



The Effect of Lunch Levies on Learners' Participation in Public Day Secondary Schools in West Pokot County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Access to quality education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of socioeconomic development. In Kenya, sustained efforts to expand educational access culminated in the 2008 introduction of the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) policy, which sought to eliminate tuition fees and make secondary education more affordable and accessible regardless of socioeconomic background. Despite this landmark intervention, many public day secondary schools have continued to impose supplementary levies, including teacher motivation fees, lunch levies, development levies, and remedial levies, that significantly hinder learner participation, particularly among students from economically vulnerable households. Understanding the effect of these extra levies on learner engagement is therefore critical to ensuring that secondary education remains genuinely accessible, equitable, and inclusive. This paper addresses one component of that broader inquiry, focusing specifically on the effect of lunch levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, Kenya. The study was anchored on three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Educational Production Function Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Social Exclusion Theory, which conceptualise educational outcomes as the product of interacting inputs, including financial resources, institutional conditions, and household socioeconomic characteristics. A descriptive survey design was employed to facilitate systematic data collection across a diverse group of respondents. The target population comprised 1,468 students, 161 parent chairpersons, and 161 principals drawn from public day secondary schools across the county, from which 147 students (10%) and 50 parent chairpersons (30%) were selected through simple random sampling, alongside 50 principals (30%) selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to 113 responding students and 37 responding parents, and semi structured interviews with 32 principals, enabling both quantitative measurement and qualitative insight into learners' and households' experiences of lunch levies and participation. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and weighted means) alongside Pearson correlation and simple bivariate regression to determine the nature, direction, and strength of the relationship between lunch levies and learner participation. Findings revealed that lunch levies had a statistically significant influence on learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, $F(1, 125) = 101.830$, $p < .001$, explaining 44.9% of the variance in participation ($R^2 = .449$, $B = .246$, $p < .001$); the null hypothesis was accordingly rejected. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education undertake a comprehensive and periodic review of the FDSE financing framework and fee guidelines to reduce the financial burden of supplementary levies on learners and their families, extend dedicated feeding capitation to public day secondary schools, and strengthen enforcement of existing directives against fee based exclusion from school meals.

1.0 Introduction

Access to a nutritious midday meal is widely recognised as a precondition for sustained learner engagement in public day secondary schools, where students commute from home each morning and remain on school premises without residential support until late afternoon. In this setting, the mechanism through which lunch is financed carries direct implications for whether learners remain in school through the full instructional day. This paper addresses the second objective of the broader study from which it is drawn: to determine the effect of lunch levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County. Lunch levies are defined, for the purposes of this study, as the mandatory financial contributions collected from students or parents to cover the cost of midday meals provided at school.

The study was guided by the following null hypothesis:

H02: There is no statistically significant effect of lunch levies on learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Lunch Levies and School Feeding

Lunch levies refer to charges collected by schools from parents and guardians to fund the provision of midday meals to learners. In public day secondary schools, where learners attend school from morning to late afternoon without residential accommodation, access to a nutritious midday meal is widely

recognised as essential to sustaining learner concentration, energy, and cognitive function throughout the school day (World Food Programme [WFP], 2020). Empirical evidence from nutritional science and educational research consistently demonstrates that hunger and nutritional deprivation adversely affect cognitive performance, concentration, and school attendance, particularly among adolescents in growth intensive developmental stages (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

2.2 Global Perspective on School Feeding Financing

Globally, school feeding programmes have been established as key interventions for promoting attendance and retention in secondary education. The World Food Programme (2021) reported that countries which had fully subsidised school meals, including Brazil, India, and Chile, consistently recorded higher daily attendance rates and lower dropout levels compared to countries where school feeding was financed through parental contributions. Studies from Latin America demonstrated that subsidised lunch programmes not only improved learner concentration and cognitive performance but also enhanced motivation and punctuality, with UNESCO (2022) noting that meal provision was among the most cost effective strategies for improving secondary school retention in low and middle income countries.

