

**GOVERNMENT POLICY STRATEGY ON FREE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
IN BANTEN**

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the policy strategies of the Banten Provincial Government in implementing free education programs at the high school/vocational school level. The primary focus of the study is to analyze the government's efforts to improve access to education and reduce dropout rates, particularly during the transition from junior high school to senior high school. However, in its implementation, the program still faces various challenges, such as budget constraints, inadequate educational infrastructure, and disparities in the quality of educational services between urban and rural areas. Additionally, affirmative policies for vulnerable groups, such as poor families and people with disabilities, are still suboptimal, while the quality and distribution of educators are not evenly distributed across the Banten region. This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews conducted at the Banten Provincial Education Office (KP3B Serang). The research findings recommend the need for improved inter-institutional coordination, equitable distribution of human resources, and accelerated development of educational facilities in underdeveloped areas such as Lebak and Pandeglang. With a more adaptive approach to local needs, this free education policy is expected to promote equitable access and improved educational quality in Banten Province, thereby fostering the development of superior and competitive human resources.

Keywords: Free Education; Government Policy; High School/Vocational High School; Banten Province; Access to Education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the main factors that is very important for improving the development of quality human resources. In addition, education is also a means or tool for improving social quality, thereby creating prosperity (Sen, 1999). Recently, the Banten Provincial Government has been quite enthusiastic about improving education, making it a priority policy in Banten. This initiative aims to cultivate outstanding human resources capable of contributing to the advancement of Indonesia. However, despite having ideas to improve education policies, there are still several challenges in the field of education.

The most common issue observed in the field is the low participation rate of junior high school (SMP) students in senior high school (SMA). According to (Aditomo & Felicia, 2018), disparities in educational quality and access in Indonesia are significantly influenced by family socioeconomic backgrounds. As we know, Banten Province still has many families that are not yet financially stable and unable to provide education for their children. Many families in Banten, especially in rural areas or those classified as low-income, find it extremely difficult to send their children to school.

Government subsidies are also insufficient to fully assist them, as there are various additional costs, including transportation, textbooks, uniforms, and extracurricular activities. In addition to economic factors, there are also issues in the infrastructure sector that make it difficult for students to access supporting facilities for learning activities. For example, in Lebak and Pandeglang, these areas are considered inadequate in providing facilities such as classrooms, libraries, and internet access, which hinder students from receiving quality education. According to (Michael W. Apple, 2004), structural inequalities in the education system can widen the gap between urban and rural areas. This disparity is particularly evident when compared to cities like Tangerang, leading to inequalities in educational quality and necessitating proactive government intervention to address such issues.

In some areas of Banten, there are still many teachers who lack the quality to provide instruction in accordance with national standards. According to (Darling-Hammond, 1997), teacher quality significantly influences student learning outcomes, and teacher professional development must be conducted contextually, not merely through bureaucratic solutions. In Banten, many teachers have not undergone intensive training, which greatly affects their competence, especially when considering the uneven distribution of educational infrastructure, which inevitably leads to disparities in teacher quality between rural and urban areas.

To address this issue, the government has implemented several new policies prioritizing education. One of the programs highlighted by the Governor of Banten at present is Andra Soni's Free Education Program for senior high school/vocational school levels, as part of a strategic policy to enhance educational accessibility for all residents of Banten. According to (Suyahman, 2016), free education policies at the upper secondary level can provide greater opportunities and access to education for children from disadvantaged families who previously found it difficult to access such education. This Free Education Program can also improve educational equity and quality, provided it is accompanied by adequate supervision and infrastructure support. This program aims to provide additional assistance beyond subsidies for students from less privileged families, enabling them to continue their studies without financial burdens.

RESEARCH METHODS



Figure 1. Documentation arrives at the Banten Provincial Education Office

This research was conducted at the Banten Provincial Education Office located in the Banten Provincial Government Center (KP3B), Serang City. This location was chosen because the Education

Office is one of the key institutions in the implementation of the free education program policy at the high school/vocational school level, which was created by Andra Soni. Additionally, research focused on the Banten Provincial Education Office has not been extensively conducted, prompting the researcher to delve deeper into this location.

The method used in this research is a qualitative method with a primary focus on gaining a deep understanding of the processes and dynamics of policy management that have been planned at the Banten Provincial Education Office. According to (Nababan Kartyka & Marpaung Melda Esterlina, 2024), qualitative research methods are very important in the field of education because they can reveal social facts and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied. The researchers also argue that the qualitative method was chosen because it allows researchers to obtain meaningful data through interviews and direct observation of the parties involved.

