

# Challenges of Implementing the *Kyushoku* Program in Contemporary Japan: An Analysis of Policy, Media, and Social Reality

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## Abstract

*Kyushoku* has long been recognized as a structured and successful school lunch program supporting nutrition education and child well-being in Japan. However, *Kyushoku* has recently faced various challenges amidst emerging global issues. This study aims to analyze the current implementation challenges of the *Kyushoku* program to provide developing countries with an understanding that this ideal program still requires improvement and targeted government intervention. This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method, through the analysis of credible data such as Japanese government policy documents, official survey reports, books, recent Japanese media reports, and relevant academic literature articles. The results reveal several key challenges in *Kyushoku*'s implementation, such as food price inflation making it difficult for local governments to provide food that meets nutritional standards, inter-regional inequality, food safety issues, and demographic decline in Japan. The study's findings suggest that the sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program depends on adaptive policy support, stable financial management, and stronger coordination among the government, schools, and related sectors. This study is expected to provide a critical perspective on the evolving reality of the *Kyushoku* program in modern Japanese society.

**Keywords:** *Kyushoku*; challenge; Japan; policy

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## 1. Introduction

*Kyushoku*, Japan's school lunch program, has long been recognized as structured and sustainable. This program not only meets nutritional needs but also plays an integral role in the education, culture, and social interactions that shape the character and habits of Japanese students (Yuko et al., 2023). Over time, *Kyushoku* has become a vital instrument in supporting child welfare, health education, and social stability in Japanese society. This success is due in large part to strong regulatory support, the involvement of central and local governments, and the integration of education, health, and the national food system (MAFF, 2024). In addition to

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being supported by the Japanese people, who consider that food is not just for meeting needs, but also plays a role in cultural interaction (Fatimah & Panjaitan, 2025). The *Kyushoku* program is primarily implemented in elementary and junior high schools, where the government covers operational costs, including labor, equipment, and other expenses. Additionally, parents bear the cost of ingredients. School dietitians, diet and nutrition teachers, and school lunch cooks, who serve as the workforce that operates the school lunch program, are responsible for its daily operation (Maruyama & Kurokawa, 2018). In its implementation, this program is also regulated and operated by local governments through prefectural or city boards of education, based on policies and standards that have been set by the central government through MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) (Y. Kojima et al., 2018).

Historically, the *Kyushoku* program is said to have begun in the late 19th century, precisely in 1889 at Chuai Elementary School, a private school run by Daitokuji Temple in Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture, Japan. The program then spread throughout Japan and experienced significant development after World War II through the aid of the United States and the passage of the School Lunch Act of 1954. The regulation places *Kyushoku* not only as a nutritious food provider program, but also as an integral part of school education (Ishida, 2018). Furthermore, the ratification of the *Shokuiku* (Food and Nutrition Education) in 2005 further strengthened *Kyushoku's* position as an instrument of Japanese food education and public health. *Shokuiku* is considered part of education, cooperation between schools, families, and communities contributes to increased interest in food and health issues not only among children but also among parents and local communities, as well as to the realization of sustainable food by linking it to the use of local products (Yamanaka, 2025). Even *Shokuiku* has been thought to be able to offer new ways to combat rising obesity worldwide, lessen meat consumption, and reduce the unsustainable ecological footprint of humans (Rappleye et al., 2024). At the same time, schools in Japan have hired professionals (diet and nutrition teachers) who are qualified as nutritionists and hold teaching licenses to provide instruction on food and nutrition, using school lunches as a teaching tool in the classroom, in addition to creating menus.

