

# Enhancing School Access and Appeal: An Analysis of a Free-Fee Policy Innovation in New Student Admission

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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	<p><i>Ensuring equitable access to quality secondary education is a persistent challenge, often hindered by economic factors. This study analyzes a bottom-up policy innovation implemented by SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa, a public high school in North Aceh, in the form of a comprehensive free-fee program for new student admission. This innovation was designed to address declining enrollment caused by parental economic constraints and diminishing school appeal. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 informants (including the principal, teachers, school committee, parents, and students), observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the free-fee policy innovation—which covers registration fees, school uniforms, and first-semester tuition for high-achieving students—was remarkably successful. This success is evidenced by a dramatic enrollment surge of over 100%, from 50 students in 2023 to 109 in 2024. The innovation model is driven by visionary school leadership, supported by active stakeholder participation, and funded through an alternative financing scheme. This study concludes that locally initiated, community-responsive policy innovations are a highly effective strategy for increasing educational access and enhancing school competitiveness at the local level.</i></p>
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## A. Introduction

Equitable access to secondary education is a cornerstone of human resource development. While the Indonesian government has established national regulations for new student admission (PPDB), including zoning, affirmation, and achievement pathways, local-level implementation often faces unique challenges. A primary obstacle is the economic burden on families, which can significantly reduce student participation rates in higher education (Ayuningtyas, 2014). Furthermore, intense competition among educational institutions requires schools to innovate continuously to maintain or enhance their public appeal.

Research on educational innovation has often focused on curriculum, teaching methods, or technology (Suardi et al., 2022). In contrast, studies on policy innovations in student admission at the school level are limited, particularly those analyzing financing models as a strategy to boost

enrollment. Innovation theory, as proposed by Everett M. Rogers (1983), posits that the successful adoption of an innovation depends on its perceived relative advantage, compatibility, and simplicity. In the context of public policy, bottom-up innovations are often more effective as they are more responsive to the real needs of the community (Albury, 2003).

SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa in North Aceh Regency faced a critical challenge of declining student interest and enrollment for several years. Initial observations identified three root causes: (1) a low continuation rate from middle to high school in the community, (2) the school's diminishing appeal, and (3) the economic constraints of parents. In response to this crisis, the school principal initiated a radical policy innovation: a comprehensive free-fee program for all new prospective students.

This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth analysis of this policy innovation. The research questions are: (1) What are the forms of policy innovation implemented in the student admission process at SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa? (2) What are the supporting and hindering factors in the implementation of this innovation? (3) What is the operational model of this policy innovation?

## B. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This design was chosen to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the policy innovation phenomenon within the specific context of SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa. The research is descriptive-analytical, aiming to describe the innovation process and analyze the factors influencing it.

Fifteen informants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Key informants chosen purposively were those with central roles in the policy, including the School Principal, Treasurer, School Committee, and School Supervisor. Other informants, including teachers, students, and parents, were selected via snowball sampling to broaden the perspectives.

Data were collected through three primary methods: (1) Semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions, experiences, and views of the informants; (2) Participant observation of the PPDB socialization and registration processes; and (3) Document analysis, including the Principal's Decree No. 004/190/SK/2024, enrollment data from the last five years, and school promotional materials.

Data analysis was conducted interactively following the model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

## C. Results and Discussion

### 1. A Paradoxical Implementation Process

The most significant impact of the free-fee policy innovation was a dramatic surge in student enrollment. School data reveals an exponential growth trend following the full implementation of the innovation.

**Table 1.** Number of New Student Enrollments (2020-2024).

Year	Number Of Students
2020	40
2021	43
2022	47
2023	50
2024	109

Source: SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa School Data, 2024

The data in Table 1 shows an increase of over 100% in 2024 compared to the previous year. This figure serves as strong empirical evidence that the free-fee policy directly addressed a key barrier faced by the community and effectively enhanced the school's appeal.

