

Embedding Health Education Through Governance, Space, and Student Conduct: Lessons From South Korea's School Nutrition Policy for SDG3 and 4

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Abstract

South Korea's school meal and nutrition programs improve student health and performance. The OECD ranks Korea among top PISA countries for educational equity, and Universal Free Lunch Program results show higher test scores and less underperformance. Since 2009, Korea has run policies like the Green Food Zone and Sugar Reduction Plan. These shape what students learn and where they eat, showing an integrated, lifelong health education model. This study uses qualitative methods, combining content analysis of policy documents, curriculum guidelines, and interviews with education and nutrition staff. It examines how Korea's health education works as behavioral governance, applying Michel Foucault's governmentality framework to show how governments shape behavior indirectly through institutions, daily practices, and norms instead of force. Analysis of spatial regulation, curriculum, and community role shows how these policies guide choices and build lasting awareness. Findings show students are learners and health-conscious citizens shaped by institutional structures, suggesting such policies act as governance tools within education. Korea's experience offers lessons for Indonesia, which launched a national free meal program in 2025 for over 82 million students to reduce stunting and support rural communities. Korea Health Promotion Association collaborates with Banda Aceh's local government and community health centers to run child growth monitoring, nutrition support, and health education programs tackling non-communicable diseases and early childhood development gaps. This illustrates an effective model of sustained public-private community partnership between Korea and Indonesia, highlighting how integrated health and nutrition strategies can help bridge regional health inequalities and advance SDGs 3 and 4.

Keywords: school nutrition policy, governmentality, behavioral governance, Universal Free Lunch Program (UFLP), Children's Food Safety Zone (Green Food Zone)

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Introduction

Child nutrition is increasingly treated as a public health concern and, at the same time, as a condition that shapes learning, cognition, and educational equity. Nutritional status in childhood shapes students' physical development and concentration, influences school participation and classroom engagement, and can widen or narrow achievement gaps over time. School-based nutrition policies are often discussed as welfare arrangements that reduce hunger and improve short-term intake. In practice, however, they also function as institutional designs that organize how children encounter food, health knowledge, and everyday routines, shaping longer-run conduct and capacities linked to SDG 3 and SDG 4 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

A key premise of this study is that schools are not neutral spaces. Habits form through repetition, norms become "common sense," and students learn not only through instruction but through the structure of daily life. School nutrition policy can therefore be read as embedded health education: it shapes what is available, what is visible, and what is repeatedly practiced. This shifts attention away from health education as textbook content alone and toward the spaces, routines, and signals through which health-related conduct is learned before explicit teaching even begins.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), this paper analyzes how health education can operate through institutions, environments, and norms rather than through coercion. Governmentality highlights governing as the practical organization of settings and expectations that guide how people act and understand themselves. Applied to school nutrition policy, governmentality helps clarify how health education may function as behavioral governance: an indirect form of conduct-shaping that makes certain choices easier, more normal, and more repeatable than others. Rather than remaining passive recipients of assistance, students emerge as subjects who gradually internalize expectations of self-care and health responsibility through institutional cues and patterned practice.

South Korea offers a particularly instructive case for this analysis in light of its sustained attention to educational equity in the PISA context (OECD, 2023). As noted in the Abstract, OECD data consistently positions Korea among the top PISA countries for educational equity (OECD, 2023). Here, "rank" is used as shorthand for comparative patterns reported in PISA indicators and equity-related distributions, not as an official causal ranking claim by the OECD (OECD, 2023). The expansion of the Universal Free Lunch Program (UFLP) has been contextualized within broader improvements in student performance and reduced underperformance. However, these quantitative indicators tell only part of the story.

While such outcome indicators are often cited in policy discussions, they do not explain how the system governs conduct. Therefore, this study looks beyond the test scores to examine the policy architecture. The framework includes publicly funded free school meals grounded in Korea's school-meal legal and administrative framework (School Meals Act, 2019), reinforced by complementary measures that work outside the classroom as well as within it. Two examples that illustrate this wider policy logic are the Children's Food Safety Protection Zone (often referred to as a "Green Food Zone") (Special Act on Safety Management of Children's Dietary Lifestyle, 2021), which regulates aspects of the food environment around schools within designated areas, and the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety's national sugar-intake reduction policy package (often presented as a "Sugar Reduction Plan") (Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, 2021), aimed at reducing excessive sugar consumption.

