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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of School Feeding Programs on Student Retention in Public Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Nyamagana District, Mwanza, Tanzania

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Author's Contributions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to evaluate the impact of school feeding programs on students' retention in public secondary schools in Nayamagan district, Mwanza-Tanzania. The study was guided by the Self-Determination Theory developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. A mixed research approach and an explanatory sequential design were employed. This study was guided by self-determination theory. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), was developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s. The target population included 53,643 people in which the sample size of 208 respondents was determined. Data collection tools included questionnaires and interview guides. Validity was ensured through face and content validation, while reliability coefficients were 0.85 for the teachers' questionnaire and 0.66 for the students' questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26 and descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically analysed and presented narratively. The study found that school feeding programs in public secondary schools significantly enhance student retention by improving attendance, reducing dropouts, and boosting classroom participation, particularly among students from low-income families. It concluded that school meals are vital not just for nutrition but also for academic success and long-term school engagement. The study recommended institutionalizing these programs through sustainable government funding, infrastructure development, stakeholder involvement, and complementary initiatives like school gardens, especially in food-insecure areas.

Keywords: School; feeding programs; student retention

INTRODUCTION

Student retention in secondary education remains a global challenge, as many students struggle to stay engaged and complete their studies. This issue affects both developed and developing countries and raises concerns among parents, educators, and policymakers (Ndanu et al., 2022). Low retention rates often stem from socio-economic difficulties, poor school environments, and personal struggles. High retention, on the other hand, reflects supportive schools that foster consistent attendance and academic engagement (Oginga & Ayienda, 2023). Measuring retention through dropout, attendance, and graduation rates helps assess school effectiveness. Programs like Safe Schools, which create secure and inclusive environments, are vital for improving student engagement and retention (Dallasheh, 2025). School feeding programs have long been recognized as an effective intervention to support educational access and improve learning outcomes, especially in low-income regions. Historically, school feeding initiatives began as social protection schemes during the early 20th century in developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, aimed at addressing child

malnutrition during economic hardships and post-war recovery periods (Watkins et al., 2024). Over time, these programs evolved into tools to combat hunger, enhance school attendance, and promote equitable education. Global organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF have played key roles in expanding school feeding schemes worldwide, especially in developing nations (Cupertino et al., 2022). Today, school feeding is increasingly viewed not only as a welfare intervention but also as an investment in human capital development, particularly in countries striving to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to zero hunger, quality education, and health (Assefa, 2025).The integration of school feeding programs into education systems has significant implications for enhancing student retention by addressing hunger-related barriers to learning, thereby contributing to broader human capital development and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

Despite the growing consensus on the value of school feeding programs, different countries approach them based on their socioeconomic contexts, educational priorities, and policy frameworks. In high-income countries like Japan and Sweden, school feeding is often universal, with meals provided as part of a broader health and nutrition strategy in schools (Adera & Pan, 2024). In contrast, in many low- and middle-income countries, school meals are targeted interventions, primarily focused on vulnerable or food-insecure communities. For instance, India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme, one of the largest globally, is legally mandated and reaches over 100 million children (Raveenthiranathan et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in sub-Saharan Africa, school feeding programs are often donor-funded, implemented in partnership with international agencies, and integrated with local agricultural development to support community food systems (Mainje et al., 2024; Esiebo, 2024). These varied models reflect differing national capacities, but all share a core aim: to improve students' learning conditions by meeting their basic nutritional needs (Appiah, 2024). This diversity in school feeding approaches highlights the need for context-specific strategies that align with national priorities and capacities while maintaining the shared goal of enhancing student well-being and educational outcomes through improved nutrition.

