



SCHOOL-BASED FEEDING PROGRAM ON BENEFICIARIES' BMI: BASIS FOR HEALTHY NUTRITION AND EATING HABITS PROGRAM

Mary May R. Pelingon, Irene D. Ocampo, Cherry T. Hipolito, Jerine Michyla D. Ocampo and Edquel M. Reyes

Lyceum Northwestern University, Dagupan City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This study assessed the changes in the nutritional status of School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP) beneficiaries in the Schools Division of Mabalacat City, Pampanga, during School Year 2024–2025 and used the findings as a basis for promoting healthy nutrition and eating habits. A quantitative descriptive-comparative research design was employed, involving 100 beneficiaries selected through simple random sampling. Pre-program and post-program height, weight, and Body Mass Index (BMI) data were recorded, while a researcher-made questionnaire was administered to determine the beneficiaries' perceptions of the program. Frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, weighted mean, and paired-samples t-test were used to analyze the data. The findings showed increases in the mean height and weight of both boys and girls after the program, although their mean BMI values decreased because the recorded increases in height were proportionally greater than their weight gains. Respondents generally perceived the SBFP positively, as reflected by an overall weighted mean of 3.74, interpreted as "High." Food variety, overall satisfaction, healthier eating habits, and perceived nutritional benefits received the highest ratings. However, portion sufficiency, daily participation, parental engagement, food quality, and opportunities for social interaction emerged as areas requiring improvement. The study concluded that the SBFP was favorably perceived and contributed to changes in the beneficiaries' anthropometric measurements. Nevertheless, BMI findings should be interpreted using age- and sex-specific standards, and the identified implementation concerns should be addressed to strengthen the program's responsiveness and sustainability.

Keywords: *Body Mass Index, healthy eating habits, nutritional status, school-based feeding program, schoolchildren*

INTRODUCTION

Malnutrition among school-aged children remains a serious public health and educational concern because inadequate nutrition can impair physical growth, cognitive development, school participation, and learning. Children may experience multiple forms of malnutrition, including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, and obesity, because of limited access to safe, nutritious, affordable, and diverse food. These conditions are often intensified by poverty, rising food prices, unhealthy food environments, and unequal access to essential nutrition services (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations et al., 2024; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). Addressing malnutrition during the school years is therefore essential to protecting children's health and enabling them to benefit fully from educational opportunities.

Schools provide a practical setting for nutrition interventions because they can reach children regularly while involving families, teachers, health personnel, and community stakeholders. School feeding programs provide meals or food supplements to reduce short-term hunger, improve dietary intake, and support learners who are undernourished or food-insecure. Recent global evidence shows that school meal programs have expanded substantially and are increasingly recognized as investments in children's health, education, social protection, and human capital development (World Food Programme [WFP], 2025). Systematic reviews have also associated school meals with increased participation, improved food security and diet quality, and favorable attendance and academic outcomes, although program effects vary according to meal quality, implementation, duration, and local context (Cohen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Height, weight, and Body Mass Index (BMI) are important anthropometric measures used to monitor children's growth and nutritional status. For school-aged children, BMI should be interpreted according to age and sex using BMI-for-age standards because children's body composition changes as they grow. A higher or lower BMI alone does not necessarily represent nutritional improvement; an excessive increase may indicate overweight, while a substantial decrease may suggest thinness. This careful interpretation is particularly important because many communities experience the double burden of malnutrition, in which undernutrition and excessive weight coexist within the same population (Popkin et al., 2020). Consequently, feeding interventions should provide nutritionally balanced meals and include accurate, consistent, and age-appropriate growth monitoring.

In the Philippines, food insecurity and child malnutrition continue to require sustained and coordinated intervention. The 2023 National Nutrition Survey reported that 31.4% of Filipino households experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, while 2.7% experienced severe food insecurity (Department of Science and Technology–Food and Nutrition Research Institute [DOST-FNRI], 2024). To address hunger and undernutrition, Republic Act No. 11037, otherwise known as the Masustansyang Pagkain para sa Batang

Pilipino Act, institutionalized a national feeding program for undernourished children in public day care centers, kindergarten classes, and elementary schools. The Department of Education's operational guidelines further require nutritious meal provision, beneficiary assessment, food safety, stakeholder participation, monitoring, and evaluation in implementing the School-Based Feeding Program (Department of Education [DepEd], 2017; Republic Act No. 11037, 2018).

