



Implementation of the Scholarship Program as an Effort to Improve the Quality of Junior High School (SMP) Education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency

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Abstract

This study examined the implementation of the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program as an effort to improve the quality of junior high school (SMP) education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency within the framework of regional autonomy. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation involving scholarship recipients, parents, schools, program managers, and regional government officials. The findings showed that the program, funded through the Regional Budget (APBD), played a strategic role in reducing the economic barriers faced by students from low-income families, lowering the risk of dropping out, and increasing learning motivation and school participation at the SMP level. The driving factors were community economic needs, regional autonomy authority, and the active role of schools, while the inhibiting factors were delayed disbursement, limited socialization, and inaccurate recipient data. The study concluded that the program is an effective policy instrument for improving educational access and human resource quality, and recommended strengthening data systems, inter-agency coordination, and program sustainability.

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Introduction

Policy implementation is one of the most decisive stages in the public policy cycle, because it is at this stage that policies formulated normatively are translated into real action in the field. From the perspective of public administration, implementation is understood not merely as a technical activity, but as a dynamic process involving various actors, institutions, and resources that interact within a particular social system. Conceptually, implementation is often considered a less strategic stage than policy formulation. In practice, however, implementation becomes the main determinant of the success or failure of a policy, because even a good policy will not provide benefits if it cannot be carried out effectively, efficiently, and on target.

Policy implementation encompasses a complex series of activities, ranging from policy communication, inter-agency coordination, and resource allocation to monitoring and evaluation. Implementation is also influenced by environmental factors, both internal to the organization and external, such as the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the community. Therefore, the success of implementation depends heavily on the government's ability to manage these factors synergistically (Matondang, 2010; Nugraha & Putra, 2024).

In the context of national development, Indonesia's policy direction is set out in the Vision of Indonesia 2045, which targets the realization of Indonesia as a sovereign, advanced, just, and prosperous nation (Bappenas, 2020). This vision serves not only as a long-term guide for national development but also as the basis for policy formulation in various sectors, including education. It is supported by four main pillars, namely human development and mastery of science and technology, sustainable economic development, equitable development, and the strengthening of national resilience and governance.

The pillar of human development is crucial because the quality of human resources is the main factor determining a nation's competitiveness in the era of globalization. Human development covers not only the improvement of education quality but also health, welfare, and community productivity. It is directed at creating individuals who are capable of critical and creative thinking and able to adapt to rapid technological developments (Bappenas, 2020). The education sector therefore has a strategic role in achieving national development goals, so that education policy implementation must be carried out consistently, sustainably, and based on the needs of the community (Bappenas, 2020).

Education is the main instrument for improving the quality of human resources that are competitive and adaptive to global change. Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System affirms that every citizen has an equal right to obtain quality education, indicating that education is a fundamental right that must be fulfilled by the state as part of its constitutional responsibility. In the context of regional development, there are three interrelated main pillars, namely natural resources, human resources, and technology, which must be managed synergistically to drive economic growth and sustainable development.

A region with abundant natural resources will not be able to develop optimally without the support of quality human resources. Conversely, a region with superior human resources will be able to manage limited resources effectively and innovatively. Investment in education is therefore a strategic step in improving regional competitiveness. Education functions not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a process of character building, skill enhancement, and the development of individual potential (Rahman & Yusuf, 2023).

With the implementation of regional autonomy through Law Number 23 of 2014, regional governments have broader authority in managing the education sector. Regional autonomy provides flexibility for regional governments to design education policies that suit local characteristics and

needs. This is important given that each region has different geographical, social, and economic conditions, so that a uniform policy approach is not always effective in addressing educational problems in the regions.

Nevertheless, regional autonomy also brings its own challenges, particularly related to the capacity of regional governments to formulate and implement policies effectively. Not all regions have adequate resources, whether in terms of budget, infrastructure, or human resources. Therefore, the success of education policy implementation at the regional level depends heavily on the ability of regional governments to manage available resources and build collaboration with various stakeholders (Kurniawan & Sari, 2024).

Kutai Kartanegara Regency, as one of the autonomous regions in Indonesia, also faces various challenges in the education sector, particularly at the junior high school (SMP) level. Although the education system applied refers to national policy, the vast and varied geographical conditions as well as the socio-economic characteristics of the community create their own dynamics in the implementation of education policy in this region. The problems faced are not only technical but also structural and cultural in nature.

One of the main problems is the limited educational facilities and infrastructure, especially in remote areas. Many schools do not yet have adequate facilities, such as proper classrooms, laboratories, and access to information technology. In addition, the distribution of teaching staff is uneven, where most teachers are concentrated in urban areas, while remote areas still lack teachers. This has an impact on the unequal quality of the learning process.