According to (Sugiyono, 2015), observation and interview techniques are the main methods in qualitative research because they provide a deep understanding of the phenomena being studied directly in the field. Observation allows researchers to obtain natural and factual data from the research object, while interviews provide access to subjective information, experiences, and the interviewee's views in more detail. Observation and interviews are the main techniques in qualitative research to uncover the meaning, perceptions, and interpretations of the subject regarding the phenomenon being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Free Education Program initiated by Banten Governor Andra Soni is one of the policies that has had a positive impact on education in Indonesia, particularly at the high school/vocational school/madrasah aliyah level and equivalent in Banten Province. The purpose of this program is to increase the participation rate of the Banten community in schooling while also alleviating the financial burden on parents for educating their children, especially for middle-to-lower-income or less affluent families. With this program, it is hoped that no one in Banten will face difficulties in accessing education or be hindered from advancing to the high school level due to insufficient economic means. The program is also expected to address existing disparities in access to education in Banten Province, thereby fostering more equitable access to education across the entire region. As stated by (Tilaar, 2009), education is a fundamental right of every citizen and it is the responsibility of the state to facilitate equal access for all levels of society.

This policy is designed in line with the vision and mission of the newly elected governor, who emphasizes that free education should not only be available in public schools but also in private schools. This policy was created because, until now, free education costs have only been provided to public schools, while many students in private schools still face significant economic challenges. This free education assistance program is still in the process of drafting regulations and is being managed by the Banten Provincial Education Office. In this interview, the source targeted was Mr. Adang Abdurahman as head of department, who explained that he could not yet provide data on the final budget allocation for the free education program. In (Supriyadi, 2020), synergy between local governments and private schools is very important in expanding access to inclusive education.

According to (Yusuf & Wahyudi, 2017), effective education policies must pay attention to social justice and favor vulnerable groups in society. Therefore, the involvement of private schools in this program reflects a more participatory approach to education development. The government is committed to allocating adequate funds to meet the needs of this program because it also wants the program to run effectively and have a positive impact on the community, especially on underprivileged families. The government also stated that private schools are not an obstacle to the implementation of this program; rather, private schools are the main target of this program. This free education program policy will be offered as an option for private schools willing to participate in implementing the program promoted by the current Banten government.

The government will also provide additional financial assistance, such as providing Rp 200,000 per month for each student. Additionally, private schools participating in this program are required not to impose additional fees related to the teaching and learning process. This program is considered voluntary for private schools, but it can also serve as an alternative strategy to enhance and expand educational access for students who cannot attend public schools. To date, hundreds of private schools, including high schools, vocational schools, and special schools (SKh), have joined the program. This is in line with (Sadiman, 2018) opinion that government incentives can be an effective instrument in increasing school participation and reducing dropout rates among the poor.

The use of data to be provided to the public will be detailed in the Governor's Regulation currently under development. The government plans to prepare a tuition fee reimbursement scheme with the planned assistance, but schools are also required not to charge any fees in the teaching and learning process. The quality of learning will also be one of the factors adjusted by the budget provided. With this free education program, schools are required to maintain educational service standards even though they do not charge fees in the teaching and learning process as additional costs. As explained by (Darmaningtyas, 2012), the quality of education is not only determined by the amount of funds allocated, but also by governance, transparency, and oversight in policy implementation.

With this policy, it will certainly be a challenge for private schools to continue providing quality education services while managing the assistance funds in detail and correctly. Although not explained in detail, this program is designed with synergy between the vision and mission given by the government, which also collaborates with cross-sector coordination. A coordination model between regency and city governments and private schools is also being developed so that implementation in the field runs smoothly. Currently, the Banten Provincial Government is verifying hundreds of private schools participating in this program. The ongoing phase is a gradual socialization process across the entire Banten region, aimed at implementing the free education program optimally and effectively.

Table 1. Questioning instruments related to the Free Education Program

No	Question	Answer
1	What is the main objective of the free education policy in the government's high school policy and how do you measure its success?	Currently, the free assistance program for high school/equivalent levels in Banten province is still in the process of being regulated. So, when asked about it, we as the new organizers are only creating the regulations first, as they are currently in the process of being finalized. The primary objective is to increase school enrollment rates, and secondly, to alleviate the financial burden on parents.
2	How is the government's policy on free high school education designed to improve access for students from low-income families in Banten?	As I said earlier, the regulations are currently being drafted, but the goal is in line with the vision and mission of the governor-elect, which he outlined during his campaign: free education for private high schools, private vocational schools, and private Islamic high schools. We are implementing this program to help all students because public schools no longer receive funding, only private schools do.
3	What data and indicators are used to monitor the impact of the free education policy on student participation in Banten?	Certainly using the APS (School Participation Rate), dropout rates, as well as the number of new student enrollments at each level. And also comparing data before and after this policy was implemented.
4	What factors are the obstacles faced by the government in implementing the Free School Education program in Banten province?	Although there is an allocation of funds, it will certainly raise the question of whether the amount that has been determined will be sufficient to cover all school operations, especially private schools, which also prevents potential misappropriation.
5	What strategies do local governments use to overcome the limited budget for education costs in the implementation of free education at the high school and equivalent levels?	One of them is to optimize the allocation of the Regional Budget (APBD), by prioritizing the education sector and also shifting budget items that are less urgent.
6	To what extent does this government policy on free education contribute to improving the quality of education and equalizing learning opportunities in Banten province?	The Banten Provincial Government will certainly strive to improve the quality and equitable access to education through the free education policy that came into effect in May 2025. This program, which includes private