In Tanzania, school feeding and nutrition programs, especially in rural areas, are crucial for improving student access, retention, academic performance, and well-being (Mketo et al., 2023). While these programs hold transformative potential providing essential daily nutrition, reducing dropout rates, and protecting vulnerable children their implementation faces persistent challenges (Tamiru et al., 2024). These include lack of political will, community resistance, poverty, and poor infrastructure. Despite supportive policies like the 2014 (version 2023) Education and Training Policy and 2021 national guidelines, many schools struggle due to inadequate facilities, hygiene concerns, and unequal contribution systems (Karogi et al., 2025). Sustainable solutions must combine school-based farming, community engagement, awareness campaigns, and improved infrastructure to ensure that every child learns without the burden of hunger (Kavula, 2025). Despite being a relatively urbanized area, the Nyamagana District faces unique challenges in implementing and sustaining school feeding programs in public secondary schools. Many families in the district still struggle with economic hardship, making it difficult for students to afford basic necessities, including meals (Mketo et al., 2023). While some schools attempt to implement feeding programs through parental contributions or partnerships with local leaders, the absence of centralized funding, infrastructure such as school kitchens, and trained personnel often limits their effectiveness. Additionally, inconsistent meal provision has been linked to irregular attendance and reduced concentration among students. These challenges underscore the urgent need for a study concerning the impact of school feeding programs on student retention in public secondary schools in Nyamagana District, Mwanza, Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was guided by self-determination theory. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), was developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1980s. The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness can enhance student motivation, engagement, and retention (Ryan & Deci, 2023; Legault, 2020). Within the context of school feeding programs, SDT is particularly relevant as it explains how the provision of meals contributes to students' sense of competence and well-being, thereby supporting their capacity to learn and remain in school. Access to regular, nutritious meals addresses students' physiological needs, reduces hunger-related distractions, and improves concentration and academic

performance factors that boost their confidence and perceived competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Moreover, school feeding programs can foster a sense of relatedness by creating inclusive, supportive environments where students feel cared for and valued. While SDT has been critiqued for its limited applicability across different cultural contexts and its emphasis on intrinsic motivation (Perera, 2020), its focus on psychological need satisfaction makes it a valuable lens for evaluating the effectiveness of school-based interventions like feeding programs. In this study, SDT underpins the analysis of how school feeding, as a core component of the Safe School Program in Nyamagana District, contributes to improved student retention by supporting not just physical well-being but also psychological engagement and long-term academic commitment.

The Impact of School Feeding Programs on Student Retention

School feeding programs play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity, thereby enhancing student retention through improved attendance and concentration. Moya et al. (2025) found that food hardship in Spain led to increased dropout rates, particularly among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, though their study lacked theoretical grounding and broader applicability. Similarly, Canbolat (2024), using ecological systems theory in the U.S., revealed a strong link between food insecurity and absenteeism, but did not directly examine retention outcomes from food provision programs. Addressing these gaps, this study applies Self-Determination Theory within the Safe School Program to explore how food provision in rural African contexts influences student motivation and long-term school retention.

Studies from various countries affirm the potential of school feeding programs to support cognitive and academic outcomes, which are strongly linked to student retention. Duan et al. (2024) demonstrated that China's SNIP improved math performance and attendance, particularly among disadvantaged students, indicating that improved nutrition fosters educational engagement. In Ghana, Appiah (2024) showed how feeding programs enhanced attendance and academic outcomes, especially for girls and rural students, though the study relied on secondary data and lacked real-time student perspectives. While these studies reinforce the importance of food provision, few explore the motivational mechanisms behind these improvements an area this study addresses using Self-Determination Theory in a rural Tanzanian setting.

Research from East Africa further supports the positive impact of school feeding on retention, although many suffer from limited geographic scope and methodological depth. Mketo (2023) in Tanzania and Cyiza and Mugiraneza (2023) in Rwanda reported improvements in attendance, participation, and promotion rates due to feeding programs, but both studies lacked longitudinal designs and robust theoretical frameworks. Turyamureeba et al. (2024) highlighted the dual benefit of school meals on both student performance and teacher welfare in Uganda, yet financial constraints and a limited theoretical lens restricted their conclusions. By employing a mixed-methods, longitudinal approach, this study contributes a broader, more theory-driven understanding of how food provision sustains retention.

Improved school environments, including physical infrastructure and psychosocial conditions, significantly affect student retention. Closs et al. (2021) in Australia found that physical and psychosocial dimensions of the school environment influence student engagement, though their small sample size and lack of a theoretical framework limited the generalizability of results. Osman et al. (2024) in Malaysia emphasized the role of academic support and structured courses in improving student satisfaction and retention but used only quantitative methods and short-term data. This study expands on their findings by incorporating both physical and motivational aspects of the learning environment within a theoretical framework, thus providing a deeper understanding of how safe and supportive schools enhance retention.