This leads to a central question: How can governments shape students' health behavior without force, through governance, space, and student conduct within daily school life? By examining South Korea's school nutrition policy through governmentality, the paper argues that the policy's significance rests on how it structures a routine-based learning environment in which health conduct is cultivated, alongside its role in nutritional provision. In particular, it emphasizes spatial regulation in and around schools, the daily routines through which repeated meal practices normalize health behavior, and the formation of norms that position students as health-conscious citizens through institutional expectations and cues. Ultimately, this perspective treats nutrition policy as a governance technology that embeds health learning in everyday school life, instead of leaving health to individual choice alone or treating nutrition policy as welfare only.

The policy relevance of this analysis extends beyond Korea, especially to countries currently expanding large-scale meal programs. Indonesia provides a timely and consequential context for translating lessons from Korea's institutional design. Indonesia launched a nationwide free meal initiative in 2025 (MBG) (The Associated Press, 2025), targeting roughly 82 million students (Reuters, 2025) under a multi-year plan aimed at reducing stunting and strengthening human capital aligned with "Golden Indonesia 2045." The scale of MBG makes implementation design and governance capacity central concerns. The Indonesian context also underscores the need to tackle multiple health challenges simultaneously, including persistent child stunting and rising risks associated with dietary change and non-communicable diseases. This, in turn, suggests that success depends on more than food distribution alone.

Recent cooperation between Korea and Indonesia provides practical grounding for this governance-centered interpretation. Publicly documented initiatives led by the Korea Association of Health Promotion in Banda Aceh illustrate a partnership approach centered on child growth monitoring, nutrition support, health screening, and community-linked health education infrastructure (including coordination with local government and community health centers) (Korea Association of Health Promotion, 2025). Such efforts resonate with the paper's argument that school-based nutrition initiatives are most sustainable when connected to monitoring systems and community-linked governance, rather than treated as isolated feeding interventions. Korea's experience is used here as an analytic case for clarifying what is being governed, where governance is enacted, and how governance becomes durable through repetition, routine, and feedback mechanisms.

Ultimately, reframing school nutrition policy as embedded health education and behavioral governance helps clarify how education systems can operationalize SDG 3 and SDG 4 together. The Korean case demonstrates how health learning can be "lived" through the organization of school spaces and routines, and why the institutional design of meal programs matters as much as formal curriculum content. This framing also offers a structured lens for thinking about Indonesia's MBG and similar initiatives as opportunities to build governance arrangements that support long-term health capability, equity, and educational participation.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design is used to examine how school nutrition policy can operate as embedded health education through institutional routines and spatial governance. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, the analysis interprets governing as an indirect process that works through environments, norms, and everyday practices rather than through explicit coercion. South Korea serves as the primary case because it provides an institutionally

consolidated setting in which school meals, child health, and educational routines are closely connected through national and local governance instruments.

To broaden policy relevance without claiming direct equivalence across contexts, Indonesia's MBG is introduced as a contemporary implementation environment for cautious policy learning on governance design and scalability. Accordingly, any mentions of "improved performance" in the paper are treated as policy-discourse framing and background context, while the study's evidence and claims remain interpretive (documentary analysis and interviews) rather than outcome-evaluative (Foucault, 1991).

The analysis is guided by three linked questions concerning how governments shape students' health-related behavior without force through school space, routines, and everyday conduct; how school meal policies become educational in effect as embedded health education rather than remaining welfare-only provisions; and which governance design features visible in the Korean case can inform reflection on Indonesia's MBG as an administrative and policy-architecture challenge without implying a simple transfer of policy content.

Two complementary forms of qualitative evidence underpin the study. Documentary material specifies policy intent, implementation architecture, and governance instruments surrounding school nutrition and child health. Interview evidence from education and nutrition staff is used to clarify how policy logics are interpreted and enacted in practice and to triangulate documentary interpretations of routines, responsibilities, and monitoring expectations at the operational level. The interviews function as supplementary interpretive material rather than a basis for representative claims or statistical generalization, strengthening credibility by adding grounded institutional perspectives to claims derived primarily from policy texts.

Documentary sources were selected purposively, prioritizing publicly available and institutionally authored materials that explicitly describe governance instruments, responsibilities, monitoring arrangements, and the spatial or behavioral assumptions embedded in policy design. The document set includes legal and regulatory texts, ministerial guidelines, national strategy documents, curriculum-related guidance, and official institutional reports. International organization materials are used as contextual references when they clarify broader objectives or framing, but they do not constitute the core evidentiary base of the analysis.