However, behind this ideal image, the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program in contemporary Japan faces new and increasingly complex challenges. In recent years, various Japanese media reports and government reports have shown that food price inflation has caused local governments to have difficulties in providing adequate food to meet nutritional standards, regional gaps, a crisis of school lunch caterers, and food safety issues. In addition, Japan also faces demographic challenges in the form of declining numbers of children and schools, which has a direct impact on human resources, governance, and implementation of the *Kyushoku* program. This condition is certainly still beyond the problem of changing lifestyles and diets of Japanese people, including the decline in family dining practices and challenges from imported food (Watabe et al., 2016). This situation shows that *Kyushoku* as a public policy is inseparable from the ever-evolving social, economic, and institutional dynamics of modern Japanese society.

In an academic context, studies of *Kyushoku* over the last decade tend to focus more on the system's success, nutrition education, and the cultural values it embodies. Maruyama and Kurokawa's (2018) research has discussed in detail *Kyushoku's* operational system in Japan from organizational aspects, financial management, resource management, and sustainability. The research shows that *Kyushoku's* success is supported by strong regulations, an organized operational system, and the involvement of central and local governments in maintaining the

sustainability of school meal programs. However, the research focuses more on the technical aspects, the role of regulation, and the success rate of the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program. It has not studied in depth how the current challenges are, which are influenced by socio-economic dynamics, such as food inflation and fiscal pressure on local governments. Although this research has acknowledged that there are future challenges to be addressed soon, such as food safety and declining students due to population decline in Japan. In addition, previous research by Pasha et al. (2025) has evaluated the governance structure of school lunch programs in different countries through comparative analysis. The study has also identified various challenges faced by each country, including Japan. However, the identification of the logistical complexities, socio-cultural barriers, and economic constraints associated with the *Kyushoku* program in Japan is less profound. The challenges mentioned are few in relation to supply chains, seasonal local sourcing, food allergies, and peer pressure in schools to run out of food. Therefore, a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of other more pressing challenges in the *Kyushoku* program in Japan is needed, in order to show more concrete facts on the ground and find solutions.

Based on the review, it can be found that there is a research gap. Most of the previous research has tended to be oriented towards the success of the *Kyushoku* system, nutrition education, and the cultural and educational values it contains. However, it has not examined in depth how the problems caused by the changing socio-economic conditions of Japan today greatly affect the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program. The novelty of this research lies in the focus of analysis on the challenges of *Kyushoku* implementation in contemporary Japan, where this study not only sees *Kyushoku* as a successful food education system, but also as a public policy that is facing social, economic, and institutional challenges in the midst of the dynamics of modern Japanese society. Thus, this study offers a more actual and critical perspective than previous research, which tends to be normative. It is hoped that by knowing the current problems, policies that are adaptive, concrete, and on target can be found. This study aims to analyze various challenges in the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan in order to give an idea to other countries that programs that are considered ideal also still need improvement and good handling by the government. In addition, this study explains how the current Japanese government is facing these challenges in the context of today's socio-economic changes.

## 2. Methods

This study has used a qualitative approach with a literature study method. The qualitative approach begins with the use of assumptions and interpretive frameworks that influence or shape the study of research problems related to the meaning imposed by individuals or groups on a social problem (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Therefore, this study starts from the assumption that the results of the analysis of the current challenges of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan can create new perspectives and mitigation recommendations for the future. The author has created a qualitative research design with a narrative literature review, which includes: determining the focus of the research, determining the research paradigm according to real conditions, and determining identifiable data sources. To ensure the credibility and validity of the study's findings, data have been obtained from a variety of sources, such as Japanese government policy documents, survey reports in Japan, current Japanese media reports, books, official websites, and relevant academic literature articles, making it possible to triangulate data to strengthen analysis and minimize bias. Furthermore, the data analysis that has been obtained is a thematic analysis technique, which is a qualitative data analysis method

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used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data analysis process includes (1) familiarizing the data, (2) creating initial code (coding), (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing analysis reports. Therefore, this study has focused on the theme of the current challenges of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan, by classifying challenges thematically, including (1) economic, (2) policy, (3) food safety, and (4) demographic challenges, which can ultimately synthesize the findings of the thematic analysis in the form of new insights and perspectives on the reality of *Kyushoku*, as well as concrete recommendations for the future to overcome these challenges.