Environmental challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, poor infrastructure, and inadequate teacher support hinder academic performance and student persistence in school. Studies by Kimaro (2020) and Moshi (2022) in Tanzania noted that improved physical infrastructure boosts engagement, but overlooked the psychological and emotional dimensions that also affect retention. In Uganda, Kyakimwa et al. (2024) emphasized inclusive infrastructure and teacher support for students with disabilities, yet failed to explore impacts on the broader student population. Similarly, Ashu and Fonkoua (2024) found that poor school upkeep and student-teacher relationships negatively impacted retention, but lacked a clear explanatory model. Addressing these gaps, this study investigates how the Safe School Program enhances retention through a comprehensive view of

environmental, motivational, and structural improvements guided by Self-Determination Theory.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. An explanatory sequential design was employed, where quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to further explain and enrich the findings. The target population consisted of 53,643 individuals, categorized into students (52,203), teachers (1,342), heads of schools (34), ward education officers (18), school board members (45), and one district education officer. A total sample size of 208 participants was selected, which included 100 students, 93 teachers, 5 heads of schools, 4 WEOs, 5 school board members, and 1 DEO. Stratified and simple random sampling were used to select students and teachers, ensuring representativeness across gender, experience, and grade levels. Purposive sampling targeted the DEO, WEOs, and heads of schools based on their roles, while convenience sampling was used to select school board members. Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires administered to students and teachers, and semi-structured interviews conducted with the DEO, heads of schools, and WEOs. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 through descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and information. The validity of the instruments was established through content and face validation by research experts and supervisors, while reliability was confirmed through a pilot study with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.85 for teachers and 0.66 for students, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Trustworthiness in qualitative data was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, including obtaining research clearance, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the proper citation of sources in accordance with APA 7th Edition guidelines.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Impact of School Feeding Programs on Student Retention

This study aspect aimed to analyse the impact of school feeding programs on student retention in public secondary schools in Nyamagana district. The researcher collected data from teachers and students through questionnaire in which they were asked to indicate strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree provided in a Likert scale. Moreover, interview was also conducted to head of schools, school boeard members, WEOs as well as DEO. The responses are provided in Table 1.

Availability of School Meals Encourages Regular Attendance

According to the data, 36 respondents (41.9%) agreed and 37 (43%) strongly agreed that the availability of school meals encourages students to attend school regularly. Meanwhile, 11 respondents (12.8%) were neutral, and only 1 respondent each (1.2%) disagreed and strongly disagreed. This means that over 84% of respondents believed meals are a strong reason students come to school consistently. Likewise, one of the heads of schools said that:

> We have observed that students attend school more regularly when meals are available. Before the feeding program, some students would miss days or come late because they hadn't eaten. Parents feel more confident sending them to school knowing they'll get food. Attendance has become more stable, especially among younger students and those from less fortunate homes (HOS C, July 2025).

This shows that food is a key motivator for school attendance. In impoverished communities, a guaranteed meal can outweigh other factors like distance or poor weather. Providing meals helps schools improve student turnout and reduce absenteeism. It also shows the importance of supporting not just learning, but students' basic needs. This aligns with Moya et al. (2025), who showed that providing food within schools can help to improve focus and retention by addressing basic nutritional needs. Again, Peter et al. (2024) revealed that school feeding programs significantly improved student attendance, with schools offering meals reporting a higher attendance rate and further gains linked to meal frequency and nutritional quality. This implies that addressing students' basic nutritional needs through regular school feeding programs is essential for improving attendance and supporting effective learning in poverty-affected communities.

Table 1. Teachers' response on the feeding programs in schools in influencing student retention (n=86)

Items	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
The availability of school meals encourages students to attend school regularly.	1	1.2	1	1.2	11	12.8	36	41.9	37	43
Providing food at school has improved student concentration and participation in class.	-	-	3	3.5	11	12.8	38	44.2	34	39.5
School feeding programs help reduce dropout rates among students.	1	1.2	-	-	7	8.1	46	53.5	32	37.2
Teachers believe school meals are essential for retaining students from low-income families.	2	2.3	12	14	12	14	36	41.9	24	27.9
Students would still attend school regularly even if meals were not provided.	13	15.1	21	24.4	23	26.7	22	25.6	7	8.1
The school feeding program has positively impacted student performance and attendance.	8	9.3	13	15.1	7	8.1	33	38.4	25	29.1
Lack of food provision at school does not affect student retention.	28	32.6	35	40.7	9	10.5	11	12.8	3	3.5

