

Journal of Religion, Local Politics, and Law 2(2), 214-228

Journal of Religion, Local Politics, and Law

<https://propanoramic.com/index.php/jrlpl/index>

DOI: 10.64595/jrlpl.v2n2.p214-228



Governmental Political Policy and Out-of-School Children in Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines how government responses addressed out-of-school children in Osun State, Nigeria. Using an exploratory research design, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews with major stakeholders and civil society organisations, and reports. Data were analysed using frequency tables and thematic analysis and interpreted through the lens of systems theory. The findings identified O'Meals, the school policing system, and the establishment of Early Child Care Development (ECCD) centers, among others, as policies implemented by the state government for out-of-school children in Osun State. Results also showed that the government's specific responses to out-of-school children had effectively reduced the number of out-of-school children in the state by 13.9%, although some challenges were encountered during implementation. The study concluded that the Osun State government's response had reasonably addressed the issue of out-of-school children in the state through the implementation of government policies such as O'Meals, school policing systems, establishment of early childhood care development, nomadic schools, and collaboration with major stakeholders.

Keyword: Education, Out-Of-School Children, Government, Educational Policy

Paper Type: Research Paper

Corresponding author: a.emordi@oauife.edu.ng

Received: 20-01-2026; **Received in Revised From** 20-02-2026; **Accepted:** 14-04-2026; **Available Online:** 14-04-2026

Cite this document as: Emordi, A. T. O., F.B., Bamire & Olufemi, I. R. (2026). Governmental political policy and out-of-school children in osun state, nigeria. *Journal of Religion, Local Politics, and Law*, 2(2), 214–229. <https://doi.org/10.64595/jrlpl.v2n2.p214-229>

Introduction

'Out-of-school children' pertains to children between the ages of six and fourteen who do not have access to a quality educational system (Zapfe & Gross, 2021). They are children within the official primary school age who are not enrolled in any formal education, excluding pre-primary education. Out-of-school children are dropouts or students who leave school before the end of the final year of the educational sessions he/she enrolled in. It refers to the non-attendance of the school-age children due to some established factors. These contributing factors include poverty, parental illiteracy, child labour, peer group pressure, lack of access to government intervention programmes, and others. Poverty poses as the biggest barrier to school access, with 43% of children forced into child labour (UNICEF, 2024). The issue of children who are not enrolled in school has garnered significant interest from governmental bodies and other relevant stakeholders at both the national and subnational levels (Okolo-Obasi & Uduji, 2024). Efforts to address this problem have been made through the enactment of laws, the formulation of policies, and the execution of various initiatives. Hence, education plays a vital role in national development (Musa & Shamsudeen Aliyu, 2023).

Regrettably, the number of out-of-school children in Africa has reached alarming levels, leaving the children's future in jeopardy (Odoh et al., 2024). According to the 2024 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, Africa continues to have the highest number of out-of-school children, with 251 million children and youth globally who are out of school (UNESCO, 2024). Furthermore, Nigeria's education system faces an alarming crisis, with about 18.3 million out-of-school children, comprising 10.2 million children in primary school and 8.1 million junior secondary school-age children. Even though both primary and secondary education have been made formally free and mandatory in Nigeria, it is predicted that one in every three children is an out-of-school children in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2024). Concerns have been raised by the government and other key stakeholders in the nation about this startling number of children who are not attending school because society is exposed to numerous hazards, such as abuse, exploitation, and deviant conduct that pose risks (B. et al., 2025).

However, in response to this, the right to education has been acknowledged by international human rights accords. The ratification of the right to education has occurred through a series of United Nations Conventions, commencing with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and culminating in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This convention was subsequently recognised as international law in 1990. As stipulated in Article 26 of the Convention, it is the responsibility of governments to ensure the mandatory provision of a primary school education, without cost, to all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic standing. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 has contributed to an increased focus on matters pertaining to education. To enhance the availability of basic education, Nigeria has become a member of several international agreements and has also established institutional frameworks to comply with these international accords (Asogwa

et al., 2025).

