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POLICY BRIEF · UGANDA

High-Coverage School Feeding Programmes Can Improve Learning in Uganda

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Key messages

- **Adopt a hybrid school feeding model that remains parent-led where viable and provides government funding in food-insecure regions.**

  This targets government resources where the parent-led model cannot reach food-insecure regions, without disrupting communities where parent-led feeding already works well.

- **Set and monitor a minimum coverage standard of at least 75% of learners.**

  Attendance and learning gains occur only when coverage is high: up to 18.5 percentage-point gains in numeracy and 8.2 percentage-point gains in attendance compared with schools with no or low coverage.

Why school feeding matters in Uganda

School Feeding Programmes (SFPs) improve educational outcomes when coverage is high and investments in school quality are in place. Uganda's 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy dramatically expanded enrolment, but access has not translated into learning: one in four primary school-age children is out of school[1], only six in ten complete primary school on time, and many who do stay lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills[2]—part of a global learning crisis in which 251 million children and youth remain out of school[3], while seven in ten children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple text by age ten[4]. Weak foundational skills push children out of school early and limit their future income[5]. Hungry children struggle to concentrate, attend regularly, and learn. Roughly 300 million school-age children in low- and lower-middle-income countries suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia, which impairs cognitive development[6], and childhood stunting is linked to an estimated 18 percent of grade repetition in Africa[7]. School feeding is therefore a key policy tool for improving nutrition, attendance, and learning together.

Unlike countries with government-funded programmes, Uganda's Education Act places responsibility for school feeding on parents—yet an estimated 66 percent of learners still have no access to school meals. Karamoja has an established, WFP-supported programme, and the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) runs a milk-based scheme in western Uganda, but coverage nationally remains patchy. Government has issued School Feeding Guidelines and is drafting a National School Feeding Policy, but it does not yet set a coverage standard.

Methodology

This brief draws on a study estimating the impact of school feeding on attendance and foundational learning (English literacy and numeracy) in Uganda, and testing whether feeding intensity—the share of learners covered at a school—shapes these outcomes. The study used the 2024 Uwezo National Learning Assessment Survey, a nationally representative survey of schools and children aged 4–17 across Uganda, covering learners' literacy and numeracy, attendance, school characteristics, and school feeding arrangements. The analysis focuses on Uganda's predominantly parent-led model, an approach that has received little research attention elsewhere.

Because schools with feeding programmes tend to differ from those without in other ways too, simple comparisons risk overstating the true effect. To guard against this, the study used a statistical approach designed to produce a credible, cautious range for the likely effect of feeding. It also compared effects across different levels of feeding coverage and school quality.

Key findings

1. School feeding programmes are widespread, but access is uneven

Approximately 71 percent of schools report some form of feeding arrangement. However, access is skewed: feeding programmes are considerably more common in private schools than in government schools, and schools with feeding programmes generally have lower pupil-teacher ratios, better infrastructure, and stronger parental financial support. This means feeding programmes are often concentrated in schools that already have better educational outcomes.

2. Coverage levels, not programme presence, drive learning gains

When schools with any feeding programme were compared to those without, results were mixed: attendance was up to 1.6 percentage points higher and English literacy 0.7 percentage points higher in feeding schools, but numeracy differences were inconsistent, consistent with the clustering pattern noted above.

Schools where at least 75 percent of learners participated in a feeding programme (high coverage) consistently outperformed schools with low (less than 25% coverage) or no coverage (no feeding programme at all):

- Attendance improved by up to 8.2 percentage points compared to schools without any feeding programme, and by up to 11.1 percentage points compared to schools with very low coverage.
- English literacy improved by up to 12.8 percentage points.
- Numeracy improved by up to 18.5 percentage points.