Key: SD-strongly disagree, D-disagree, N-neutral, A-agree, SA-strongly agree
Source: Field Data (2025)

School Meals Improve Concentration and Participation

Many respondents agreed that food improves student concentration and class participation. Specifically, 38 respondents (44.2%) agreed, and 34 (39.5%) strongly agreed. Only 11 (12.8%) were neutral, and 3 (3.5%) disagreed. No one strongly disagreed. More than 83% of the respondents saw a clear connection between meals and better classroom engagement. The data shows that students are more mentally active and better behaved in class when they are not hungry. Providing food doesn't just help them show up to school; it allows them to focus during lessons. Hunger affects learning, and the presence of food improves both cognitive ability and motivation. Schools that invest in meals also invest in better learning outcomes. The broader context presented by Irizarry et al. (2025) highlights that while governments often provide such programs, a lack of multi-sectoral commitment and investment can limit their full impact, suggesting that the benefits observed in the local study could be further maximized with more comprehensive, coordinated support. Additionally, this agreement directly supports self-determination theory, as fulfilling the physiological need for food creates the conditions for students to satisfy their psychological needs for competence (ability to learn and engage) and choice to participate fully rather than being driven by hunger.

Feeding Programs Reduce Dropout Rates

Responses strongly supported the statement that school feeding programs reduce dropout rates. 46 respondents (53.5%) agreed and 32 (37.2%) strongly agreed. Only 7 (8.1%) were neutral, and 1 respondent (1.2%) strongly disagreed. No one disagreed. This indicates that more than 90% of respondents felt school meals help students stay in school. Also, the interview conducted with the Ward Education Officer shows that:

> Dropout cases have reduced in several schools across the ward since the feeding programs began. We used to get reports of students leaving school to help at home or find work because they were hungry. But now, with meals available, even parents see school as a support system. The program is not just keeping students in class, it is keeping them in school altogether (W 4, July 2025)

This implies that feeding programs offer a lifeline to students at risk of leaving school. Schools reduce the pressure on families by ensuring at least one meal a daily and motivate continued learning. This is especially impactful in economically disadvantaged areas. Similarly, Duan et al. (2024) highlighted that the nutritional intervention improved cognitive performance by enhancing students' health, increasing school attendance, fostering better study habits, raising educational expectations, and positively influencing peer human capital. The result underscores school

meals' significant social and motivational role, aligning with self-determination theory by fulfilling students' basic psychological needs for relatedness and competence. Providing consistent access to nutritious meals enhances students' health and well-being, boosting their confidence and motivation to engage in learning activities. This support encourages continued attendance and fosters a sense of belonging and self-efficacy, vital for sustained educational achievement, especially in disadvantaged communities.

Importance of Meals for Students from Low-Income Families

Among respondents, 36 (41.9%) agreed and 24 (27.9%) strongly agreed that meals are essential for retaining students from low-income families. Meanwhile, 12 (14%) were neutral, and another 12 (14%) disagreed. Only 2 respondents (2.3%) strongly disagreed. This means over two-thirds (69.8%) of the respondents believe meals are crucial for keeping poorer students in school. Furthermore, from this aspect, one of the school board members revealed that:

> In our community, many families struggle to provide even one proper meal a day. The school feeding program has become a real support for these children. We have seen that attendance improves when meals are offered at school, especially among students from poor backgrounds. Parents feel less pressure, making students happier and more active in class. Without meals, some of them might not come at all. It is not just about education; it is about giving them a chance to live better lives (School board member 1, July 2025).