The World Bank (2021) similarly found that when lunch programmes were financed through parental levies rather than government grants, participation declined sharply among low income learners, particularly in urban slum communities and rural areas where household incomes were irregular and insufficient to absorb recurring school related costs. Pernas and Titus (2021) confirmed this pattern in Mexico, where schools that provided lunch free of charge through government nutrition programmes recorded significantly higher afternoon attendance rates and lower dropout rates than comparable schools where lunch access was contingent on parental payment.

The World Food Programme (2020) estimated that school feeding programmes in Sub Saharan Africa increased school enrolment by an average of 9%, attendance by 8%, and reduced dropout rates by up to 25% in schools where meals were provided consistently. These findings underscore the powerful role of school nutrition in sustaining learner participation, particularly in food insecure communities. However, when school feeding programmes are financed through mandatory parental contributions rather than government grants, their equity implications change fundamentally: learners whose families cannot afford lunch levies are excluded from meals, leading to nutritional deprivation that undermines the very participation benefits that school feeding is intended to deliver. Glewwe and Kremer (2006) reinforced this argument, noting that the equity benefits of school feeding depend entirely on whether programme participation is universal or conditional on payment, as fee contingent access systematically excludes the poorest and most nutritionally vulnerable learners — precisely those who stand to benefit most from meal provision.

2.3 Evidence from Sub Saharan Africa

In Sub Saharan Africa, school lunch levies remain a major barrier to participation in public day secondary schools. In Nigeria, Eze (2020) found that learners from poor households frequently missed school on days when they could not afford daily feeding fees, generating a pattern of irregular attendance that cumulatively undermined their academic performance. In Ghana, Owusu (2021) reported that while government sponsored school feeding programmes had significantly increased enrolment, schools that supplemented these programmes with parental lunch levies experienced higher rates of absenteeism among learners from low income households. Nannyonjo (2023) similarly found in Ghana that school feeding programmes funded entirely through parental contributions had lower coverage and worse participation outcomes than those funded through government grants, and recommended that governments fully subsidise school meals as part of their commitment to universal secondary education rather than requiring household contributions that inevitably exclude the most vulnerable learners.

In East Africa, the challenge is equally pronounced. Mwaura (2022) established in Tanzania that learner attendance improved significantly in schools with free feeding programmes compared to those requiring parental contributions, with the attendance differential between the two groups being particularly marked in the afternoon sessions that followed the lunch break.

2.4 The Kenyan Policy Context

In Kenya, the situation is further complicated by the structure of the Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) policy, which provides capitation grants covering tuition costs but makes no provision for school feeding, leaving public day secondary schools without a government funded mechanism for providing midday meals to learners. In the absence of such provision, schools routinely impose lunch levies on parents to sustain feeding programmes, creating conditions in which meal access becomes contingent on household financial capacity rather than learner nutritional need.

Empirical evidence from Kenya documents the specific participation consequences of lunch levy exclusion. Ouma (2023) found in Uasin Gishu County that lunch levies were a significant determinant of secondary school attendance patterns, with learners denied meals due to non payment frequently leaving school premises during lunch hours and failing to return for afternoon classes. Over the course of a school term, this pattern of afternoon absenteeism translated into significant cumulative learning loss, particularly in subjects scheduled in the afternoon, and was identified as a contributing factor to poor examination performance among learners from food insecure households. Cherono (2021) found in the same county that students who failed to pay lunch levies were routinely sent home or skipped afternoon sessions, further reducing their participation in ways that compounded over time into measurable academic disadvantage.

Kilonzo and Wambua (2024) found in Kisii County that lunch levies ranged from KES 3,000 to KES 8,000 per term — amounts that were financially manageable for households with regular incomes but highly burdensome for those dependent on subsistence agriculture or informal economic activities.

