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Assessing the Implementation Fidelity of the National School Feeding Program in Rural Colombia: Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement



Introduction: This study aimed to evaluate the implementation fidelity of the National School Feeding Program (Plan de Alimentación Escolar, PAE) in rural schools in Caldas, Colombia. The assessment focused on the quality, variety, and accessibility of the meals provided to students. By identifying gaps in the program's execution, the study sought to offer recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of school feeding programs in Colombia and other similar contexts, such as the United States. The overarching goal was to ensure that the program achieve their intended outcomes of providing equitable, nutritious meals to all students, thereby improving their health and academic performance.

Methods: This cross-sectional study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative epidemiological methods. Informed by a comprehensive literature review, the research examined the PAE's structure, objectives, and outcomes. Over five weeks, five rural schools in Caldas were visited, and data were collected through in-depth interviews with school administrators, teachers, and lunch personnel, as well as through direct observations of meal services. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with local government officials, including the mayor and the Secretary of Education, were conducted to assess the governance and oversight mechanisms influencing the PAE's implementation.

Results: The evaluation revealed significant variation in the fidelity of PAE implementation. Some schools adhered to program guidelines, providing balanced meals, while others faced challenges such as limited meal variety and inadequate portions. Rural schools struggled with consistent access to diverse and fresh food supplies, leading to disparities in nutritional quality. Interviews with local government officials highlighted gaps in monitoring and support, contributing to inconsistent program delivery.

Conclusions: The study underscores the need for targeted interventions to address disparities in school meal programs, especially in rural areas. Improving governance, logistics, and oversight are essential to ensuring the PAE provides equitable nutrition to all students. These insights could also inform the optimization of similar programs in other contexts, including the United States.