JURNAL ECONOMINA e-ISSN: 2963-1181
Volume 5, Number 7, July 2026
Homepage: ejournal.45mataram.ac.id/index.php/economina

Collaborative Policy Strategies for Addressing School Dropout in Archipelagic Areas: Evidence from North Sea Island, Indonesia

Taufikurrahman[1*], Muhammad Riduansyah Syafari[2], Siswanto[3]
[1,2,3] Master of Development Studies Program, Lambung Mangkurat University, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

** Corresponding Author: taufik.bnjr@gmail.com*

Article History

Received: 13-07-2026
Revised: 20-07-2026
Published: 30-07-2026

Keywords: Collaborative Governance; School Dropout; Archipelagic Education; Place-Based Policy; PKBM; Early Warning System

ABSTRACT

This study examines policy strategies for addressing school dropout in Pulau Laut Utara District, Kotabaru Regency, Indonesia, an archipelagic area characterized by economic vulnerability, geographical barriers, and fragmented educational services. Using a qualitative design informed by participatory action research, data were collected through interviews, observation, and policy document analysis involving local government officials, school leaders, teachers, PKBM managers, parents, and out-of-school children. The findings indicate that dropout is not a sudden event but a gradual process shaped by household poverty, indirect schooling costs, weak learning motivation, distance to school, and limited cross-sectoral coordination. Existing policies include preventive, curative, and rehabilitative strategies; however, their implementation remains constrained by fragmented data systems, weak case-based coordination, and stigma toward nonformal education. The study contributes to place-based education policy by proposing an integrated early warning system, community-based PKBM strengthening, and collaborative governance across education, social protection, and village-level institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a strategic instrument in human development because it expands individuals' decision-making abilities, participates in social life, and increases economic mobility. From the Capability Approach perspective, education is understood not only as an administrative service but also as an expansion of substantive freedom so that people can live valuable lives (Sen, 1999). In line with human capital theory, education also increases individual productivity and capacity to obtain better employment opportunities (Becker, 1993; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Through a good education system, individuals can develop their potential optimally, becoming independent, creative, innovative, and capable of critical and analytical thinking (Sulfiani et al., 2025).

However, the sustainability of education still faces serious challenges, especially for vulnerable groups of children. At the national level, the issue of children not attending school and dropping out remains a key policy agenda. The 2025 Susenas (National Statistics Agency) data, cited by the Ministry of Education and Culture's Center for Elementary and Secondary Education (Puslapdik Kemendikdasmen), shows that there are 2,922,607 out-of-school children aged 7-18, with the largest concentration among 16-18 year olds (Puslapdik Kemendikdasmen, 2026). The dominant reasons for children not attending school include feeling they have sufficient education, lack of funds, already working, distance from home to school, disability, marriage, and cultural factors. The 2025 Education Statistics also show that in the 2024/2025 academic year, the national dropout rate increased along with the level of education, namely 0.09 percent at elementary school/equivalent, 0.54 percent at junior high school/equivalent, and 0.86 percent at senior high school/vocational school/equivalent (Central Statistics Agency, 2025).

The context of South Kalimantan and Kotabaru Regency presents more specific challenges. The average length of schooling (RLS) in South Kalimantan Province in 2025 was recorded at 8.81 years, while in Kotabaru Regency it was 7.71 years (Central Statistics Agency of South Kalimantan Province, 2026). This figure indicates that, on average, Kotabaru residents have not yet completed their full junior high school education. The gap is also evident in the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) in Kotabaru Regency in 2024, with 97.51 percent for elementary school, 79.63 percent for junior high school, and 53.42 percent for senior high school (Central Statistics Agency of Kotabaru Regency, 2025). The sharp decline from elementary school to junior high and senior high school indicates that the primary issue is not only initial access to schooling, but also the continuity of education at the transitional level.