Their study found that 34.2% of learners in sampled schools had been denied lunch at some point during the academic year due to inability to pay, with affected learners recording significantly higher rates of afternoon absenteeism and lower examination scores than peers with consistent meal access.

A national investigative report by The Star (2023) revealed similar patterns in Nakuru County, where learners were turned away from school for failing to pay lunch fees despite Ministry of Education circulars explicitly declaring such exclusions impermissible. The Ministry's Circular No. MOE/GEN/ADM/3/23 emphasised that no learner should be excluded from school or school activities due to inability to pay lunch levies, yet weak enforcement mechanisms at the county and school levels allowed these violations to persist with minimal accountability. This regulatory failure illustrates a broader pattern in which policy frameworks exist to protect learners from levy related exclusion but are rendered ineffective by insufficient monitoring capacity and inconsistent application.

West Pokot County lies within Kenya's arid and semi arid lands (ASAL), where the WFP (2020) notes that food insecurity rates are particularly high and the nutritional status of school age children frequently falls below national averages as a result of the climatic and economic vulnerabilities associated with arid and semi arid conditions. Recurrent drought in the county has repeatedly damaged crop yields and depleted household food reserves, weakening the capacity of many families to meet basic subsistence needs, let alone recurrent school related levies. Against this backdrop, school lunch levies place an additional financial burden on households that are already food insecure, with the result that learners from the poorest families are frequently unable to access an adequate diet either at home or at school. Because these vulnerabilities are specific to West Pokot's climatic and economic profile, the literature reviewed above suggests that any policy response to lunch levy related exclusion in the county should be grounded in local evidence on poverty and food insecurity rather than approaches transplanted uncritically from better resourced settings.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a sample drawn from students, parent chairpersons, and principals in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County. Students were sampled using simple random sampling, and parent chairpersons were similarly sampled using simple random sampling, while principals were selected using purposive sampling on account of their administrative oversight of school feeding programmes. The target population and resulting sample sizes for each respondent category are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Size of the Study

Category	Target Population (N)	Sample Size (n)	%	Sampling Technique
Students	1,468	147	10	Simple random
Parent Chairperson	161	50	30	Simple random
Principals	161	50	30	Purposive sampling

Source: West Pokot County Education Office, 2025.

Table 1 shows that the study drew on three respondent categories with different roles in relation to lunch levies. Students, who number 1,468 across the county's public day secondary schools, were sampled at a rate of 10% ($n = 147$) using simple random sampling, reflecting their status as the largest population group and the direct beneficiaries of school feeding; a lower sampling fraction was applied to this group because its large size still yields an adequately powered sample even at a modest percentage. Parent chairpersons, who represent the financial and decision making interests of households in relation to school levies, formed a much smaller target population of 161 and were sampled at a higher rate of 30% ($n = 50$) using simple random sampling, ensuring sufficient representation despite the smaller pool. Principals, who oversee the administration of school feeding programmes and the enforcement of levy policy at the institutional level, were equally drawn from a target population of 161 and sampled at 30% ($n = 50$); however, because principals were selected specifically for their administrative knowledge of feeding programme implementation rather than at random, purposive sampling was used for this category instead of simple random sampling. Together, this stratified approach ensured that the study captured the perspectives of learners directly affected by lunch levies, the parents who bear the financial burden of paying them, and the school administrators responsible for implementing and enforcing feeding policy.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents the effect of lunch levies on learners' participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County. A total of 113 students, 37 parents, and 32 principals who participated in the study were requested to share their views on the matter. Students' and parents' descriptive responses are presented first, followed by descriptive statistics comparing the two groups, correlation analysis, and bivariate regression results testing hypothesis HO2.