This demonstrates how school meals serve as an educational and social support system for students from low-income families. They help reduce absenteeism and dropouts caused by hunger while easing the burden on struggling households. By offering meals, schools retain more students and promote equal learning opportunities regardless of a student's background. This reinforces the need for sustained investment in school feeding programs, especially in underserved areas. Moreover, according to Canbolat (2024), lack of adequate food is a critical factor that undermines student engagement and consistent school attendance, which are critical factors that influence long-term student retention. However, while the study effectively established the link between food insecurity and absenteeism, it fell short of directly examining how food provision programs within schools affect sustained student retention. Moreover, School meal programs serve as a critical foundation for satisfying the basic psychological needs outlined in self-determination theory. Specifically, ensuring adequate nutrition through these programs enhances students' competence by enabling them to focus and learn effectively, rather than being distracted by hunger. It strengthens their sense of relatedness by fostering a supportive school environment where their basic needs are met, thereby promoting consistent engagement and long-term retention.

Attendance Without Meals

This statement received mixed responses. 13 respondents (15.1%) strongly disagreed and 21 (24.4%) disagreed, showing they believed meals are essential for attendance. 23 (26.7%) were neutral, while 22 (25.6%) agreed and 7 (8.1%) strongly agreed that students would still attend even if meals were not provided. This shows uncertainty and diverse opinions among respondents. The data reflect that not all students rely on school meals to attend, but a significant number do. Neutral responses suggest that some teachers may not have observed a direct link or believe other factors influence attendance. This highlights the importance of considering academic and social student motivation aspects. Removing school meals may not impact all students equally, but it could seriously affect many. Likewise, Appiah (2024) asserted that school feeding programs significantly improve attendance and outcomes, particularly for girls and rural students, by addressing hunger and enhancing engagement. This data illustrates the varied perspectives on the role of school meals in attendance, aligning with Self-Determination Theory by highlighting the importance of meeting basic psychological and physiological needs for motivation. For students who rely on meals as a motivation to attend school, the absence of such programs could undermine their sense of competence and relatedness, potentially decreasing their intrinsic motivation to learn. Therefore, ensuring access to school meals supports the basic needs and the motivational factors critical for sustained engagement and educational success.

School Feeding Programs Impact Performance and Attendance

Regarding feeding programs' impact on student performance and attendance, 33 respondents (38.4%) agreed, and 25 (29.1%) strongly agreed. On the other hand, 13 (15.1%) disagreed, 8 (9.3%) strongly disagreed, and 7 (8.1%) were neutral. While some

disagreement exists, over 67% of respondents felt there was a positive impact. While an interview with a school board member revealed that:

> Our teachers reported that students perform better since meals became part of the school routine. They are more alert, complete assignments faster, and ask more questions. Attendance records are stronger, and we see fewer discipline problems. Even parents say they've noticed the difference at home, children talk more about school and seem happier to go every day (school board member 4, July 2025).

This shows that food affects both academic and behavioral outcomes. While not all teachers agreed, a clear majority saw benefits in performance and attendance. Feeding programs support not just physical health but also emotional and academic growth. This means they are a valuable part of any school improvement strategy. As supported by Cyiza and Mugiraneza (2023), meal timing, food quality, hygiene, and teacher involvement in gardening were positively associated with increased student retention, as reflected in higher promotion and completion rates for both boys and girls. This also aligns with self-determination theory, as consistent access to nutritious meals supports students' basic psychological needs by creating conditions that enable sustained participation and academic engagement. When students feel physically well and supported, they are more likely to stay motivated, focused, and connected to the learning environment.

Lack of Food Does Not Affect Retention

Most respondents rejected the idea that lack of food does not affect student retention. About 28 respondents (32.6%) strongly disagreed and 35 (40.7%) disagreed. Only 9 (10.5%) were neutral, while 11 (12.8%) agreed and 3 (3.5%) strongly agreed. This means over 73% of respondents believe food shortages affect whether students stay in school. This strong disagreement shows that most teachers believe food insecurity leads to higher dropout or absenteeism. When food is missing, students, especially those in poverty, are likelier to leave school. Schools must take meal interruptions seriously and ensure a consistent food supply. Feeding programs are not just optional but a core part of student retention strategies. This concurs with Mketo (2023), who showed significant improvements in student attendance, participation, and examination scores following the introduction of SFPs. Notably, the study also found that SFPs positively influenced student retention, as improved attendance and engagement in class were observed.