Analytically, governmentality is operationalized as a set of observable governance logics traceable across policy design and institutional practice. The documents are read as governance blueprints that reveal how standards, routines, monitoring, and spatial-arrangements structure everyday life in schools, while interview accounts illuminate how those routines and norms are translated into practice, including how students encounter regulated food environments, standardized meal practices, and health-oriented cues.

A consistent coding logic is applied across both the documentary corpus and interview material to keep interpretation disciplined and transparent. Coding focuses on how policies define the target of intervention, embed health-related norms into school life, and distribute responsibilities among ministries, schools, local governments, and related institutions. Particular attention is given to language and provisions that indicate governance through space and routine, including regulation of food environments near schools, standardization of nutritional guidelines and meal provision, and institutional practices that make health-related conduct repeatable and socially expected within everyday school rhythms.

Rigor is strengthened through triangulation across multiple document types and by tying interpretive claims to identifiable policy instruments and operational routines. Interview material is used to corroborate, nuance, or challenge implications drawn from documentary evidence, helping prevent the analysis from relying solely on formal policy rhetoric. Where policy language is aspirational, it is treated as part of governance discourse and intention, without equating stated goals with confirmed outcomes; outcome-related claims are addressed separately in the Results and Findings section.

Indonesia's MBG is discussed as an analytically cautious extension that supports policy learning without asserting comparability. It provides a structured bridge from the Korean case to a policy environment where scale and administrative complexity make governance architecture especially salient, and it is used to reflect on design issues common to large-scale school meal programs, including coordination, routinization, monitoring capacity, and the relationship between welfare delivery and educational effects. This extension does not function as a second empirical case producing independent findings, but as a framework for disciplined reflection on how governance insights may travel across contexts.

Data Collection & Key Findings

The study employs a qualitative case study approach, combining documentary analysis with interviews to trace how school nutrition policy in South Korea operates as a welfare provision and as a governance mechanism shaping everyday conduct. Purposive sampling was used to capture policy intentions, institutional designs, implementation routines, and monitoring logics that show how healthy eating is constructed and stabilized within schools and surrounding food environments.

Policy and regulatory texts form the core documentary base. These materials define the scope and rationale of school nutrition governance through national strategies on student health and diet, standards for school meal provision, and frameworks addressing food environments around schools. Reading these texts clarifies how nutrition is framed as a public responsibility, how risk and responsibility are distributed across institutions, and how the boundary of education extends beyond the classroom into everyday spaces of consumption.

Beyond policy texts, operational guidelines and institutional manuals were also analyzed to examine how governance is translated into routine practice. School meal operation guidance, nutrition and health education materials, and implementation instructions specify daily procedures and standardize expectations. This material makes it possible to trace how routines are formalized, how compliance is embedded in administrative processes, and how repeated meal practices become a stable setting through which habits are cultivated over time.

Interviews with education and nutrition staff complement the documentary analysis and strengthen interpretive validity. Rather than serving as a basis for statistical generalization, the interviews provide contextual grounding on how policies are enacted in everyday settings, how responsibilities are understood across institutional actors, and how routines and monitoring expectations are experienced in practice. This triangulation helps connect formal policy design to the institutional processes through which students encounter regulated spaces, repeated meal practices, and normalized health cues.

Analytically, the combined materials are interpreted through a governmentality lens associated with Michel Foucault, with attention to how space, routine, and norm formation structure the

conditions of possible action. The analysis therefore treats healthy eating less as an individual preference and more as an outcome shaped by designed environments, repeated practices, and institutional expectations.