4.1 Students' Responses on Lunch Levies

Student respondents rated five statements relating to lunch levies on a five point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree [SA] to 5 = Strongly Disagree [SD]). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Students' Response on Lunch Levies

Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD	Mean	Std.
Lunch levies are affordable for most parents	21 (18.6%)	36 (31.9%)	17 (15.0%)	27 (23.9%)	12 (10.6%)	2.76	1.297
Students who do not pay lunch levies are not allowed to eat lunch	23 (20.4%)	39 (34.5%)	14 (12.4%)	19 (16.8%)	18 (15.9%)	2.73	1.382
Missing lunch at school affects learners' ability to participate actively in afternoon classes	39 (34.5%)	54 (47.8%)	6 (5.3%)	14 (12.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1.96	0.949
Lunch levies cause some students to miss or skip school	32 (28.3%)	41 (36.3%)	17 (15.0%)	23 (20.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.27	1.089
Free or subsidized lunch would increase learner attendance and participation	42 (37.2%)	49 (43.4%)	16 (14.2%)	5 (4.4%)	1 (0.9%)	1.89	0.874
Composite values (corrected)	31 (27.4%)	44 (38.9%)	14 (12.4%)	18 (15.9%)	6 (5.3%)	2.32	1.118

Source: Field Data, 2026.

On the affordability of lunch levies, the results show a divided picture: 57 students (50.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that lunch levies are affordable, 39 students (34.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 17 students (15.0%) were not sure. The resulting mean of 2.76 falls within the Not Sure band of the interpretive scale, indicating that opinion among students on the affordability of lunch levies for their families is genuinely split rather than one sided.

On whether non paying students are denied lunch, more than half (54.9%) of students agreed or strongly agreed, with 23 students (20.4%) strongly agreeing and 39 (34.5%) agreeing. This finding implies that withholding lunch for non payment is a recognised practice within public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, exposing affected students to hunger and nutritional deprivation as well as social and psychological consequences such as embarrassment and diminished sense of belonging.

On whether missing lunch affects afternoon participation, an overwhelming majority (82.3%) agreed or strongly agreed, with 39 students (34.5%) strongly agreeing and 54 (47.8%) agreeing, against only 14 (12.4%) who disagreed. This implies that inadequate midday nutrition has a direct and significant impact on students' cognitive functioning, concentration, and capacity to engage meaningfully in afternoon lessons, consistent with Grantham-McGregor et al. (2007).

On whether lunch levies cause absenteeism, 62.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed (32 strongly agreeing, 41 agreeing), against 23 (20.4%) who disagreed. This suggests that the financial burden of lunch levies is significant enough to deter some students from attending school altogether, particularly on days when their families cannot provide the required funds.

Finally, on whether free or subsidised lunch would increase attendance and participation, 80.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed (42 strongly agreeing, 49 agreeing), against only 6 (5.3%) who disagreed. This implies that students overwhelmingly perceive free or subsidised lunch as a potentially transformative intervention, consistent with evidence from school feeding programmes in other developing country contexts (World Food Programme, 2020).

4.2 Parents' Responses on Lunch Levies

Parent respondents rated the same five statements. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Parents' Response on Effect of Lunch Levies on Learners' Participation

Statement	SA	A	NS	D	SD	Mean	Std.
Lunch levies are affordable for most parents	4 (10.8%)	7 (18.9%)	5 (13.5%)	6 (16.2%)	15 (40.5%)	3.57	1.462
Students who do not pay lunch levies are not allowed to eat lunch (n = 35, see note)	4 (10.8%)	11 (29.7%)	5 (13.5%)	8 (21.6%)	7 (18.9%)	2.92	1.243
Missing lunch at school affects learners' ability to participate actively in afternoon classes	16 (43.2%)	9 (24.3%)	4 (10.8%)	6 (16.2%)	2 (5.4%)	2.16	1.303
Lunch levies cause some students to miss or skip school	15 (40.5%)	11 (29.7%)	4 (10.8%)	7 (18.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2.08	1.140
Free or subsidized lunch would increase learner attendance and participation	28 (75.7%)	4 (10.8%)	2 (5.4%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (8.1%)	1.54	1.168
Composite values (corrected)	13 (35.1%)	8 (21.6%)	4 (10.8%)	5 (13.5%)	5 (13.5%)	2.45	1.263

Source: Field Data, 2026.