Despite teachers' responses, students also had to respond the provision of food in schools to influence student retention in public secondary schools. Their responses were as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' response on the feeding program in schools in influencing student retention (n=98)

Items	SD		D		N		A		SA	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I attend school more regularly because of the program.	20	20.4	20	20.4	10	10.2	29	29.6	19	19.4
I am more motivated to attend school regularly because meals are provided.	16	16.3	24	24.5	11	11.2	31	31.6	16	16.3
I would find it difficult to come to school every day without food.	41	41.8	27	27.6	15	15.3	4	4.1	11	11.2

Source: Field Data (2025)

The data from Table 2 indicates mixed student perceptions on the impact of school meals on attendance. For the statement "I attend school more regularly because of the program," 29 students (29.6%) agreed and 19 (19.4%) strongly agreed, suggesting that nearly half of the respondents believe school meals support regular attendance. However, 20 students (20.4%) disagreed, 20 (20.4%) strongly disagreed, and 10 (10.2%) were neutral, highlighting that other factors like personal drive or family expectations may influence attendance. Similarly, 31 students (31.6%) agreed and 16 (16.3%) strongly agreed that meals motivate them to attend school regularly, while 24 (24.5%) disagreed, 16 (16.3%) strongly disagreed, and 11 (11.2%) remained neutral. Notably, in response to whether they would find it difficult to attend school without meals, 41 students (41.8%) strongly disagreed and 27 (27.6%) disagreed showing that almost 70% believe they would still attend even without food. Only 11 (11.2%) strongly agreed, 4 (4.1%) agreed, and 15 (15.3%) were neutral, indicating that while meals are helpful, they are not the sole driver of school attendance. These findings reflect that

motivation to attend school is multifaceted and meals alone are not sufficient for every student.

Qualitative data from interviews enriches this understanding. The head of schools noted that meals significantly impact attendance, particularly among students from low-income households, with some attending school mainly because they are assured of food. During days when meals are delayed or unavailable, a decline in attendance and early departures is observed (HOS B, July 2025). This supports Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the importance of meeting students' basic needs like nutrition to foster intrinsic motivation and enhance engagement. Access to meals strengthens students' sense of relatedness and competence, promoting consistent participation. The school board also emphasized that meals build trust between schools and families, making parents more comfortable sending their children to school, especially when breakfast is unavailable at home (School Board Member 2, July 2025). This reinforces the broader community benefits of feeding programs. Appiah (2024) underscored the link between meeting basic needs and academic success, while Ashu and Fonkoua (2024) stressed the role of emotional and environmental support in promoting cognitive development. Duan et al. (2024) further highlighted how nutritional interventions enhance health, attendance, study habits, and educational outcomes. Collectively, these insights show that feeding programs support not only academic participation but also psychological well-being and community cohesion.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concluded that the provision of food in public secondary schools has a significant and positive influence on student retention in Nyamagana District. The findings revealed that school feeding programs greatly improve students' attendance, reduce dropout rates, and enhance classroom engagement and concentration, particularly among students from low-income families. A majority of teachers and education officials agreed that meals serve as a critical incentive for students to come to school consistently, while also addressing key barriers such as hunger and poverty that often lead to absenteeism. Students who benefit from school meals showed increased motivation, better participation in academic activities, and improved behavior in class. Additionally, the feeding program was found to strengthen relationships between schools and communities by easing the financial burden on families and building parental trust in the education system. Overall, school meals were not merely a nutritional intervention but a foundational element of student support that fosters educational equity, promotes well-being, and ensures that more students remain in school and complete their education.

The study recommended that the government, through the Ministry of Education and Local Government Authorities, should prioritize and institutionalize school feeding programs in all public secondary schools, particularly in food-insecure areas like Nyamagana District. This should involve the establishment of a dedicated and sustainable budget for feeding programs within national and district education plans, covering both the cost of food and the necessary infrastructure such as kitchens, storage facilities, and clean water. Clear policies, guidelines, and monitoring mechanisms must be developed to ensure consistent, safe, and effective program delivery. Active involvement of stakeholders including parents, school boards, local leaders, and development partners should be encouraged to promote ownership, accountability, and community support. Moreover, the program should be inclusive and sensitive to the needs of vulnerable students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to enhance equity in access to education. Where possible, schools should adopt complementary approaches like school gardens and partnerships with local farmers to ensure long-term sustainability and nutrition education. By treating school feeding as a strategic investment in education and human capital, the government can significantly boost retention, learning outcomes, and the overall well-being of students.

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