

Between Policy and Practice: School Nutrition in Filipino Classrooms

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School nutrition policies in the Philippines aim to improve child health and learning. Teachers and students are both part of this system—they shape and are shaped by it. Even with strong intentions from authorities, real school situations often differ from what is planned. This essay examines how teachers and students understand, follow, and adapt nutrition policies in public schools. It draws on Philippine studies to explore the gaps between policy design and practice.

One of the most visible policies is the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP), led by the Department of Education. According to a study by Tabunda and colleagues at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), teachers and school heads generally appreciate the program's benefits. They report better attendance and alertness in students who receive food each school day. Yet, they also identify major issues in practice. For example, many schools lack accurate measurement tools such as scales and height boards. This sometimes leads to errors in identifying which students need help. Teachers note that such mistakes can cause undernourished students to be left out or healthy students to receive unnecessary extra food.

Logging data also presents challenges. The PIDS study explains that many teachers lack standardized forms or training for tracking pre- and post-feeding measurements. Without reliable data, both the DEPED and partner agencies struggle to assess the program's impact. Yet teachers continue to support SBFP, keeping records manually and ensuring no child goes hungry.

Nutrition education forms another key part of school policy. According to the FAO and DepEd's guidelines, nutrition lessons are integrated in MAPEH and Health Education subjects from Grades 1 to 10. Teachers and health staff are expected to deliver lessons on food groups, hygiene, and healthy habits during class and PTA meetings. An example from a nutrition education project shows that in many schools, MAPEH teachers or nutrition coordinators offer short lessons and even nutrition tips during parent meetings. These sessions help students and parents learn, but success depends on dedicated time, teacher skill, and available teaching aids.

Teachers also take on roles beyond teaching. In many schools, MAPEH or science teachers measure student weight and height, manage feeding operations, and oversee gardening projects. Some teachers describe this as taking on multiple jobs. They must stop teaching classes to prepare meals, distribute food, clean up, and cook. These tasks cut into lesson time and add pressure, but teachers take pride in supporting a child's health.

The new National Feeding Program (Republic Act 11037, 2018) aims to extend feeding to a full school year at more schools. Early feedback from community-led kitchen models shows that this law helps better plan lessons and meals together

through multisectoral work. However, its success still depends on having trained staff, rating systems, and school-level resources.

Barriers remain. Administrative and logistical issues limit the implementation of even good policies. PIDS studies note the lack of equipment, missing toilets, and poor water supply affect program success. Even when food is available, poor hygiene facilities lower its positive impact on student health.

Finally, promotion of nutrition and gardening works best when schools have local buy-in. The FAO report shows that "lighthouse schools"—those with active gardens and parent engagement—help other schools copy good nutrition practices. These schools often become champions of nutrition education in their community.

In conclusion, Philippine school nutrition policies offer a strong structure in law and design. Yet the real-world impact depends on teachers' ideas and students' daily experiences. Teachers show dedication, even when tools and training are limited. Students learn more when programs include regular feeding, education, and hands-on gardening. To improve, schools must invest in accurate equipment, data training, sanitation, and community programs. Supporting teachers with training and staffing is also vital. When policies match classroom realities and receive the right resources, students benefit not only in health but also in learning and lifelong habits.

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