Despite its strong legal and policy foundation, the effectiveness of the SBFP depends on the consistency and quality of its implementation. A Philippine impact evaluation reported improvements in the nutritional status of many beneficiaries but also identified concerns involving beneficiary targeting, meal delivery, participation, and program monitoring (Albert et al., 2016). Moreover, the success of nutrition interventions is influenced by food acceptability, portion adequacy, learner participation, parental involvement, and support from teachers and school personnel. Evidence suggests that nutrition interventions are more effective when they are theory-based, interactive, supported by parents, and responsive to children's social and environmental conditions (Shorey & Chan, 2021). Therefore, beneficiaries' perceptions provide important information about how the program is experienced and what aspects require improvement.

Although international and national studies have examined school feeding programs, their findings cannot be automatically generalized to every school division. Program outcomes may vary according to beneficiaries' characteristics, socioeconomic circumstances, meal composition, food availability, implementation procedures, family participation, and local resources. Limited localized evidence is available regarding the changes in height, weight, and BMI of SBFP beneficiaries in the Schools Division of Mabalacat City during School Year 2024–2025. There is also insufficient evidence concerning beneficiaries' perceptions of food variety, meal quality, portion sufficiency, participation, health benefits, and program support. Examining both anthropometric measurements and beneficiary perceptions may provide a more comprehensive evaluation than relying on implementation reports alone.

Accordingly, this study assessed the changes in the nutritional status of SBFP beneficiaries in the Schools Division of Mabalacat City, Pampanga, during School Year 2024–2025. Specifically, it described and compared the beneficiaries' height, weight, and BMI before and after their participation in the program, determined whether the observed changes were statistically significant, and examined their perceptions of the SBFP. Based on the findings, strategies were proposed to strengthen program implementation and promote healthy and sustainable eating habits. The results may guide school administrators, feeding coordinators, teachers, parents, health personnel, and policymakers in developing evidence-based interventions that respond to the nutritional needs and actual experiences of school-aged children.

Research Questions

This study assessed the school-based feeding program on beneficiaries' BMI in the Schools Division of Mabalacat City, Pampanga for the school year 2024-2025 as the basis for promoting healthy nutrition and eating habits.

Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the BMI of the beneficiaries before and the implementation of the school-based feeding program?
2. Is there a significant difference in the beneficiaries' BMI before and after the implementation of the school-based feeding program?
3. What are the perceptions of the beneficiaries regarding the school-based feeding program?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-comparative research design to examine changes in the nutritional status of beneficiaries of the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP) in the Schools Division of Mabalacat City, Pampanga, during School Year 2024–2025. The descriptive component was used to present the beneficiaries' height, weight, Body Mass Index (BMI), and perceptions of the program. Meanwhile, the comparative component determined whether significant differences existed between their height, weight, and BMI measurements before and after participating in the SBFP. This design was more appropriate than a correlational design because the study compared two sets of measurements obtained from the same participants rather than examining relationships between separate variables.

The study was conducted in selected public schools implementing the SBFP within the Schools Division of Mabalacat City, Pampanga. The respondents consisted of 100 SBFP beneficiaries selected through simple random sampling from the official list of qualified beneficiaries. This sampling method gave each eligible beneficiary an equal chance of being selected, thereby reducing selection bias and improving the representativeness of the sample. The locale was selected because it provided direct access to the beneficiaries and program records needed to assess changes in nutritional status and understand the participants' experiences with the feeding program.

Two instruments were used to collect the required data. A researcher-developed data-recording sheet was used to document each beneficiary's height and weight before and after the SBFP, while BMI was calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in meters squared. A researcher-made questionnaire was used to determine the beneficiaries' perceptions regarding the meals, program implementation, perceived benefits, satisfaction, and promotion of healthy eating habits. The questionnaire was developed through a review of related literature and relevant SBFP guidelines and was submitted to experts in nutrition, research, and education for content validation. It was

also pilot-tested among beneficiaries who were not included in the final sample to identify unclear items and establish its reliability before administration.