### 3. Result and Discussion

The *Kyushoku* program in Japan is not completely free. The program is funded through a combination of central government subsidies, local governments, and parental contributions in proportions that vary by region. The availability of free lunches depends on local government policies, which often provide subsidies to keep prices affordable for families (Pasha et al., 2025). Thus the Japanese government through the School Lunch Program Act can instruct well, especially the organizers of public elementary and junior high schools to always provide safe and nutritious school meals to students, which ultimately contributes to realizing the school's seven lunch objectives including sustaining and improving proper nutrition, encouraging an active social life and caring spirit, and promoting an understanding of Japan's and the local region's traditional food culture (Morohashi, 2025). However, amidst the socio-economic changes in contemporary Japan, the implementation of *Kyushoku* faces a variety of new and increasingly complex challenges. Based on a thematic analysis of policy documents, Japanese government reports, and recent media coverage, this study identifies several key issues affecting the sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan.

#### 3.1 Economic Challenges: Food Price Inflation

In the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program, the food menu provided is divided into 3 categories, such as (1) full meal, (2) supplementary meal or side dish, and (3) milk. The full meal consists of staple food, an accompanying dish, and milk. The staple food includes cooked rice, bread, and noodles (Ishida, 2018). However, recently, these food ingredients have experienced an increase in prices, which certainly affects the operation of the *Kyushoku* program. Reported by The Japan Times, rice prices in early 2026 still remain high, still averaging above 4000 yen per 5 kilograms, almost double the level before the supply shortage (JIJI, 2026). In fact, last year, there was also news about the deterioration of food quality, which drew outrage in the *Kyushoku* program at an elementary school in Fukuoka, Japan (Hara, 2025). This situation is worrying if it can lower the nutritional standards that have been set, which were set to higher standard values than one-third of the daily energy requirement and one-third or more of the daily nutrient intake, based on the actual circumstances surrounding the schoolchildren (Morimoto & Miyahara, 2018). This is due to the unchanged lunch budget of 4,200 yen per month (243.15 yen per meal) for approximately 10 years, while the price of staples continues to rise. On the other hand, the city will have to cover a cost increase of about 1.2 billion yen in fiscal 2025, which has increased 3-fold compared to the previous three years (Hara, 2025). Akamatsu, a professor of nutritional education at Ochanomizu University, also acknowledged that the main challenge in the *Kyushoku* program is the recent price hike in food and utilities. In many municipalities, the cost of school lunches is now around 300 to 350 yen per meal. Therefore, some municipalities face difficulties in providing food that meets



nutritional standards based on the current budget, even though, under the School Lunch Act, the cost of lunch is also borne by the parents. On the other hand, some local governments have independently introduced *Kyushoku* programs to reduce the burden on families, but this also poses challenges, such as increased financial strain on local governments (Morohashi, 2025). This situation naturally causes local governments to face increasing fiscal pressure in maintaining the quality of school meals.

Based on the latest data released by MEXT, it shows that the average cost of lunch in the *Kyushoku* program has continued to increase in the past decade. In 2023, the average monthly meal cost (not the actual amount paid by parents) reached 4,688 yen for elementary school, and 5,367 yen for junior high school. This figure is an increase of about 8% from the last five years, and an increase of about 12% compared to the previous ten years (MEXT, 2024). This means that the cost of school lunches ranges from 250 yen - 300 yen per day. This situation is reflected in Chart 1 below, which shows that the trend of rising food costs tends to be consistent from year to year, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and rising global food prices. In the realization of its implementation throughout Japan, the *Kyushoku* program also continues to increase in various schools, especially the provision of school lunches in the full meal category. Elementary Schools dominate by 98.8%, Junior High School 89.8%, and Schools for special needs education 88.9%. With details of 99.5% Public Elementary School, 97.1% Public Junior High School, 43.4% Private Elementary School, and 8.2% Private Junior High School (MEXT, 2024). This means that the implementation rate of the *Kyushoku* program continues to increase amid rising food prices, automatically continuing to push up the amount of the Japanese government's fiscal budget, especially for local governments. Some local governments have replied that there are still schools outside the above percentages, or do not provide a full meal due to geographical or financial reasons.