Figure 1 shows the estimated numeracy effect of feeding under three comparisons. Comparing any feeding to no feeding shows almost no effect, because it lumps low- and high-coverage schools together and cancels out. But comparing high-coverage schools to either no feeding or low coverage shows a clear, positive numeracy gain—one that holds up even under the most cautious assumptions the study can make (right-hand panel). The data point squarely to coverage, not presence, as what matters.

Policy options

The findings above point to coverage, not mere presence, as the decisive factor in learning gains—evidence that should anchor the choice among Uganda's policy options—but regions with distinct food-security challenges, such as Karamoja, need a different, government-funded response. Governments relying mainly on parents, including Uganda's, face a choice among four broad policy scenarios, compared in Table 1 against the evidence from this study.

Of the four options, the hybrid model (Option 2) offers the strongest combination of impact, feasibility, and cost: it delivers the full learning gains documented in this brief, builds directly on the National School Feeding Policy already awaiting Cabinet approval, and targets government funding to the food-insecure regions the parent-led model alone cannot reach. The recommendations below set out the specific steps required to implement it.

Conclusions and policy messages

1. **MoES & Cabinet: adopt Option 2—the hybrid model—and approve the National SFP policy with a minimum coverage standard.**

   Cabinet should approve the draft National School Feeding Policy without further delay, and the approved policy must set a minimum coverage standard—at least 75 percent of enrolled learners consistently fed—as the benchmark for performance, not merely whether a school has a feeding programme. MoES should gazette implementation guidelines operationalising this standard within 90 days of approval.

2. **MoFPED & MoES: create a dedicated budget line for food-insecure sub-regions.**

   MoFPED should allocate a dedicated school feeding budget line in the next Budget Framework Paper cycle, concentrated in the food-insecure sub-regions identified by UBOS and Food Insecurity Experience Scale data—particularly Karamoja, Teso, and Bukedi, where informal packed-lunch arrangements are weakest. Development partners (WFP, UNICEF, World Bank) should co-finance the transition to domestic funding.

3. **MoES & Local Governments: strengthen implementation standards and monitoring.**

   MoES should set minimum standards for meal frequency, nutritional quality, and food safety, and build SFP monitoring directly into the existing NAPE and UNEB assessment cycles rather than a costly parallel data system. Local governments and district education offices should verify coverage compliance and report annually to MoES.