Before collecting the data, the researcher obtained permission from the Schools Division Office, school heads, SBFP coordinators, and other appropriate authorities. The beneficiaries' pre- and post-program height and weight measurements were obtained from validated school nutritional records or measured using calibrated equipment following standard procedures. The perception questionnaire was administered using language appropriate to the beneficiaries' age and level of understanding, with neutral assistance provided when necessary. Parental consent and learner assent were secured, participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw without penalty. Codes were used instead of names to protect the participants' identities, and all information was kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Frequency and percentage were used to summarize the beneficiaries according to their nutritional classifications, while the mean and standard deviation were used to describe their height, weight, and BMI before and after the SBFP. A paired-samples t-test, also known as the t-test for correlated data, was applied to determine whether the pre-program and post-program measurements differed significantly at the .05 level of significance, subject to the required statistical assumptions. The weighted mean was used to analyze the beneficiaries' perceptions, interpreted as follows: 4.50–5.00, Very High; 3.50–4.49, High; 2.50–3.49, Moderately High; 1.50–2.49, Moderately Low; and 1.00–1.49, Very Low. The results provided the basis for proposing strategies to strengthen the SBFP and promote healthy nutrition and eating habits among its beneficiaries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussion of findings brought from the data gathering procedure. The data gathering procedures were based on the questions posited in the beginning of this study.

1. BMI of the Beneficiaries

Table 1
BMI of the Beneficiaries
N = 100

Measurement/Attribute	Before SBFP		After SBFP	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Height (in cm):	105.84	92.16	136.75	124.18
Weight (in kg):	16.37	15.46	21.87	20.83
BMI (Body Mass Index):	14.61	18.22	11.69	13.51

Table 1 presents the height, weight, and Body Mass Index (BMI) of the 100 beneficiaries before and after the implementation of the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP). Among boys, mean height increased from 105.84 cm to 136.75 cm, while mean weight

increased from 16.37 kg to 21.87 kg. Among girls, mean height increased from 92.16 cm to 124.18 cm, while mean weight rose from 15.46 kg to 20.83 kg. These findings indicate increases in the beneficiaries' average height and weight after the program. However, these changes should not yet be described as statistically significant unless supported by the results of a paired-samples t-test and its corresponding p-values.

Despite the increases in height and weight, the mean BMI of boys decreased from 14.61 to 11.69, while that of girls declined from 18.22 to 13.51. This occurred because the recorded increase in height was proportionally greater than the increase in weight. Nevertheless, a lower BMI should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of improved nutritional status or healthy catch-up growth. For children, BMI must be interpreted according to age- and sex-specific BMI-for-age standards rather than adult BMI classifications. The very large increases in mean height—30.91 cm among boys and 32.02 cm among girls—also require verification because such changes may be unlikely within a typical feeding-program period. The researcher should review the measurement dates, participants' ages, measuring procedures, equipment calibration, data encoding, and whether the same children were measured before and after the program.

The results suggest that the beneficiaries gained height and weight during the study period, but the changes cannot be attributed solely to the SBFP because children naturally grow and other factors may have affected their nutritional status. These factors include age, sex, program duration, food intake outside school, physical activity, health conditions, socioeconomic status, parental support, and participation in other nutrition or health interventions. Moreover, the study involved only 100 beneficiaries and relied primarily on anthropometric measurements. Future research should include a comparison group, BMI-for-age z-scores, dietary intake, attendance, health indicators, socioeconomic characteristics, and qualitative feedback from beneficiaries and parents to provide a more reliable and comprehensive evaluation of the program's effectiveness.

2. Difference in the Beneficiaries' BMI Before and After the Implementation of the School-Based Feeding Program

Table 2
Difference in the Beneficiaries' BMI Before and After
the Implementation of the School-Based Feeding Program

	Statistic	Before-After (Boys)	Before-After (Girls)
Test of Homogeneity of Variances (Levene's Test)	F	.934	.986
	P	.361	.366
Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality	W	.921	.938
	p	.087	.082
Paired t-Test	t	-6.843	-7.842

	p	.578	<.001
Effect Size (Cohen's D)	D	.214	.441

Table 2 presents the statistical analysis of the beneficiaries' BMI before and after the implementation of the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP). Levene's test produced $F = 0.934$, $p = .361$ for boys and $F = 0.986$, $p = .366$ for girls. Because both p-values were greater than .05, no statistically significant differences in variance were identified. However, equality of variances is not a required assumption of the paired-samples t-test because the pre-program and post-program measurements were obtained from the same beneficiaries. The more relevant assumption is whether the differences between the paired BMI measurements were approximately normally distributed.