The increase in food costs also has an impact on school food providers and related industrial sectors. Several Japanese media reports show that there are school catering companies that are experiencing operational difficulties due to the increasing cost of distribution and food materials. After an incident at one of the elementary schools in Fukuoka, for example, Hoyu, a catering company based in Hiroshima, recently found itself unable to absorb cost increases and went bust, meals at some 150 schools had to be suspended (Kuchikomi, 2025). In addition, by 2025, there has been a record number of *Bento* (Japanese boxed foods) stores that have gone bankrupt, due to inflation that has reached a 3% increase in foodstuffs, especially rice (Nagata, 2025). This situation shows that the sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program does not only depend on educational policies, but is also closely related to the stability of the food economy, regional fiscal capacity, and the sustainability of the school food industry in contemporary Japan.



Chart 1. *Kyushoku* cost increase year-over-year of different types of schools  
(Sources: MEXT, 2024)

### 3.2 Policy Challenges: Inter-Regional Inequality

Although the Japanese government has a strong national regulatory framework through the School Lunch Program Act and the Basic Act on *Shokuiku*, the implementation of *Kyushoku* remains highly dependent on the capabilities of local governments. The central government sets nutritional standards and general policies, while the provision of operational implementation is carried out by the local government. The central government gives high autonomy to local governments regarding school meals, so there are considerable differences in the volume and quality of school lunches served across the country. In addition, the rules of the free lunch program vary from municipality to municipality depending on the local government's policy. As a result, if there are budget constraints due to rising food prices, the local government finds it difficult, as in the case of a small piece of fried chicken that has been served on the *Kyushoku* menu at an elementary school in Fukuoka (Kuchikomi, 2025). This situation certainly shows the inequality in the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program in every region in Japan.

Based on a survey conducted by MEXT, in 2023, there is a high cost of school lunch disparity between prefectures (Chart 2). At the elementary school level, *Kyushoku* fees range from 3,933 to 5,314 yen per month, with Fukushima Prefecture having the highest and Shiga Prefecture the lowest. While at the junior high school level, they range from 4,493 to 6,282 yen per month, with Toyama Prefecture having the highest and Shiga Prefecture the lowest. This means that the difference is about 1.4 times between prefectures. This situation creates capacity imbalances between regions in providing the *Kyushoku* program. Some regions are able to provide free meals or use organic and local ingredients, while others face budget constraints, making it difficult to meet the same standards. In addition, the use of local products in *Kyushoku* also faces challenges related to price and the stability of local food supplies (MEXT & MAFF, 2023). Thus, the challenges of implementing *Kyushoku* are not only related to food provision, but also related to inter-regional inequality.

### 3.3 Food Safety Challenges: Poisoning and Allergies

Food safety is a widespread challenge in the *Kyushoku* program. This issue is particularly important considering that the program involves millions of students every day. *Kyushoku* is required to meet very strict hygiene and food safety standards. The Japanese government, through MEXT, has set standards for managing school food hygiene, starting from the selection of foodstuffs, the processing process, and the distribution of food to students. In addition, the government also sets nutritional standards to ensure that each menu is in accordance with the needs of children's development (MEXT & MAFF, 2023).