Family economic factors are also one of the main causes of low educational participation. Many students do not continue their education to the junior high school level because they have to help their parents meet the family's economic needs. In addition, indirect costs such as transportation, school supplies, and daily living needs are an additional burden that is quite heavy for low-income families (Dewi et al., 2022). Data from the Central Statistics Agency (2025) provide a clearer picture of the educational conditions in Kutai Kartanegara Regency, as follows:

Table 1. Average Length of Schooling by Education Level, 2025

Education Level	Population (Persons)	Percentage (%)
Senior High/Vocational equivalent	196,130	24.73
Junior High School (SMP)	113,480	14.31
Elementary School (SD)	152,570	19.24
Not Completed	289,240	36.47

Source: Central Statistics Agency, 2025

Based on these data, it can be seen that most of the population of Kutai Kartanegara Regency is still at a low level of education. The percentage of the population who have not or not yet completed elementary school reaches 36.47 percent, indicating that there are still serious problems in access to basic education. Meanwhile, the population who have completed junior high school education is only 14.31 percent, showing that this level of education remains a critical point in the regional education system. The low participation rate at the junior high school level indicates that there are still barriers in the transition process from basic to secondary education. This is caused not only by economic

factors but also by geographical and socio-cultural factors. In some areas, the distance between students' homes and schools is quite far, making access to education difficult. In addition, there is still a view in society that education is not very important, especially for children who are considered capable enough to work.

In general, the data show that the increase in the average length of schooling in Kutai Kartanegara Regency is still slow and uneven across all regions. This condition indicates that existing policy interventions have not been fully able to address educational problems comprehensively. Therefore, more innovative and well-targeted policies are needed to increase educational participation, particularly at the junior high school level. The Kutai Kartanegara Regency Government has made various efforts to improve the quality of education, among others through free education programs, regional school operational assistance, and the provision of educational facilities. In addition, the strengthening of education governance has been carried out through the establishment of Sub-district Coordinators for the Education Sector based on Regent Regulation Number 33 of 2025, which aims to improve coordination and the effectiveness of education delivery at the local level.

One of the strategic policies that becomes the focus of this study is the implementation of the scholarship program, particularly through the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program regulated by Regent Regulation Number 5 of 2022. This program is a form of direct intervention by the regional government in addressing the economic barriers faced by students, particularly at the junior high school level. The scholarship program plays a very important role in improving access to education, especially for students from low-income families. With financial assistance, students can continue their education without being burdened by educational costs. In addition, scholarships can increase students' learning motivation and encourage them to achieve better academic performance. In 2025, the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program was allocated a budget of IDR 8 billion with a target of around 800 beneficiaries. The program provides not only educational cost assistance but also various supporting aspects such as transportation costs and other school needs. This demonstrates that the regional government has a strong commitment to improving the quality of education through investment in human resources.

Various previous studies have shown that scholarship programs have a significant impact on increasing educational participation, reducing dropout rates, and improving students' academic achievement (Kurniawan & Sari, 2024; Arifin, 2023). Therefore, the implementation of scholarship programs becomes one of the effective strategies for improving the quality of education in the region. Accordingly, the implementation of the scholarship program as an effort to improve the quality of SMP education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency is highly relevant to be examined in depth. The program functions not only as economic assistance but also as a strategic policy instrument for improving the quality of human resources. The success of its implementation will depend heavily on inter-agency coordination, resource availability, and community support.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the scholarship program, identify the factors that influence its success, and provide more targeted and sustainable policy recommendations. Thus, the scholarship program is intended to be not only a short-term solution but also part of a long-term strategy for improving the quality of education and regional development (Nugraha & Putra, 2024). Based on this background, the objectives of this study are to analyze and describe the implementation of the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program in improving the quality of SMP education through regional autonomy policy, and to identify the driving and inhibiting factors in its implementation in Kutai Kartanegara Regency.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the implementation of the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program in improving the quality of junior high school (SMP) education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency. This approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of actors' meanings, perceptions, and experiences within the real context of policy implementation and regional autonomy (Creswell, 2021; Sugiyono, 2022). The study focused on how the programme contributes to reducing dropout rates, increasing educational participation, and supporting SMP/equivalent students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families, high-achieving students, students at risk of dropping out, and students from rural, remote, and educationally underserved areas (Kurniawan & Sari, 2024).