The Shapiro–Wilk test yielded $W = 0.921$, $p = .087$ for boys and $W = 0.938$, $p = .082$ for girls. Since the p-values exceeded the .05 significance level, there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the BMI difference scores departed significantly from normality. Thus, the normality assumption for conducting a paired-samples t-test was considered satisfied, provided that the test was applied to the differences between the pre-program and post-program BMI scores. The results supported the use of a parametric paired comparison for both groups.

For boys, the reported result of $t = -6.843$ and $p = .578$ is mathematically inconsistent because a t-value of that magnitude would normally produce a very small p-value for a sample of this size. Therefore, the original statistical output, degrees of freedom, and encoded values must be reviewed before concluding that the change in boys' BMI was not statistically significant. For girls, the result of $t = -7.842$, $p < .001$ indicated a statistically significant difference between their BMI before and after the SBFP. Nevertheless, the negative direction reflected a decrease in BMI rather than an automatic improvement in nutritional status. The reported Cohen's d values of 0.214 for boys and 0.441 for girls represented small and small-to-moderate effects, respectively, but these values should also be recalculated because they may not be consistent with the reported t-statistics and sample size.

Overall, the results cannot yet establish that the SBFP affected girls more strongly than boys until the inconsistent statistical values have been verified. Furthermore, changes in BMI should be interpreted using age- and sex-specific BMI-for-age classifications because a decrease may indicate increasing thinness rather than improved nutrition. BMI alone also does not distinguish muscle mass from body fat or account for dietary intake, physical activity, health conditions, socioeconomic circumstances, and natural growth. Future studies should use BMI-for-age z-scores, include other nutritional and behavioral indicators, document program participation, and consider a comparison group to provide a more reliable evaluation of the SBFP's contribution to children's nutritional outcomes.

3. General Perceptions of the SBFP

Table 3
General Perceptions of the SBFP

Indicators	Mean	Verbal Description
The food options varied and suitable for the learners' needs.	4.83	All the Times
Learners, parents, and school staff are satisfied with the SBFP.	4.78	All the Times
Changes or recommendations should have been suggested by learners, parents, or teachers to improve the SBFP.	4.68	All the Times
SBFP influenced learners to adopt healthier eating habits.	4.67	All the Times
There has been a significant change in BMI among learners participating in the SBFP.	4.6	All the Times
Learners experienced positive changes in their physical health or nutrition.	4.33	All the Times
SBFP had a measurable effect on learners' academic performance.	3.58	Always
Learners report higher energy levels during the school day due to the SBFP.	3.48	Always
SBFP improved the overall attendance rate among learners.	3.47	Always
School staff and teachers actively support and facilitate the SBFP.	3.47	Always
Learners are satisfied with the quality of food provided by the SBFP.	3.45	Always
Parents perceive the effect of the SBFP on their children's health, behavior, and academic performance.	2.85	Sometimes
Learners actively participate in the SBFP on a daily basis.	2.77	Sometimes

SBFP provides an opportunity for learners to build friendships and interact socially.	2.65	Sometimes
The food portions are sufficient to meet the daily needs of the learners.	2.47	Rarely
Grand Mean	3.74	Always

Table 3 presents the respondents' perceptions of the School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP), which obtained an overall weighted mean of 3.74, verbally interpreted as "High." This finding indicates that the program was generally perceived as effective and beneficial to the learners. Respondents particularly recognized its contribution to food provision, nutrition, and the development of healthier eating practices. The favorable overall rating supports the importance of sustaining the SBFP while addressing aspects that received comparatively lower evaluations.