Chart 2. Comparison of *Kyushoku* costs in each Prefecture in Japan

(Source: MEXT, 2024)

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However, the issue of food safety has received renewed attention as a result of the recent cases of food poisoning (*shokuchū doku*) in the *Kyushoku* program. For example, as reported by several sources, by March 2026, food poisoning occurred in a number of schools in Osaka, Japan, affecting more than 600 students. It is caused by norovirus in some students who have been affected, and the same virus was also found in employees of a company that supplies bread for the *Kyushoku* program in all elementary and junior high schools in the city (Xinhua, 2026). The case has raised public concerns about the quality of food safety oversight in the *Kyushoku* program, especially when school meal services have to serve thousands of students simultaneously in a short period of time.

In addition to food poisoning, Japan also faces the challenge of persistent food allergies among schoolchildren. A recent MEXT document survey revealed that although most schools have implemented a full meal category, some students are unable to consume school meals due to severe allergies and must bring their own lunches from home. The document also shows that some local governments have implemented selective feeding systems, particularly at the junior high school level, to accommodate the needs of specific students (MEXT, 2024). According to Japan's Consumer Affairs Agency's 2024 report on allergy food labeling, the most common allergen in Japan is eggs, cited in 26.7% of cases, followed by nuts such as walnuts at 24.6%, and milk at 13.4%. Wheat, peanuts, and fish roe each account for more than 5% (S. Kojima, 2026). This situation indicates that food allergies have become a structural challenge in the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan. The Japanese government has actually paid serious attention to the issue of poisoning and allergies in the *Kyushoku* program, setting hygiene and supervision standards. However, other problems also remain, such as excess intakes of fat and salt, and insufficient intake of dietary fibre, which are major problems in this population (Asakura & Sasaki, 2017).

### 3.4 Demographic Challenges: Decrease in the Number of Students and Schools

Japan is currently facing a declining birth rate and a declining number of school-age children (*Shōshika*), which indirectly reduces the number of schools. This reduction, it does not mean that the budget for the *Kyushoku* program is reduced, and quite the opposite. Given that, in principle, the *Kyushoku* program aims to provide for struggling families and encourage population growth (Yamamoto, 2024). In September 2023, 547 municipalities, or about 30% of all municipalities, provided free school lunches to the public's primary and junior high schools, and this represents an increase of about 7-fold in the 6 years since a similar survey was conducted in 2017. When asked about the reason, 652 municipalities (90.3%) mentioned "reducing the financial burden of parents and supporting childcare", followed by "measures to address the decline in the birth rate (support in the hope of increasing the number of children)". However, local governments are divided on whether to continue the free lunch program in the future after seeing rising food prices (Nippon.com, 2024).



Figure 1: Menus that are helpful for accommodating food allergies

(Source: *Saitama-ken Gakkou Kyushoku-kai*. (2026). <https://www.saigaku.or.jp/info/rep/>)

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According to the 2025 School Basic Survey published by MEXT, the number of elementary school students in 2025 was recorded at 5.81 million, a decrease of approximately 129,000 compared to the previous year and the lowest figure in history. Meanwhile, the number of junior high school students also decreased to 3.10 million, a decrease of approximately 36,000 students compared to the previous year. Similar declines also occurred at the high school levels (MEXT, 2025). This declining trend has persisted since the end of Japan's second baby boom in the 1980s. At its peak in 1958, the number of elementary school students in Japan reached approximately 13.49 million, while by 2025, that number had fallen to only about 5.81 million. This decline also has an impact on the number of educational institutions in Japan. This decline also impacted the number of educational institutions in Japan. In the same survey, in 2025, the number of elementary schools was recorded at 18,291, a decrease of 215 compared to the previous year. Meanwhile, the number of junior high schools also decreased to 9,827, and the number of teachers also decreased, as shown in Table 1.

This situation certainly has a direct impact on the governance and sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program. The decline in student numbers has made it increasingly difficult to maintain the operational efficiency of school kitchens and food distribution. In some cases, local governments have resorted to school consolidation or the use of a combined central kitchen system to reduce operational costs for school meals. For example, a collective kitchen was planned to have 2 kitchens that would prepare 6,000 meals each, which were eventually combined into 1 collective kitchen that could prepare 12,000 meals, to save costs and taking into account the decreasing number of schoolchildren in Japan (Maruyama & Kurokawa, 2018).