On affordability, the corrected figures show that 21 parents (56.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that lunch levies are affordable, against 11 (29.7%) who agreed or strongly agreed, with 5 (13.5%) unsure. This corroborates the students' responses and reinforces the broader finding that the financial demands of lunch levies are inconsistent with the prevailing socioeconomic realities of families in the county, where informal employment and irregular income are the norm.

On whether non paying students are denied lunch, around 40.5% of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed (subject to the item 2 respondent gap noted in the source table), suggesting that a notable proportion of parents were either unaware of or did not acknowledge the practice of withholding lunch, which may reflect a gap in parental awareness of day to day enforcement mechanisms at school level.

On whether missing lunch affects afternoon participation, a majority (67.5%) of parents agreed or strongly agreed (16 strongly agreeing, 9 agreeing), against 8 (21.6%) who disagreed. This implies that parents widely recognise the critical link between adequate midday nutrition and students' capacity to engage actively in afternoon learning.

On whether lunch levies cause absenteeism, a majority (70.2%) of parents agreed or strongly agreed (15 strongly agreeing, 11 agreeing), against 7 (18.9%) who disagreed. This implies that parents recognise lunch levies as a direct contributing factor to school absenteeism in West Pokot County.

Finally, on whether free or subsidised lunch would increase attendance and participation, an overwhelming majority (86.5%) of parents agreed or strongly agreed (28 strongly agreeing, 4 agreeing), against only 3 (8.1%) who disagreed. This near unanimous finding implies that parents overwhelmingly support the introduction of free or subsidised school lunch programmes as a viable strategy for improving learner attendance and participation, consistent with global evidence on school feeding programmes (World Food Programme, 2020).

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Summated mean indices and standard deviations were computed from the responses of both respondent groups. Using the corrected composite means of 2.32 (students) and 2.45 (parents), the overall average mean index for this section is 2.39, which falls within the Agree range of the interpretive scale (1.9 to 2.6), indicating that respondents on balance agreed that lunch levies affect learner participation. The results are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4**Descriptive Statistics on the Effect of Lunch Levies on Learners' Participation**

Statement	Stu. Mean	Stu. Std.	Par. Mean	Par. Std.	Ave. Mean	Ave. Std.	t (df)	Sig.
Lunch levies are affordable for most parents	2.76	1.297	3.57	1.462	3.17	1.380	-3.005 (56)	.004
Students who do not pay lunch levies are not allowed to eat lunch	2.73	1.382	2.92	1.243	2.83	1.313	-0.785 (67)	.436
Missing lunch at school affects learners' ability to participate actively in afternoon classes	1.96	0.949	2.16	1.303	2.06	1.126	-0.862 (49)	.393
Lunch levies cause some students to miss or skip school	2.27	1.089	2.08	1.140	2.175	1.115	0.890 (59)	.377
Free or subsidized lunch would increase learner attendance and participation	1.89	0.874	1.54	1.168	1.71	1.021	1.652 (50)	.105
Composite values (corrected)	2.32	1.118	2.45	1.263	2.385	1.191	—	—

Source: Field Data, 2026.

Respondents on average were not sure whether lunch levies are affordable for most parents (mean = 3.17). Students (mean = 2.76) fell in the Not Sure band, while parents (mean = 3.57) fell in the Disagree band; this difference was statistically significant ($t = -3.005$, $p = .004$), indicating that parents were considerably more sceptical of affordability than students, who were more evenly split.

On whether non paying students are denied lunch, respondents on average agreed (mean = 2.83), with students at 2.73 and parents at 2.92; the difference was not statistically significant ($t = -0.785$, $p = .436$), though this item should be treated with some caution given the unresolved gap in the parent response frequencies.