Pulau Laut Utara District is a relevant context for study because it is the center of settlement and socio-economic activity in the island region of Kotabaru Regency, with coastal characteristics, informal work mobility, and dependence of some households on the daily economic sector. The publication of Pulau Laut Utara District in Figures 2025 confirms that sub-district data covers geographic, population, social, agricultural, and tourism aspects sourced from the census/survey of BPS and related sectoral agencies (Central Statistics Agency of Kotabaru Regency, 2025). However, public data available at the sub-district level does not fully present the profile of school dropouts disaggregated by age, village/sub-district, cause, and educational reintegration status. This condition makes field-based research important to complement administrative data.

Based on these conditions, the research gap in this article can be formulated more explicitly in three dimensions. First, the empirical gap: there is no empirical study that specifically maps the conditions of school dropouts in Pulau Laut Utara District by combining the perspectives of the government, schools, PKBM, families, and children. Second, the contextual gap: most studies of school dropouts tend to discuss mainland or urban areas,

while island areas face different obstacles, particularly transportation costs, distance to services, and coastal family work patterns. Third, the policy gap: policies for handling school dropouts are still often administrative-sectoral in nature, not yet fully based on cross-sectoral case management and integrated data.

This article aims to analyze the conditions and characteristics of school dropouts in Pulau Laut Utara District, evaluate the policy strategies implemented by the local government, and identify supporting and inhibiting factors for policy implementation. Practically, this research offers regional-based policy recommendations through strengthening early detection systems, cross-sector coordination, and optimizing Community Learning Centers (PKBM) as a dignified non-formal education pathway.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a design informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR). The research location was centered in Pulau Laut Utara District, Kotabaru Regency, South Kalimantan, which was purposively selected because it represents an archipelagic region characterized by dense population, coastal economic activity, and challenges in educational sustainability at the elementary-middle-high school transition level.

Research participants were purposively selected based on their relevant roles in managing school dropouts. Informants included policymakers, formal and non-formal education service providers, families, and dropouts. Details of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Informant	Amount	Criteria
1	Head of the Education Office	1	Regional policy makers in the field of education
2	Official for Primary and Secondary Education	1	Handle primary/secondary education programs and school data
3	Headmaster	3	Schools affected and have at-risk/dropout students
4	Teacher	5	Handling at-risk students and communicating with parents
5	PKBM Manager	3	Package A, Package B, and Package C Managers
6	Parent	5	Having a child who has dropped out of school or is at risk of dropping out of school
7	School dropouts	5	School-age children who have dropped out of formal education

Data collection techniques included limited participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and policy document analysis. Observations were used to understand the context of education services and children's access. Interviews were used to explore the experiences of policy actors, schools, community development groups (PKBM), families, and children. Document analysis included official statistical documents, education assistance programs, and relevant regional policy documents.

The participatory process was conducted in three limited cycles. The first cycle was problem diagnosis, which involved mapping the causes of dropout through interviews and observations. The second cycle was participatory reflection, which involved validating the pattern of findings with school actors, PKBM (Community Learning Center), and local government to ensure that the researcher's interpretations aligned with field experience. The third cycle was policy action formulation, which involved developing strategic options in the form of an early detection system, strengthening PKBM, and a cross-sector coordination forum. The actions in this study were not program interventions implemented longitudinally, but rather co-produced policy action plans formulated with stakeholders.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), encompassing data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The coding process was conducted in three stages: open coding to identify units of meaning, axial coding to connect categories, and selective coding to develop key themes. After qualitative themes were formed, a SWOT analysis was used as a secondary analytical framework, not as the primary analysis technique. SWOT was used to organize strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats so that the coding results could be translated into strategic policy directions.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, limited member checking, and an audit trail of the analysis process. Ethically, the identities of children and families are not disclosed. Interview excerpts are presented anonymously and used only to strengthen thematic findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conditions and Characteristics of School Dropouts in North Pulau Laut District

The research results show that school dropout in Pulau Laut Utara District is not a single, sudden event, but rather a cumulative process. This process begins with household economic pressures, repeated absences, learning delays, decreased motivation, and ultimately, the child's withdrawal from formal school. In some cases, children then switch to PKBM (Center for Community Development), but continuity in non-formal education is also unstable due to ongoing work demands and social stigma.