However, on the other hand, these measures also pose new challenges, such as increased distribution costs and dependence on food logistics systems. Furthermore, the decline in the number of schools has been accompanied by a decline in the availability of *Kyushoku* support staff, including teachers, school nutritionists, kitchen staff, and school meal service providers. Limited human resources in some areas undoubtedly make it difficult to maintain a stable school meal system. Thus, the demographic challenge demonstrates that the sustainability of *Kyushoku* in Japan is not only influenced by nutritional aspects and educational policies, but also depends heavily on changes in population structure and the sustainability of educational institutions amid Japan's contemporary demographic crisis.

**Table 1. Number of Schools, Students, and Teachers in Japan (Source: MEXT, 2025)**

| Type of school     | Number of schools (schools) |          |        |         | Number of students enrolled (persons) |          |            |          | Teachers (persons) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------|--------|---------|---------------------------------------|----------|------------|----------|--------------------|
|                    | Total                       | National | Public | Private | Total                                 | National | Public     | Private  | Total              |
| Elementary school  | (-215)                      | (-1)     | (-215) | (1)     | (-129,358)                            | (-779)   | (-127,922) | (-657)   | (-280)             |
|                    | 18,607                      | 66       | 18,291 | 250     | 5,812,375                             | 34,612   | 5,698,430  | 79,333   | 424,894            |
| Junior high school | (-55)                       | (-1)     | (-51)  | (-3)    | (-35,835)                             | (-493)   | (-36,521)  | (1,179)  | (-121)             |
|                    | 9,827                       | 67       | 8,982  | 778     | 3,105,297                             | 26,353   | 2,829,783  | 249,161  | 247,305            |
| Senior high school | (-13)                       | (-)      | (-12)  | (-1)    | (-33,302)                             | (-18)    | (-23,336)  | (-9,948) | (-1,488)           |
|                    | 4,761                       | 15       | 3,426  | 1,320   | 2,873,619                             | 8,018    | 1,867,684  | 997,917  | 221,713            |



After reviewing the above data, this study aims to analyze various challenges in the implementation of the *Kyushoku* program in Japan in order to give an idea to other countries that programs that are considered ideal also still need improvement and good handling by the government. The results show that although the *Kyushoku* program in Japan has strong regulations, such as the School Lunch Act, a structured and successful system, and is considered effective in addressing obesity (Miyawaki et al., 2018), the program is currently facing increasingly complex socio-economic, demographic, and institutional pressures. Thematic analysis in this study identified four main challenges affecting the sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program: (1) economic challenges that include food price inflation, (2) policy challenges that include inter-regional inequality, (3) food safety challenges that include poisoning and allergies, and (4) demographic decline that includes a decrease in the number of students and schools. These findings reinforce previous research that emphasizes the success of the *Kyushoku* system and nutrition education in Japan, as Ishida's (2018) research shows that this program is supported by a strong legal basis (School Lunch Act 1954), or a study by Asakura & Sasaki (2017) that has compared the nutritional intake of children who follow the *Kyushoku* program every day much better than those who do not. However, this study also shows that *Kyushoku* is not free from various structural problems in modern Japanese society, accompanied by real data.

The economic challenges in this study primarily relate to rising food prices and the increasing operational costs of school meal programs. The findings indicate that inflation in food and utility prices places significant pressure on local governments and school meal providers. These findings support the research of Maruyama & Kurokawa (2018), who stated that the sustainability of *Kyushoku* is highly dependent on operational management and local fiscal capacity. However, this study expands on previous discussions by demonstrating that contemporary economic instability directly impacts the nutritional quality and sustainability of school meal services. Media reports of reduced meal portions, rising rice prices, and bankruptcies of school catering companies demonstrate that the challenges of *Kyushoku* are no longer merely technical but also structural and economic. This situation demonstrates that *Kyushoku* implementation is increasingly influenced by global economic dynamics, including post-pandemic inflation and food supply chain instability.