## 2. The Form and Model of the Policy Innovation

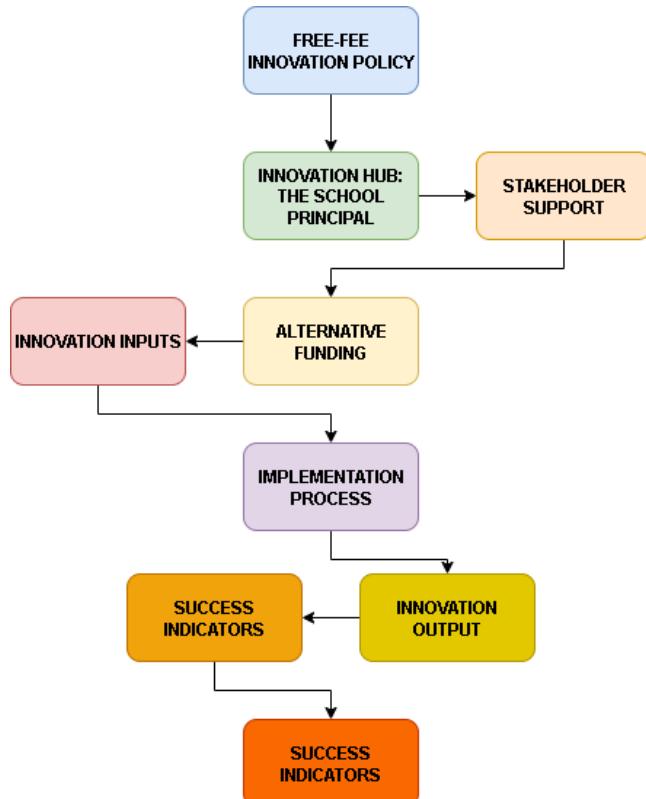
The innovation was not a single action, but a comprehensive policy package targeting two key areas: financing and enhancing learning interest.

1. Financing Innovation: This is the core of the policy, encompassing fee waivers for:

- Registration.
- School uniforms (Scout, Batik, Sports) and their attributes.
- First-semester tuition fees (SPP) for students ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in their previous junior high school.
- Textbooks (through a library loan system).

2. Learning Interest Innovation: To ensure the school was not just "free" but also "quality," the financing innovation was supported by strengthening extracurricular activities, which were also offered free of charge, such as computer training, fashion design, futsal, and public speaking (MC).

The implementation model of this innovation can be described as a leadership-centric model with strong stakeholder support, as visualized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Free-Fee Policy Innovation Model

- Innovation Hub: The School Principal acts as the primary initiator, planner, and driver
- Innovation Inputs: Consist of Financing Innovation and Learning Interest Innovation
- Implementation Process: Involves student identification, data verification, official decree issuance (SK), and periodic evaluation
- Stakeholder Support: Success heavily relies on the involvement of the supervisor, School Committee, Teachers, and parents.
- Alternative Funding: Financial resources are sourced from optimized BOS funds (School Operational Assistance) and voluntary donations from civil servant teachers.
- Success Indicators: Measured by a decrease in dropout rates, an increase in students from low-income families, and enhanced public trust
- Innovation Output: The creation of an inclusive and socially just school, where underprivileged students can access quality education

### 3. Analysis of Supporting and Hindering Factors

The success of this innovation was supported by a synergy of several factors. The most dominant internal supporting factors were the progressive leadership and commitment of the principal, along with solid support from teachers and staff. The crucial external supporting factor was the positive participation of the community and parents, who felt the policy directly addressed their needs.

On the other hand, the identified hindering factors were more potential and external in nature. These included limited transportation access for students from remote areas and difficulties in socializing the program to a wider region, which meant that information had not yet spread evenly.

### D. Conclusion

The free-fee policy innovation implemented at SMA Negeri 3 Citra Bangsa is a successful example of an effective bottom-up strategy to address local challenges related to educational access and appeal. The policy has proven its

ability to significantly increase student enrollment by removing economic barriers while simultaneously strengthening the school's public image.

The success of this innovation model rests on three key pillars: (1) Visionary and courageous leadership from the school principal; (2) Strong collaboration with stakeholders, especially the school committee and teachers; and (3) A clear implementation model with a creative alternative funding mechanism.

This research offers a significant implication: school-level initiatives, designed responsively to the socio-economic conditions of the community, can serve as powerful engines for achieving national goals of educational equity.

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