Table 2. Themes and Patterns of School Dropout Conditions in North Pulau Laut District

No	Thematic Themes (Selective Coding)	Field Pattern (Axial Coding)	Data Citation Example (Open Coding)
1	Family economic vulnerability	Economic pressures push children to help their parents work; absenteeism increases.	"My child actually still wants to go to school, but the daily transportation costs are quite high. Sometimes he helps his parents with work." (Parent Informant)
2	The gradual process of dropping out of school	Children don't stop immediately; early symptoms include repeated absences, falling behind in class, and feeling embarrassed about returning to class.	"At first, he often asked for permission, then he was absent several times. After falling behind in class, he became increasingly embarrassed to come." (Teacher Informant)
3	Barriers to access to education	School distance and transportation costs become daily burdens, especially at the junior high and senior high school levels.	"The school isn't always far away on the map, but the cost of commuting every day is quite significant for families with irregular incomes." (School Informant)
4	Psychological pressure on children	Children feel that family economic responsibilities are more pressing than studying.	"If I don't have any money at home, I feel it's better to help my parents than go to school." (Child Informant)
5	Non-formal alternatives are not yet stable	PKBM serves as a safety net, but participant attendance has not been consistent due to work schedules and social stigma.	"Participants in Package B and C often come and go because they also work. Schedules need to be more flexible." (PKBM informant)

Table 2 shows that economic factors do not exist in isolation but interact with geographic access and children's psychological well-being. While formal school costs can be

reduced through free school policies and educational assistance, indirect costs remain a burden on families. In families with daily wages, a day without a child helping with work can be perceived as a loss of additional household income.

Another prominent pattern is repeated absences as an early indicator. Teachers and principals generally recognize students who are starting to show up less frequently, but not all schools have a documented early detection system connected to village/sub-district governments or social services. As a result, interventions are often initiated after a child has been absent for too long and their motivation has declined.

Community Learning Centers (PKBM) hold a strategic position as a rehabilitative pathway, especially for children unable to return to formal school. However, PKBM still faces challenges in terms of service quality, flexibility of time, limited resources, and the stigma that non-formal education is a second-rate option. This stigma impacts children's self-confidence and family support for continued learning.

Policy Strategy for Handling School Dropouts

The Kotabaru Regency Government and stakeholders in the North Pulau Laut District have implemented three strategies: preventive, curative, and rehabilitative. Preventive strategies include monitoring student attendance, communicating with teachers and parents, and identifying students who begin to show signs of absenteeism. This strategy is relatively effective when teachers and principals actively communicate, but it still relies on personal initiative and has not yet become a fully integrated cross-agency system.

Curative strategies are implemented when students show strong indications of dropping out of school. These include persuasive approaches to families, academic tolerance, facilitation of educational assistance such as PIP (Planning for Children with Disabilities), and involvement of village/sub-district officials. The main weakness of this strategy is its reactive nature. Schools often initiate action after a child has been absent for a long time, while family economic data and social assistance status are not always integrated with school data.

Rehabilitative strategies are implemented through Community Learning Centers (PKBM) and equivalency programs for Packages A, B, and C. This pathway is crucial for children who have already dropped out of formal school. However, successful rehabilitation requires strengthening PKBM institutions, flexible learning schedules, psychosocial support, and a campaign to eliminate the stigma of non-formal education.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Policy Implementation

Supporting factors for policy implementation include local government commitment to compulsory education, teachers' dedication to engaging with students and parents, the existence of Community Learning Centers (PKBM) as an educational safety net, and the existence of social assistance and educational assistance programs. This support demonstrates the presence of basic institutional infrastructure.

Inhibiting factors include family economic vulnerability, transportation barriers, data fragmentation, limited case-based coordination, and stigma against non-formal education. Data fragmentation is a key issue because schools, education offices, villages/sub-districts, social services, and community-based learning centers (PKBM) do not always share the same database. As a result, a child may be recorded as inactive at school but not automatically included in the PKBM's social assistance or referral list.