On whether missing lunch affects afternoon participation, respondents on average agreed (mean = 2.06), with students at 1.96 and parents at 2.16; the difference was not statistically significant ($t = -0.862$, $p = .393$), underscoring a widely shared recognition among both groups that nutritional deprivation during the school day directly undermines afternoon engagement.

On whether lunch levies cause absenteeism, respondents on average agreed (mean = 2.175), with students at 2.27 and parents at 2.08; the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 0.890$, $p = .377$), reflecting a consistent view across groups that lunch levies act as a direct deterrent to attendance.

Finally, on whether free or subsidised lunch would increase attendance and participation, respondents on average agreed, close to Strongly Agree (mean = 1.71), with students at 1.89 and parents at 1.54; the difference was not statistically significant at the conventional threshold ($t = 1.652$, $p = .105$), reflecting broad consensus that removing financial barriers to lunch would have a positive effect on attendance and participation.

4.4 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between lunch levies and learners' participation. Correlation strength was interpreted following Cohen (1988): 0.10–0.29 weak, 0.30–0.49 moderate, 0.50 and above strong. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5**Pearson Correlation of Lunch Levies and Learners' Participation**

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	6
Learners' participation	1					
Lunch levies are affordable for most parents	.453 .000**	1				
Students who do not pay lunch levies are not allowed to eat lunch	.356 .024**	.244 .145	1			
Missing lunch at school affects learners' ability to participate actively in afternoon classes	.124 .086	.245 .096	.023 .854	1		
Lunch levies cause some students to miss or skip school	.298 .021**	-.457 .089	.396 .035**	.104 .245	1	
Free or subsidized lunch would increase learner attendance and participation	.342 .024**	.543 .000**	.475 .000**	.273 .039**	.547 .000**	1

Source: Author, 2026. ** Correlation is significant at $p < .05$.

Four of the five lunch levy factors correlated significantly with learners' participation. Affordability of lunch levies showed a moderate positive correlation with participation ($r = .453$, $p < .0001$). Whether non paying students are denied lunch showed a moderate positive correlation with participation ($r = .356$, $p = .024$). Whether lunch levies cause absenteeism showed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation with participation ($r = .298$, $p = .021$). Whether free or subsidised lunch would increase attendance and participation showed a moderate positive correlation with participation ($r = .342$, $p = .024$).

The correlation between missing lunch and afternoon participation was not statistically significant ($r = .124$, $p = .086$). This suggests that while the relationship between midday nutritional deprivation and afternoon classroom engagement may be real and practically significant — as evidenced by the strong descriptive agreement among respondents on this item — it did not attain statistical significance at the 0.05 alpha level within this analysis.

4.5 Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

A bivariate regression analysis was conducted to establish the nature and magnitude of the influence of lunch levies on learners' participation, testing hypothesis HO2. The mean responses for learner participation were regressed against the mean responses on lunch levies for the combined sample of students and parents ($n = 127$).

Table 6**Lunch Levies and Learner Participation — Model Summary**

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.670	.449	.445	.794

Predictor: (Constant), lunch levies.

Table 7**Lunch Levies and Learner Participation — ANOVA**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	64.235	1	64.235	101.830	<.001
Residual	78.854	125	0.631		
Total	143.089	126			

Dependent variable: learners' participation. Predictor: (Constant), lunch levies.

Table 8

Lunch Levies and Learner Participation — Coefficients

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.243	.351	—	3.542	<.001
Lunch levies	.246	.024	.670	10.091	<.001

Dependent variable: learners' participation.

The model summary (Table 6) shows that lunch levies explained a considerable proportion of the variance in learner participation: $R^2 = .449$, meaning that lunch levies alone accounted for 44.9% of the variance in learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, with the remaining 55.1% attributable to factors outside the scope of this analysis.

The ANOVA results (Table 7) show that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 125) = 101.830$, $p < .001$, and therefore adequate for predicting learner participation from lunch levies.