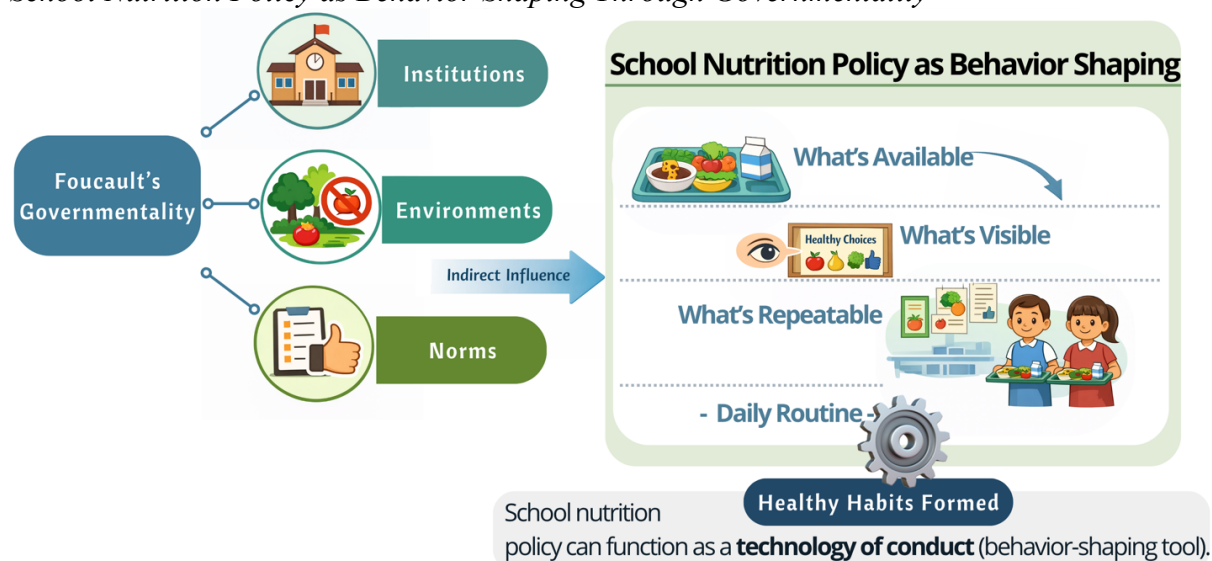
The findings suggest that South Korea's school nutrition policy functions through spatial governance that extends educational authority beyond the school interior into surrounding food environments. By shaping what is available and salient near schools, governance reorganizes the conditions under which students encounter food choices, shifting nutrition from a matter of personal willpower to a matter of structured access, visibility, and constraint embedded in everyday geography.

Routinization strengthens the policy's behavioral effects because school meals operate as a repetitive and standardized practice that supports habit formation over time. Since eating occurs daily within an institutional framework, the educational force of the policy depends less on episodic campaigns and more on predictable rhythms produced through repeated practice, administrative standardization, and stable implementation routines.

Norm formation is reinforced through institutional language, guidance, and monitoring that link health to responsibility and define desirable conduct in practical terms. In this way, school nutrition policy contributes to subject formation by encouraging students to internalize health-oriented norms through environments that make certain practices easier, routines that make them repeatable, and evaluative systems that make them measurable and governable.

Results and Findings

The analysis finds that South Korea's school nutrition policy operates not merely as a welfare-oriented meal provision system but as a form of behavioral governance embedded in everyday schooling. Across policy designs and implementation logics, "health education" is produced as an effect of institutional arrangements rather than a stand-alone classroom lesson. In this framing, the core mechanism is not persuasion or coercion, but the indirect shaping of conduct through structured environments and repeated practices. This supports the study's central claim that nutrition policy can function as a "technology of conduct," where what students learn about health is continuously reinforced by how school life is organized.

Figure 1*School Nutrition Policy as Behavior Shaping Through Governmentality*

Spatial regulation constitutes the foundational layer of this governance. Spatial regulation extends the educational boundary beyond the classroom by treating the food environment itself as a policy instrument. Korea's policy architecture indicates that what is available, visible, and accessible to students is actively shaped through institutional and regulatory design, including the regulation of food environments around schools and the structuring of cafeteria settings inside schools. As a result, cafeterias operate as "living labs" in which nutrition learning is enacted through daily exposure to curated options, informational cues, and standardized routines. The key insight is that the environment performs pedagogical work before formal instruction occurs, because it sets the default conditions under which choices are made.

Complementing spatial regulation is the governance of routine. The policy logic repeatedly positions everyday repetition as a pathway to durable habit formation, suggesting that health learning is stabilized through frequency and predictability rather than episodic instruction. When balanced meals, regulated food options, and consistent school-based practices are encountered as part of normal school life, "healthy conduct" becomes less a matter of individual willpower and more a patterned outcome of institutional design. In this sense, routine is not simply operational; it functions as an educational mechanism that embeds health-oriented norms into ordinary conduct, reducing the need for moralized pressure while increasing the likelihood of sustained behavioral internalization.

Embedded within this architecture is the production of students as governed subjects. Policy language, guidance, and monitoring do more than describe desired outcomes, functioning instead as active engines of norm formation. They define what responsible conduct looks like and where responsibility is located, gradually positioning students as health-conscious actors within an institutional setting. Expectations of self-care are not delivered as moral pressure alone. They are embedded in cues, routines, and evaluative practices that make certain behaviors socially legible as normal and responsible within school life.