The research was conducted as field research supported by library research. Primary data were obtained through observation, semi-structured interviews, and direct interaction with informants, while secondary data were collected from books, scholarly articles, official documents, and institutional reports from BPS, the Education Office, and BPKAD of Kutai Kartanegara Regency (Samsu, 2017; Creswell, 2021). The informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in the programme, including scholarship recipients, parents or guardians, school representatives, officials of the Education and Culture Office, and programme managers (Moleong, 2014).

The researcher served as the main research instrument and was supported by interview guidelines, field notes, and recording devices (Arikunto in Nasution, 2016; Sugiyono, 2022). Data collection was carried out through observation of programme implementation, semi-structured interviews to explore stakeholder experiences, and documentation to verify data related to regional education policy, scholarship implementation, and education indicators (Satori & Komariah, 2013). The use of multiple data sources and techniques was intended to strengthen the credibility, validity, and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2021; Sugiyono, 2022).

Table 2. Determination of Informants

No	Informant	Information Sought	Criteria	Number
1	SMP students receiving the scholarship	Impact of the scholarship on educational continuity	Scholarship recipients	10
2	Scholarship program manager	Program mechanism and evaluation	Program coordinator	1
3	Education Office officials	Implementation of program policy	Program implementers	4
4	Regional official	Policy and program validation	Authorized official	1

Source: Processed by the Author, 2026

The population in this study included all parties involved in the 2025 Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program, numbering around 220 people, consisting of scholarship recipients, parents/guardians, and regional government and program managers. The sample consisted of 10 scholarship recipients and 10 parents/guardians of students, as well as supporting informants from the Education Office and the regional government. Moleong (2014) states that in qualitative research, sample selection is not

intended for generalization but rather to understand phenomena in depth within a particular context (Kurniawan & Sari, 2024).

Data analysis is the step of interpreting the data obtained from the field. Following Miles and Huberman (1992) in Samsu (2017), the most important data analysis activities include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction is a form of analysis that sharpens, classifies, directs, discards unnecessary information, and organizes data in such a way that final conclusions can be drawn. Data display is the activity of arranging a set of information so that conclusions can be drawn, in the form of narrative text, matrices, graphs, networks, and charts. Conclusion drawing/verification is the result of analysis that can be used to take action.

To test the validity of the data, this study used triangulation. Sugiyono (2016) states that triangulation is a data collection technique that combines various data collection techniques and existing data sources. This study used source triangulation, namely comparing and rechecking the degree of trust in information obtained through different times and means. The steps taken included comparing observation data with interviews, comparing what was said privately with what was said in public, comparing a person's statements with those made throughout the conversation, comparing the perspectives of people from various parties, and comparing the results of interviews with documentation.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the research findings obtained from the field as well as the discussion based on data, theory, and empirical findings regarding the role of the regional government in handling school dropouts and improving the quality of education at the junior high school level in Kutai Kartanegara Regency. In qualitative research, the findings present not only data but also the processes, meanings, and interpretations of the phenomena under study.

1. The Role of Government in Improving SMP Education through the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program

Interviews with scholarship recipients showed that the main factor underlying the role of the government in improving SMP education was the still-limited socio-economic condition of families. Ahmad Fauzi (14), a grade VIII student at SMP Negeri 2 Tenggarong from a lower-middle-income family, stated that his family's uncertain economic condition often caused difficulties in meeting educational needs. In an interview on 12 February 2026 he said, "My parents work odd jobs, so their income is not fixed and is often insufficient for school costs." He added, "After receiving the Kukar Idaman Scholarship, I felt greatly helped because my school needs could be met and I became more enthusiastic about studying."

Similar statements were made by Siti Rahmawati (13), a grade VII student at SMP Negeri 1 Loa Kulu, whose parents work as daily laborers. In an interview on 13 February 2026 she said, "Sometimes I did not have money for transportation to school and had to walk or join my friends," and added, "After receiving the Kukar Idaman Scholarship, I became more enthusiastic about studying because I was less worried about school costs." Rizky Pratama (14), a grade IX student at SMP Negeri 3 Muara Jawa from a farming family with irregular income, stated in an interview on 14 February 2026, "When the harvest is poor, my parents struggle to pay for school, so I often buy school supplies late," and added, "The Kukar Idaman Scholarship greatly helped me meet my school needs and made me more eager to continue my education."

The same pattern emerged from the seven other student informants. Muhammad Ilham, Nur Aisyah, Andika Saputra, Fitri Handayani, Rina Marlina, Rahmat Hidayat, and Dewi Sartika all came

from families with limited economic conditions and reported difficulties in meeting school needs before receiving the scholarship; some, such as Andika Saputra, had even considered dropping out so as not to burden their parents. After receiving the assistance, they reported feeling calmer, more confident, and more focused on the learning process. Based on the interviews with the ten student informants, it can be concluded that the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program has a very important role in helping students from low-income families continue their education, reducing the risk of dropping out and increasing learning motivation.