		SMA/SMK/SKh, aims primarily to expand learning opportunities for underprivileged students by eliminating school fees. Thus, it is expected to reduce dropout rates and create equality of access.
7	How is the effectiveness of the implementation of the free education policy at the secondary school level (SMA/SMK/MA) and equivalent in Banten Province in increasing access to and participation in education?	The effectiveness of the implementation of the free education policy at the SMA/SMK/MA and equivalent levels in Banten Province in increasing access to and participation in education is because it is still in its early stages.
8	To what extent is the budget chosen by the Banten Provincial Government able to meet the needs of free education financing according to the minimum service standards (SPM) set?	In this instrument, our interviewees could not say for sure the amount of budget that would be allocated.
9	What is the implementation of the Banten Provincial Government's free education policy on the sustainability of private schools that must also receive financial support from the local government?	The government states that private schools are not an obstacle, because they are part of the program's target. The free education policy will be offered as an option to private schools. The government will provide grants-for example, Rp200,000 per student per month-and willing schools will not be allowed to levy additional learning-related fees. The program is not mandatory for private schools, but an alternative to expand access to education.
10	How did the government use the experience of a similar program in Tangerang City as an example and how was coordination with private schools and district governments implemented to ensure the program ran smoothly?	Although not specifically mentioned, the program is designed with synergy between the governor's vision and mission, the budget team, and the education office, which also involves cross-sector coordination. A coordination model between district/municipality governments and private schools is being developed so that implementation is in line with the fiscal capacity and readiness of schools willing to implement the free program.
11	How will the government regulate the use of grants, ensure adequate school facilities and infrastructure, and maintain the quality of teaching so that the free education program not only eliminates costs, but also improves the quality of human resources in Banten?	The use of the grants will be regulated in a Governor Regulation that is currently being drafted. The government is preparing a scheme to replace tuition fees with grants, but schools must commit not to collect fees from students. The quality of teaching and infrastructure will be adjusted according to the available budget. Schools that are willing must be able to maintain the standard of education services even without levies.
12	What are the technical, administrative and social constraints, such as budget constraints, coordination with private schools, resistance from some parties, and quality gaps between regions, as well as ensuring challenges in reaching remote areas, transparency in the use of funds, and how does the government plan solutions to overcome these obstacles so that the program can run effectively and equitably?	Some of the main challenges include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budget limitations, as the funds prepared must be adjusted to the ability of the region. - Cross-party coordination, still in the process of synchronizing between the governor's vision and mission and the budget mechanism. - Resistance from schools that are not willing to participate in the free program, due to differences in the value of operational costs and grants. - Quality disparities between regions and access to remote areas are also a concern, but will be addressed by offering the program to willing schools and conveying information to the community in a transparent manner.

13	How are the community and other education stakeholders involved in supporting the implementation of the free senior high school education policy in Banten Province?	<p>Community and stakeholder involvement is carried out through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public socialization of schools participating in the free education program. - School selection based on readiness and transparency to parents. - The community will be directed to choose schools that have stated that they are ready to participate in this program during the new student admission process (SPMB). - Data collection and active involvement of schools and the education office are part of the participatory strategy.
14	What evaluation and monitoring measures does the Banten local government take to ensure that the free education policy is effective and sustainable?	<p>The government is currently developing an evaluation and monitoring system, which will be regulated in a governor's regulation. Evaluation will be done by looking at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The number of schools willing to implement the program. - The number of students who benefit. - The effectiveness of budget utilization and schools' compliance with the levy-free provisions. <p>Monitoring will involve the education office and possibly be supported by a team of supervisors from the local government to ensure accountability and transparency.</p>

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the Banten Provincial Government's policy strategy in implementing free education programs at the high school/vocational school level is an important effort in improving access to education and reducing dropout rates, especially during the transition from junior high school to high school. However, the implementation of this program still faces various challenges, including budget constraints, lack of educational infrastructure, and disparities in the quality of educational services between urban and rural areas. Additionally, support for vulnerable groups such as low-income families and people with disabilities has not been fully optimized, and the distribution and quality of educators remain uneven across the entire Banten region. Therefore, several recommendations can be made to improve the effectiveness of this program, including: first, strengthening inter-agency coordination to ensure more integrated policy implementation; second, equalizing the distribution of teaching staff through incentives and special policies for disadvantaged areas; third, accelerating the development and improvement of educational infrastructure, especially in areas such as Lebak and Pandeglang; fourth, strengthening affirmative action programs for vulnerable groups through direct assistance and inclusive approaches; and fifth, implementing more adaptive and locally-based policies to address real-world challenges on the ground. With these steps, it is hoped that the free education policy in Banten Province will not only improve access but also ensure equitable and high-quality education across the board.

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