In the face of these challenges, the Japanese government has actually made a number of efforts to maintain the sustainability of the *Kyushoku* program, considering that the program is primarily to help the burden on parents and children's welfare. The central government continues its efforts to ensure free school lunches for children through proactive subsidies to local governments, despite the global crisis. By 2026, the central government had provided a subsidy of 5,200 yen per child per month nationwide. Although some municipalities had already begun offering free school lunches before the central government, national government support was expected to significantly reduce the burden on parents in more municipalities. However, according to a survey by the Minami-Nippon Shimbun, the average monthly cost of school lunches in 43 municipalities in Kagoshima Prefecture (as of April), for example, was approximately 5,820 yen, with 38 municipalities exceeding the national subsidy due to rising food prices. This means that the remaining costs not subsidized by the central government will be borne by local governments, leading local governments on remote islands to request uneven subsidies (Minami Nippon, 2026). Previously, there had also been opposition to the proposal for the prefectural government to cover half of the cost of free school meals (TNC, 2025).

Therefore, significant differences in conditions and needs in each region of Japan have become a complex issue, where the central government must be careful and adaptive, especially related to support and subsidies, in addition to regulating stable financial management amid the global crisis. On the other hand, local governments can also continuously strengthen coordination, develop collaboration with local farmers and producers, strengthen food safety and allergy management systems, develop efficient centralized kitchen systems, utilize digital technology, and formulate specific policies for rural areas and the demographic crisis. Adaptive policies and stronger intersectoral coordination are essential, given that the current *Kyushoku* program relies on financial stability, nutritional quality, and food security, and concurrent demographic changes in Japan. The *Kyushoku* program is now not only a school meal program, but also a crucial part of social welfare, public health, and sustainable education policies in modern Japan. This situation can encourage the Japanese government to continuously improve adaptive policies, stable financial management, and stronger coordination among governments, schools, and related sectors.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study shows that although *Kyushoku* has long been known as a structured and successful school meal system in supporting nutrition education and child well-being, the program is currently facing increasingly complex challenges amidst socio-economic changes in modern Japan. Through thematic analysis, this study identified four main challenges affecting the sustainability of *Kyushoku*: (1) economic challenges related to food price inflation, (2) policy challenges in the form of regional disparities, (3) food safety challenges related to food poisoning and food allergies, and (4) demographic challenges in the form of declining student and school numbers. These findings indicate that *Kyushoku* is no longer understood solely as a school meal program, but has evolved into a public policy closely related to food security, public health, social welfare, and regional sustainability in modern Japan.

This study also shows that the sustainability of *Kyushoku* relies heavily on adaptive policy support, stable financial management, and stronger coordination between the central government, local governments, schools, and the relevant food sector. Although the Japanese government has attempted to maintain the program's sustainability through subsidies, strengthened food safety regulations, *Shokuiku*, and operational restructuring, the study's findings indicate that current challenges require a more flexible and targeted response tailored to the specific conditions of each region. Therefore, this study confirms that even an “ideal” school meal program still requires ongoing evaluation and policy adjustments to address changing social and economic conditions. This study provides important lessons for developing countries seeking to adopt or expand school meal programs as part of their education and social welfare policies.

However, this study still has several limitations. This study primarily used qualitative data based on a literature study derived from policy documents, official reports, academic literature, and media reports, without involving field observations or direct interviews with parties involved in the implementation of *Kyushoku*. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct field studies involving schools, local governments, school nutritionists, parents, and food providers to gain a deeper understanding of the operational realities and effectiveness of the *Kyushoku* program. Furthermore, comparative research between Japan and other countries implementing school meal programs could also provide a

broader perspective on sustainable school food governance amidst global socio-economic changes.

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