Table 3. Matrix of Student Informants Receiving the Kukar Idaman Scholarship

No	Informant	Sex	Age	Grade	School	Reason
1	Ahmad Fauzi	M	14	VIII	SMP Negeri 2 Tenggarong	Uncertain family economy causing difficulty in education costs
2	Siti Rahmawati	F	13	VII	SMP Negeri 1 Loa Kulu	Limited family economy causing transport and supply difficulties
3	Rizky Pratama	M	14	IX	SMP Negeri 3 Muara Jawa	Irregular parental income as farmers; school needs often delayed
4	Muhammad Ilham	M	13	VII	SMP Negeri 4 Tenggarong	Parents are daily laborers with low income
5	Nur Aisyah	F	14	VIII	SMP Negeri 1 Tenggarong Seberang	Poor family economy and limited school supplies
6	Andika Saputra	M	14	IX	SMP Negeri 2 Muara Jawa	Difficulty paying school needs due to family economy
7	Fitri Handayani	F	13	VII	SMP Negeri 3 Loa Kulu	Unable to buy textbooks and school supplies
8	Rina Marlina	F	14	VIII	SMP Negeri 1 Samboja	Limited family economy delaying school needs
9	Rahmat Hidayat	M	15	IX	SMP Negeri 2 Loa Janan	Has to help parents work due to family economy
10	Dewi Sartika	F	13	VII	SMP Negeri 5 Tenggarong	Concern over parents' ability to fund schooling

Source: Processed by the Author, 2026

From the program manager's side, Masmuni (45), Data and Information Manager of the Technical Implementing Officer (PPTK) for SMP Scholarships and Coordinator of the Kukar

Idaman Scholarship Program, explained in an interview on 3 June 2026 that “the main objective of the Kukar Idaman Program is to improve the quality of human resources through more equitable and inclusive education,” and that the program is “one of the important instruments for preparing quality human resources” within the framework of regional development. He emphasized that every stage, from quota planning and the determination of recipient criteria to implementation monitoring, is carried out on the principles of transparency and accountability.

Rudy Octa Fitriansyah, S.E., M.Si. (52), Junior Expert Planner for Finance and Programs at the Education and Culture Office, explained in an interview on 3 June 2026 that “funding for the Kukar Idaman Program comes from the Regional Budget (APBD) of Kutai Kartanegara Regency,” reflecting the regional government's commitment to allocating a budget for the education sector. He added that evaluation is carried out by looking at indicators such as increased school participation, reduced dropout rates, and the educational continuity of scholarship recipients, while noting that the constraints faced include limited accurate data and delays in the administrative process.

Dr. Emy Rosana Saleh, S.Pd., M.A.TESOL (49), Head of the Secondary Education Division, explained in an interview on 13 February 2026 that the regional government continuously pursues equitable access to education through the construction and rehabilitation of schools in areas with limited facilities, and uses a data-based monitoring system to identify students at risk of dropping out so that interventions can be carried out promptly. She emphasized that collaboration with village governments, schools, and community leaders is essential for ensuring that dropout data are monitored accurately and quickly.

Pujianto, S.Pd., M.Pd. (56), Secretary of the Education and Culture Office, stated in an interview on 3 June 2026 that the program “has had a fairly significant impact on increasing school participation rates,” enabling students previously at risk of dropping out to continue their education, and has positively affected the socio-economic conditions of recipient families by easing the burden of educational costs. H. Heriansyah, S.E., M.Si., CGCAE (47), Head of the Education Office, added in an interview on 4 June 2026 that educational development in the regency shows a fairly positive trend and that assistance programs such as the Kukar Idaman Scholarship help reduce dropout rates, supported by the strengthening of a school-based data system for early identification and intervention.

Dr. H. Sunggono, M.M. (59), Regional Secretary of Kutai Kartanegara Regency, explained in an interview on 4 June 2026 that the Kukar Idaman Program is “part of a regional development strategy focused on improving the quality of human resources” and is part of the regional government's commitment to creating social justice through improved access to education for all communities. Based on the research matrix, it can be concluded that the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program emerged because of the still-low economic conditions of the community and the uneven access to education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency. This condition became the “because-of motive” that drove the regional government to introduce an education policy based on educational social assistance. Meanwhile, the “in-order-to motive” of the program is to improve access to education, reduce dropout rates, improve the quality of human resources, and create equal educational opportunities for all communities, especially students from low-income families.

