunch programs contribute to reducing health disparities related to food insecurity. By offering nutritious meals to all students, these programs help level the playing field, ensuring that even those facing economic challenges have access to the same quality of meals as their peers.

### **D. Promoting Academic Engagement**

Proper nutrition is linked to cognitive function and academic performance. By addressing food insecurity and providing nutritious meals, school lunch programs create an environment conducive to academic engagement, concentration, and effective learning. Students who are well-nourished are better positioned to participate actively in the educational process.

### **E. Extending Support Beyond School Hours**

Some school lunch programs extend their impact beyond regular school hours through initiatives such as breakfast programs or take-home meal options. This recognizes that food insecurity is not limited to school hours alone, ensuring that students have access to nutritious meals even outside the traditional lunchtime.

### **F. Educational Initiatives**

Some school lunch programs incorporate educational initiatives related to nutrition. By raising awareness about healthy eating habits, these programs empower students and families to make informed food choices, contributing to long-term food security by fostering positive dietary habits.

### **G. Community Collaboration**

School lunch programs often involve collaboration with local communities, including parents, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. This collaborative approach enhances community support, ensuring that the broader community is engaged in addressing food security challenges collectively.

### **H. Accommodating Diverse Dietary Needs**

Accommodating diverse dietary needs is a fundamental aspect of school lunch programs, aiming to create inclusive environments where all students have access to safe and nutritious meals. Inclusivity extends beyond providing a variety of food options; it encompasses considerations for cultural preferences, religious dietary restrictions, and the diverse nutritional requirements of individual students. By fostering inclusivity, school lunch programs ensure that every child, regardless of their background or dietary needs, can fully participate in and benefit from the nutritional support provided.

Inclusive practices involve menu planning that considers a broad range of dietary preferences, allowing students to make choices that align with their cultural or personal dietary norms. This inclusivity not only promotes a sense of belonging but also supports the development of healthy eating habits by acknowledging and respecting diverse food traditions. Accessibility is a key component of inclusivity. School lunch programs strive to make nutritious meals easily accessible to all students, considering factors such as physical accessibility of serving areas, distribution methods, and the affordability of meals. Some programs may implement strategies like subsidized or free meal options to ensure that economic barriers do not hinder access for students from low-income families. Effectively managing allergies, medical conditions, and cultural preferences is a crucial aspect of accommodating diverse dietary needs within school lunch programs. Schools work closely with parents, healthcare providers, and nutritionists to create environments that are safe for students with allergies or specific medical conditions. Allergen management involves clear labeling of ingredients, awareness campaigns, and communication between school staff, students, and parents to prevent accidental exposure. Some school lunch programs implement designated allergen-free zones or provide alternative meal options to ensure the safety of students with allergies. For students with medical conditions

requiring special dietary considerations, such as diabetes or celiac disease, collaboration between school health services and nutrition professionals is essential. Individualized meal plans are developed to meet specific dietary restrictions while ensuring that nutritional needs are adequately addressed. Cultural preferences are respected through menu diversification and cultural sensitivity training for food service staff. Offering a variety of culturally diverse and appealing meals not only accommodates the dietary preferences of students from different backgrounds but also contributes to a more inclusive and culturally rich dining experience.

## **V. Challenges & Opportunities**

- A. Limited funding poses a significant challenge to the quality and variety of meals provided by school lunch programs. Budgetary constraints may restrict the inclusion of fresh and diverse ingredients, impacting the nutritional value of meals.
- B. Issues related to transportation, scheduling, and infrastructure can pose logistical challenges, hindering students' access to school meals. Overcoming these challenges requires creative solutions to ensure effective meal distribution.
- C. Social stigma associated with receiving subsidized meals may discourage some students from participating in school lunch programs. Destigmatizing participation through initiatives like universal meal programs or discreet distribution methods is crucial.
- D. Efficient resource allocation is a challenge, especially in managing the procurement and distribution of food. Balancing nutritional quality, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability requires careful planning and collaboration with local suppliers.
- E. Collaborating with parents, local businesses, and community organizations provides an opportunity to enhance community support for school lunch programs. Engaging the community fosters a sense of shared responsibility for addressing food security challenges.
- F. Leveraging technology for meal planning, ordering, and communication can streamline processes, reduce waste, and enhance the efficiency of school lunch programs. Digital platforms facilitate transparent communication with parents and caregivers.
- G. Integrating robust nutritional education within school curricula empowers students to make informed and healthy food choices. This educational component extends beyond

the classroom, involving parents and the broader community to create a holistic approach to nutritional awareness.

- H. Regularly assessing menu popularity, collecting feedback, and collaborating with nutritionists provide opportunities to diversify and improve school lunch menus. Offering a variety of culturally diverse and appealing meals contributes to overall satisfaction and nutritional adequacy.
- I. Engaging in policy advocacy at local, regional, and national levels presents an opportunity to influence positive changes. Advocating for increased funding, improved nutritional guidelines, and policy initiatives that support school lunch programs is essential for addressing food security

## **VI. Conclusion**

This research has comprehensively examined the multifaceted impact of school lunch programs on childhood nutrition, encompassing historical context, nutritional guidelines, food security, academic performance, and dietary inclusivity. The key findings shed light on the indispensable role these programs play in enhancing the overall well-being and development of students. The positive correlation between nutrition and academic achievement emerged as a significant discovery, emphasizing the pivotal role school lunch programs play in creating environments conducive to effective learning. The programs not only address immediate nutritional needs but also contribute to sustained academic success. Mitigating food insecurity emerged as a prominent outcome, underscoring the vital role school lunch programs play in providing consistent and nutritious meals to students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs act as crucial safety nets, helping alleviate hunger and reducing health disparities. The importance of accommodating diverse dietary needs was another key finding, highlighting the significance of creating inclusive environments. By respecting cultural preferences, managing allergies, and ensuring accessibility, school lunch programs contribute to fostering a positive relationship with food and promoting lifelong healthy eating habits. Despite these positive impacts, challenges were identified, with budgetary constraints standing out as a significant hurdle. However, the research revealed promising opportunities for program improvement. Community engagement, technology integration, and policy advocacy emerged as strategic avenues for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of school lunch programs.



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