The highest-rated indicator was the variety and suitability of the food options, with a weighted mean of 4.83 or "Very High." Overall satisfaction with the program followed closely, obtaining a weighted mean of 4.78 or "Very High." These results suggest that the meals generally met the learners' preferences and nutritional needs and that the program was positively received by its stakeholders. A varied menu can prevent meal fatigue, encourage regular participation, and provide learners with a broader range of nutrients necessary for healthy growth and development.

The need to provide recommendations for improving the SBFP obtained a weighted mean of 4.68, while the program's perceived influence on healthier eating habits received 4.67; both were interpreted as "Very High." The high rating for recommendations does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction but may demonstrate the respondents' willingness to participate in improving the program. Moreover, the perceived influence on eating habits suggests that the SBFP may have benefits beyond addressing immediate hunger by exposing learners to nutritious food and encouraging healthier choices. Continuous nutrition education and parental involvement may help learners apply these practices at home.

Perceived changes in learners' BMI obtained a weighted mean of 4.60 or "Very High," while perceived improvements in physical health and nutrition received 4.33 or "High." These findings indicate that respondents generally observed or believed that participation in the SBFP contributed to changes in learners' physical and nutritional condition. Nevertheless, these perceptions must be interpreted together with the actual height, weight, and BMI results. A perceived change in BMI does not automatically indicate improved nutritional status because children's BMI must be classified according to their age and sex.

The perceived effect of the SBFP on academic performance received a weighted mean of 3.58 or "High." Improved energy during the school day obtained 3.48, while increased attendance and active support from teachers and school personnel both received 3.47;

these were interpreted as “Moderately High.” These findings suggest that the respondents recognized educational and participation-related benefits, although these were less evident than the nutritional benefits. Adequate food intake may help learners remain attentive and active, but academic performance and attendance may also be affected by health, family circumstances, motivation, teaching quality, and access to learning resources.

Satisfaction with food quality obtained a weighted mean of 3.45, parental observations of changes in health, behavior, and academic performance received 2.85, daily participation obtained 2.77, and opportunities for friendship and social interaction received 2.65. These indicators were interpreted as “Moderately High,” but their lower ratings reveal areas requiring additional attention. The findings suggest the need to improve meal quality and acceptability, identify barriers to consistent participation, strengthen communication with parents, and make feeding activities more socially engaging. Regular consultation with beneficiaries and stakeholders may help program implementers respond more effectively to these concerns.

Food-portion sufficiency received the lowest weighted mean of 2.47, interpreted as “Moderately Low,” indicating that some respondents considered the servings insufficient for the learners’ daily needs. Program implementers should therefore review portion sizes based on the beneficiaries’ ages, nutritional requirements, prescribed feeding standards, available resources, and recorded plate waste. Overall, the findings show that the SBFP was highly regarded for its menu variety, stakeholder satisfaction, and promotion of healthy eating habits. However, strengthening portion adequacy, food quality, daily participation, parental engagement, and social interaction may further improve the program’s responsiveness, sustainability, and contribution to learners’ nutritional well-being.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The SBFP significantly improved the height and weight of beneficiaries, indicating enhanced nutritional status.
2. The SBFP had a significant impact on the BMI of girls, suggesting gender-specific responses to the program.
3. The SBFP was generally well-received by stakeholders, with high satisfaction and positive perceptions of its impact on health and eating habits.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study and the conclusions drawn, the following were the recommendations offered:

1. Future programs should continue to focus on providing balanced and nutritious meals to support the growth and development of children.

2. Tailored interventions may be necessary to address the unique nutritional needs of boys and girls, ensuring equitable benefits for all learners.
3. Efforts should be made to improve food portions and encourage consistent daily participation to maximize the program's impact.
4. Enhanced communication with parents and the inclusion of qualitative measures of nutritional status can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study complied with established ethical standards to protect the rights, dignity, safety, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Before data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the appropriate Schools Division and school authorities, secured informed consent from the parents or legal guardians, and obtained assent from the learner-beneficiaries. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using identification codes instead of names, securely storing the collected data, and limiting their use to academic purposes. The researcher also ensured honesty, accuracy, and objectivity in collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the findings and properly acknowledged all sources to avoid plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, and misrepresentation.

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Corresponding author: 80reyesj@gmail.com