Figure 1: School feeding effects on numeracy

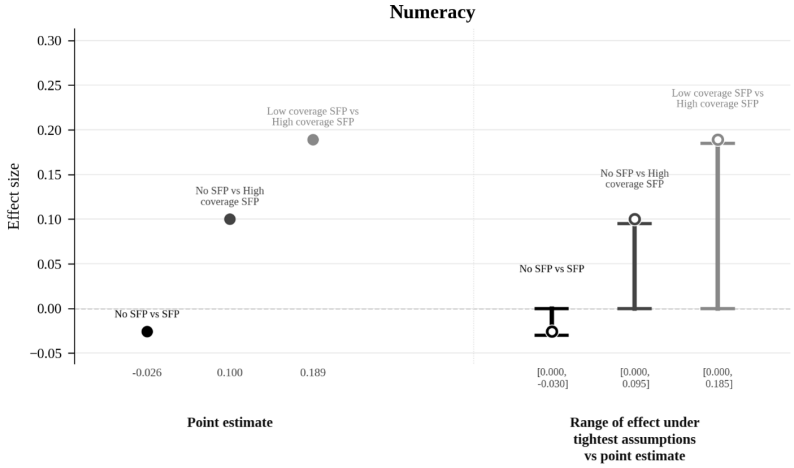


Table 1: Policy options for school feeding in Uganda

Policy option	Likely impact on learning	Cost to government	Political feasibility	Key risk
1. Status quo (parent-led only, no policy)	Low (only about 20% of schools will have adequate coverage of at least 75% of learners accessing meals; uneven coverage yields no system-wide gains)	Very low	Low (growing pressure from high enrolments brought on by universal access to primary education and civil society)	Learning poverty persists; the country misses SDG 4 targets
2. Hybrid model: predominantly parent-led, with government-funded provision in food-insecure and other high-need regions. Approve the National School Feeding Policy and enforce a minimum coverage standard of at least 75% learner participation	High (this study finds up to 18.5 percentage point numeracy gains and 8.2 percentage point attendance gains at high-coverage schools)	Moderate (hybrid model leverages parent contributions; government targets the poorest schools/regions)	High (policy already drafted; Cabinet approval is the remaining step)	Risk of compliance gaps if monitoring is weak. To assess outcomes, M&E needs to be linked to learning outcome data, such as NAPE for Uganda
3. Targeted government support only to unique poor or food-insecure regions (Karamoja + food-insecure sub-regions only in Uganda's case)	Moderate (gains in high-need areas, but the national learning gap will likely persist)	Low to moderate because of a special geographically ring-fenced budget line for special regions	High (politically popular; builds on the World Food Programme and other humanitarian agencies' support precedent)	Excludes many poor children in non-targeted areas; fragmented implementation
4. Universal government-funded school meals (all government schools)	Very high (maximum coverage ensures gains are system-wide)	Very high (requires a substantial new budget line and institutional capacity)	Low to moderate (fiscal constraints make near-term full rollout unlikely)	Implementation strain; risk of underfunded, low-quality meals that do not generate learning gains

4 **MoES & Parliament: complement feeding with investment in school quality.**

Learning returns to feeding are stronger in better-resourced schools, so MoES and Parliament must ensure the rollout is paired with, not a substitute for, investment in teacher deployment and learning infrastructure. The Parliamentary Committee on Education should review this complementarity as part of the SFP policy approval process.

Two evidence gaps are worth naming before action is taken. First, this analysis shows high coverage works, but not what it costs to achieve at scale under each of the four options above—a comparative cost-effectiveness assessment would sharpen the budget case MoFPED needs to make. Second, the data capture school-level feeding arrangements rather than confirmed individual meal receipt, so true coverage may carry some measurement error; the NAPE-linked monitoring in Recommendation 3 will generate the data needed to close this gap. Neither limitation changes the direction of the finding.

Implementation roadmap

The roadmap in Table 2 translates the recommended course of action into a sequenced set of steps, specifying enabling conditions and key partners at each phase.

Table 2: Implementation roadmap

Timeframe	Key actions	Resources / enabling conditions	Key partners
Short-term (2026–2027)	• Cabinet approves national SFP policy • MoES gazettes coverage standard (≥75% learner participation) • MoFPED allocates dedicated budget line for food-insecure sub-regions • MoES establishes or strengthens SFP coordination unit within Basic Education Dept.	Policy document; Cabinet memo; donor bridge financing (WFP, UNICEF)	MoES, MoFPED, Cabinet Secretariat, WFP, UNICEF
Medium-term (2027–2028)	• Phase rollout of home-grown SFP in Karamoja + bottom-two food-insecurity quintile sub-regions • Local Governments establish district SFP committees • MoES integrates SFP M&E into NAPE assessment cycle • Strengthen SMCs/PTAs with capacity and budget guidance • MoES issues minimum meal quality and frequency standards	District implementation grants; training for SMCs; NAPE M&E integration; UBOS sub-region food security data	MoES, OPM, Local Governments, UBOS, SNV, WFP, community PTAs, smallholder farmer cooperatives
Long-term (2028 and beyond)	• Scale the hybrid model nationally, with coverage targets in the annual Education Sector Budget Framework Paper • Evaluate impact using NAPE longitudinal data; adjust intensity standards based on evidence • Integrate SFP into Home-Grown School Feeding linkages with the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) agricultural production programmes	Sustained domestic budget allocation; public-private partnerships; MAAIF co-financing for local procurement	MoES, MAAIF, MoFPED, private sector, development partners, research institutions (Makerere, Uwezo, Building Tomorrow)

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About this brief

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