The regression coefficients (Table 8) show that lunch levies had a positive and statistically significant influence on learner participation, $B = .246$, $p < .001$. This implies that a unit increase in lunch levies was associated with a corresponding increase in learner participation of 0.246 units, holding other factors constant. Since $p < .05$, the null hypothesis (HO2) that lunch levies have no statistically significant influence on learner participation was rejected. It is therefore concluded that lunch levies significantly influence learner participation in public day secondary schools in West Pokot County.

4.6 Discussion of Findings

These findings align with contemporary literature on school feeding and learner engagement. The World Food Programme (2023) emphasises that school meals significantly improve learner attendance, concentration, and retention, particularly in food insecure regions. UNESCO (2022) similarly notes that school feeding programmes improve learner participation, reduce absenteeism, and increase completion rates, an effect that is especially pronounced in arid and semi arid areas of Kenya such as West Pokot.

From a policy standpoint, these findings are closely tied to the implementation of the Free Day Secondary Education policy. The policy provides schools with capitation grants intended to reduce the financial burden on households, but many schools continue to rely on lunch levies to sustain feeding programmes because government funding does not cover meal provision. In a county characterised by poverty and recurrent food insecurity such as West Pokot, school feeding initiatives remain critical to promoting access to education and sustaining learner participation, even as their levy based financing continues to exclude the households least able to pay.

School principals interviewed as part of the study corroborated these quantitative findings, describing lunch levies as crucial to sustaining feeding programmes that in turn support attendance and participation. One principal observed:

“The lunch program has helped us retain learners in school. Many students come from homes where food is not guaranteed, so when we provide meals at school, attendance improves significantly.”

Another principal noted the fragility of levy dependent feeding programmes:

“Inconsistent payment of lunch levies by parents sometimes disrupted feeding programs, leading to fluctuations in attendance and participation. In such situations, schools struggled to maintain stable meal provision, which negatively affected learner engagement.”

These qualitative accounts align closely with the regression findings, suggesting that lunch levies enhance learner participation by addressing the basic physiological needs of students, which in turn improves concentration, energy levels, and overall engagement in learning throughout the school day. Principals further noted that learners who consistently benefited from school meals demonstrated more regular attendance patterns and were more actively engaged in classroom activities compared to those who frequently missed meals due to non payment of lunch levies. This distinction is an important one: it is consistent and reliable meal provision — however financed — that drives the participation benefit, while the levy mechanism itself remains the primary source of the exclusion documented in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 among learners from the poorest households.

5.0 Conclusion

This study concludes that lunch levies, as currently structured, are fundamentally at odds with the equity and access goals underpinning the Free Day Secondary Education policy. By tying access to a basic school meal to a household's ability to pay, the levy model converts what should be a universal support for learning into a further filter that advantages better resourced families and penalises those least able to bear it, precisely in a county where drought and chronic food insecurity make such capacity least reliable. The persistence of this arrangement reflects a gap in national policy design rather

than a failure at the school level: schools have been left to fund feeding through household contributions because no dedicated government mechanism exists to do so. Closing that gap is therefore a policy responsibility, not merely an administrative one, and until it is addressed, public day secondary schools in Kenya will continue to deliver an unevenly participatory education despite the promise of free tuition.

6.0 Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the study recommends that:

- (i) The national and county governments extend dedicated school feeding capitation to public day secondary schools in West Pokot County, rather than relying on the Free Day Secondary Education tuition grant alone.
- (ii) The Ministry of Education strengthen monitoring and enforcement of Circular No. MOE/GEN/ADM/3/23 at the school and sub county level, so that the existing prohibition on excluding learners for non payment of lunch levies is consistently applied.
- (iii) Where levies remain necessary in the interim, schools and County Education Offices establish transparent, means tested exemption or subsidy mechanisms so that inability to pay does not translate into exclusion from meals or from afternoon lessons.

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