Finally, the linkage to Indonesia helps clarify the transferability of these insights. Indonesia's nationwide free meal initiative launched in 2025 at large scale makes a familiar implementation issue especially visible: meal provision by itself does not guarantee sustained health capability

unless monitoring, education, and community linkage are built into the system. Publicly documented cooperation in Banda Aceh illustrates one practical pathway, where a partnership involving local government and community health centers supports growth monitoring, nutrition support, hygiene environment checks, and screening or awareness activities, alongside discussions of mobile enabled approaches. This suggests that the policy lesson is primarily institutional. It lies in the governance capacity organized around meals, including measurement, support, and reinforcement as a repeatable local system, rather than in a single program design to be copied across contexts. In this respect, the findings suggest that Korea's experience is relevant to Indonesia not as a blueprint to copy, but as an evidence-informed logic for embedding health education into institutional life in ways that can simultaneously advance SDG 3 and SDG 4.

Implications & Conclusion

This study treats school nutrition policy as part of how education systems govern everyday life, not simply as a welfare instrument that delivers meals. When health is framed only as individual choice, policy discussion often narrows to information delivery and short-term persuasion. The Korean case points to a different policy logic. Health learning accumulates through institutional settings that students inhabit daily, so the relevant question becomes less what children are told to know and more what they repeatedly do, see, and internalize as normal.

What stands out in the Korean case is the extent to which design features outside the classroom carry educational force. Regulations around food environments and the organization of school cafeterias shape exposure and practice, while routine meal provision turns those practices into repetition. In that context, healthier conduct can be learned through participation in ordinary school rhythms rather than through moralized pressure. The durability of the intervention comes from this quiet accumulation of practice that makes certain choices easier to sustain.

This framing also shifts how students appear within nutrition policy. They are not simply recipients of a benefit. They are gradually positioned as health-conscious actors through cues, routines, and institutional expectations that define what responsible conduct looks like in school life. The aim is not to eliminate choice, but to structure the conditions under which students come to experience healthier conduct as ordinary and self-directed within a regulated environment.

From this perspective, the most transferable lesson from Korea is not a menu or a single program component. The Indonesian context makes these implications more than an abstract interpretation. Indonesia's nationwide free meal program introduced in 2025 creates an opportunity to reach students at scale during formative years, but it also raises a familiar implementation risk that delivery and coverage may be prioritized while behavioral and educational functions remain under-designed. Persistent stunting alongside rising non-communicable disease risks under dietary change suggests that meals alone are unlikely to carry the full burden of health capability.

What travels from the Korean case is therefore a governance design logic that links provision to monitoring, educational reinforcement, and community-level capacity. In this respect, publicly documented cooperation in Banda Aceh illustrates a multi-actor pathway through which school-based nutrition initiatives can be sustained as an ongoing system. By centering on child growth monitoring, nutrition support, health screening, and coordination with local

government and community health centers, this example moves beyond a one-time feeding intervention to demonstrate a functional governance model.

A further implication concerns how policy evaluation should be framed. If nutrition programs are assessed only through short term health indicators or logistical metrics, the governance function is underestimated. The Korea case suggests that educational outcomes and equity outcomes should be treated as core outcomes of nutrition policy, not secondary spillovers. This directly connects to SDG 3 through improved health and prevention-oriented habits, and to SDG 4 through stronger learning conditions and reduced disadvantage linked to poor nutrition. The combined SDG framing is not rhetorical. It reflects the empirical reality that health and learning are mutually reinforcing across childhood.

At the same time, the study points to clear directions for future work. Subsequent research should examine how different configurations of space, routine, and norm-setting shape behavioral trajectories across regions and school types, and how monitoring systems can support effective feedback without creating avoidable risks for children. Comparative analysis would further clarify how governance design changes when school-based systems are integrated with community health centers and local partnerships, as in the Indonesian implementation context, and how these arrangements affect sustainability at scale.

In conclusion, the Korean case demonstrates that health education works best when it is lived through everyday governance rather than taught as isolated content. Policies that shape environments, structure routines, and reinforce norms can cultivate durable health habits while supporting educational equity. For countries implementing large scale nutrition programs such as Indonesia, the key challenge is to move from food provision alone to integrated system design that links meals to community partnerships and monitoring-based support. The key message is simple. Health education works best when it is lived in the cafeteria, not just taught in the classroom.

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