Cross-sector coordination also tends to be administrative. Inter-agency meetings have yet to fully produce individual support plans. Yet, school dropout cases require a "one child, one support plan" approach to effectively address specific causes.

SWOT Analysis and Policy Strategy Direction

Based on the qualitative coding results, a SWOT analysis was used as a secondary analytical framework to translate field findings into policy strategies. The mapping results indicate that North Laut Island possesses strengths in the form of local government commitment, the role of teachers, and the existence of Community Learning Centers (PKBM), as well as opportunities in the form of a national agenda for addressing out-of-school children and educational assistance. However, these strengths must be directed toward addressing weaknesses in data fragmentation and threats in the form of family economic pressures, geographic barriers, and the stigma of non-formal education.

Table 3. SWOT Matrix for Handling School Dropouts

	Strengths	**Weaknesses**
Opportunities	SO Strategy: Optimizing regional commitment, active role of schools, and PKBM through national regulatory support, PIP/PKH assistance, and ATS handling agenda.	WO Strategy: Integrate school, village/sub-district, DTKS, PIP, and PKBM data; increase tutor capacity and PKBM facilities through collaborative budgeting.
Threats	ST Strategy: Utilizing networks of teachers, community leaders, and village/sub-district officials to reduce the impact of economic pressure, distance, and stigma through a community approach.	WT Strategy: Implementing intensive case-based mentoring for vulnerable families, subsidizing indirect education costs, and campaigning to eliminate the stigma of non-formal education.

Theoretical Discussion

The findings of this study align with Bourdieu's (1986) perspective that limited economic and cultural capital can reproduce intergenerational educational inequality. Children from coastal families with irregular incomes are more likely to be absent and work during school age. However, these findings also demonstrate that the reproduction of inequality is not automatic; schools, community development groups (PKBM), and

village/sub-district governments can become points of intervention if they have strong data and collaboration mechanisms.

In international literature, dropout is often understood as the result of the interaction between poverty, geographic location, and social exclusion. ECLAC (2022) confirms that absenteeism and dropout have multidimensional causes and are higher in low-income groups and rural areas. The North Laut Island findings reinforce this pattern in the context of the Indonesian archipelago, where transportation costs and family work mobility are important factors influencing school sustainability.

The recommendations for early warning systems in this study are also consistent with a study by Haimovich, Vazquez, and Adelman (2021), which showed that data-driven early warning systems and school support can reduce the risk of dropout at relatively low cost. While the Guatemalan context differs from Kotabaru, the underlying principle is relevant: attendance data and identification of at-risk children must be promptly translated into action by school and local government actors.

From a place-based policy perspective, the research findings suggest that uniform policies are insufficient for island regions. National education assistance remains crucial, but it needs to be complemented by local interventions such as transportation subsidies, flexible community learning (PKBM) schedules, home visits, strengthening village/sub-district data, and collaboration with community leaders. Thus, policies should not only focus on administrative participation rates but also eliminate substantive barriers that limit children's freedom to pursue education.

Institutionally, this research reinforces the importance of collaborative governance. The problem of school dropouts cannot be solved by schools or education offices alone, as the causes include social protection, family economics, child labor culture, and stigma. Cross-sectoral coordination forums must shift from information exchange to joint case management, with a list of target children, a mentoring plan, responsible parties, a monitoring schedule, and success indicators.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that school dropout in Pulau Laut Utara District is a structural problem formed through the interaction of family poverty, indirect education costs, geographical barriers within the archipelago, low learning motivation, and unintegrated service coordination. Dropout occurs gradually through repeated absences, learning delays, shame, and disconnection from formal schooling.

Preventive, curative, and rehabilitative strategies have been implemented by local governments, schools, and community-based learning centers (PKBM). However, their effectiveness remains limited because data is not yet integrated, coordination is not case-based, and non-formal education still faces social stigma. Therefore, addressing school dropout in island regions requires collaborative, community-based governance and place-based education policies.

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