2. Driving and Inhibiting Factors in Program Implementation

The driving factors in the implementation of the program centered on the economic needs of the community for educational assistance, the authority granted by regional autonomy, and the active role of schools. The interviews showed that family economic limitations had a very large influence on students' access to and continuity of education, while the high risk of dropping out due to economic

pressure made the scholarship a necessary form of government intervention. From the regional government's perspective, the program is part of a human resource development strategy: H. Heriansyah stated that "the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program is part of the regional government's policy to improve educational access for low-income communities," and Masmuni affirmed that "this program is part of a regional development strategy based on improving the quality of human resources."

Regional autonomy provided the legal space for the regional government to design contextual education policies. Dr. H. Sunggono stated that "this program emerged from the authority of the regional government to respond to the community's needs in the field of education," while Dr. Emy Rosana Saleh emphasized that "regional autonomy gives the regional government room to design education policies that suit local conditions." In addition, schools played a strategic role in socialization and the submission of applications: students such as Ahmad Fauzi and Siti Rahmawati reported that teachers and homeroom teachers helped them obtain information and process the administrative files for the scholarship.

On the other hand, the inhibiting factors related to administration and data. Rudy Octa Fitriansyah explained that "selection is carried out through data verification and school recommendations so that assistance is well targeted," while Pujianto noted that "completeness of administration and accuracy of data are still challenges in implementing the program." These statements indicate that, alongside its strong policy support, the program still faces obstacles such as delayed disbursement of assistance, insufficient socialization to the community, and limitations in beneficiary data, which require strengthened inter-agency coordination and supervision.

Overall, based on the interviews conducted with scholarship recipients, schools, and the regional government, it can be concluded that the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program is a concrete form of the regional government's role in improving access to education at the junior high school level in Kutai Kartanegara Regency. The program emerged in response to the community's economic limitations in meeting educational needs and the high risk of dropping out due to family economic pressure. Through regional autonomy policy, the regional government has the authority to design education programs that are more adaptive, contextual, and suited to local community needs. In addition to providing financial assistance, the program also functions as a strategic instrument for improving the quality of human resources through equitable access to education. With the support of schools, the regional government, and the community, the program is expected to increase school participation rates, reduce dropout rates, and create a more competitive and higher-quality generation in the future.

Conclusion

Based on the research on the implementation of the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program in improving the quality of SMP education in Kutai Kartanegara Regency, it can be concluded that the Kutai Kartanegara Regency Government has carried out its role in improving the quality of education through the program by providing educational assistance to disadvantaged students, high-achieving students, and students at risk of dropping out, as a form of commitment to improving access to and equity in education. The implementation of the program has had a positive impact on increasing the educational participation of SMP students, as the assistance provided eases the family economic burden so that students can continue their education more easily, and it has also increased students' learning motivation. In its implementation, the scholarship program still faces several constraints, such as delays in the disbursement of assistance, insufficient socialization of the program to the community,

and limitations in beneficiary data. Therefore, improved inter-agency coordination and the strengthening of the supervision system are needed so that program implementation can run more optimally. In general, the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program has made a fairly good contribution to supporting the improvement of education quality and human resource development in Kutai Kartanegara Regency.

This study has several limitations, including a scope that focuses only on one program in one region, so that the results cannot yet be widely generalized to other regions with different social and economic characteristics. In addition, the study was dominated by qualitative interview data and has not yet been fully supported by more comprehensive quantitative data, such as long-term statistics on the program's impact on reducing dropout rates. These limitations open opportunities for future research to use broader and deeper approaches, both through quantitative methods and mixed methods, and to expand the area of study so that the results become more comprehensive and representative. Practically, the findings indicate that the Kukar Idaman Scholarship Program needs to be maintained and improved as the main instrument for reducing dropout rates in Kutai Kartanegara Regency.

The regional government is expected to strengthen the data and validation system for beneficiaries so that assistance is genuinely well targeted, to improve coordination among the regional government, the Education Office, schools, and program managers, and to digitalize the administrative system in order to reduce data constraints and accelerate service delivery. Theoretically, this study reinforces the concept that regional economic development is closely related to improved access to education and reduced dropout rates, and supports the theory of human resource development that positions education as a primary investment in the long-term development of a region. For further research, it is recommended that studies use quantitative or mixed methods to more measurably assess the program's impact, expand the scope to other education levels and other regencies/cities in East Kalimantan, and examine more deeply the governance of beneficiary data digitalization.

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