In compliance with the international accord, the National Policy on Education (NPE) implemented the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme by enacting the Free Universal Basic Education Act in 2004. This act established a policy framework to ensure that all eligible Nigerian citizens had access to free and mandatory primary education. The objective of this is to examine concerns about the accessibility of education for children. Also, in 2011, the federal government of Nigeria initiated the Better Education Service for All (BEDSA) programme in collaboration with the Central Bank of Nigeria. The primary objective of this initiative was to enhance access to education for children who were not enrolled in schools. Furthermore, the National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) was instituted in public primary schools across Nigeria in the year 2016. The primary objective of this programme is to offer children a nutritious daily meal, thereby enhancing enrolment rates, mitigating student attrition, and fostering improved educational achievements (Aminulloh et al., 2025). The programme also seeks to enhance students' motivation for academic engagement.

However, the efficacy of the implemented initiatives on academic enrolment has been constrained, casting doubt on the feasibility of attaining universal primary education by 2030. Regrettably, Nigeria continues to have a significant number of out-of-school children on a global scale, despite the implementation of government policies, institutional structures, and other related measures (Mohammed et al., 2021). Specifically, in Osun State, as of 2021, an estimated 297,000 children aged 6-11 were not registered in educational institutions in Osun State, constituting 13% of the overall count of children not attending school in Nigeria, according to a UNICEF report. Moreover, it is worth noting that a mere 60% of children within the primary school-age range in the state were enrolled in schools. Additionally, a notable gender discrepancy exists, as there is a higher enrolment rate for boys compared to girls (UNICEF, 2021).

To combat the prevalence of out-of-school children and increase access to high-quality education, Osun State also enacted several noteworthy policies and initiatives within its education sector. These include the Osun State elementary feeding programme, the construction of school facilities, the reorganisation of the administration of education, including the reclassification of Osun schools, modifications to the curriculum, and the adoption of a common uniform (Muhammad Noval Abdul Rozak et al., 2025). The provision of free meals is a strategic approach aimed at facilitating access to education for students by mitigating the hindrances posed by hunger. (Zulu, 2026) found that when pupils participate in school feeding programmes, they tend to do better academically because school becomes more appealing. Though it was observed that meals provided are consistently inconsistent and grossly inadequate for the pupils as a result of corruption, poor programme coverage, inadequate funding, the high cost of food items, and exploitation by the stakeholders that might affect its continuity (P.K. et al., 2022).

Furthermore, to reorganise the educational administration, the reclassification of classroom policy was implemented with the aim of improving learning outcomes. This involved grouping students of comparable age ranges together within the same school environment while ensuring the availability of essential resources and facilities. The government of Osun State, under the administration of former governor Rafiu Aregbesola, implemented a transition from the 6-3-3-4 educational system, which was previously employed by the Nigerian government, to a 4-5-3-4 system. The inclusion of a standardised uniform within the reorganised education administration was also implemented with the aim of promoting consistency and fostering a collective sense of identity among students attending public primary schools. The policies gave rise to concerns pertaining to their quality, perception, and sustainability, ultimately resulting in their reversal in 2020 under the administration of Governor Gboyega Oyetola (Akiika et al., 2024).

Referring to the systems theory, the formulation of a new policy shows the evolving nature of policy-making in the system, which is guided and controlled by the demand, process, and output systems, which serve as feedback to the people and their response as input, which stimulates another policy cycle in the system. Within this framework, the phenomenon of out-of-school children in Osun State is better understood by offering insights into the dynamics of interactions within the political system and the demand for policies to curb the menace of the out-of-school children crisis and increase school enrolment in the state. It also reveals how policy demand influences the planning, formulation, implementation, and evaluation of these policies. Within the specific context of tackling the issue of out-of-school children in Osun State, the political framework engages in an ongoing interaction marked by inputs (demands) and outputs (policies). The actors involved include stakeholders across relevant government ministries and institutions. However, the implementation of these policies is often influenced by the availability of funds and actor networks.

Studies have thoroughly examined the various patterns and consequential effects associated with the phenomenon of children not attending school in Nigeria. For instance, (Athaya Syifa Nadira Kusuma & Putri Rohmaning, 2025) identified several key factors contributing to the issue of children not attending school in Nigeria. These factors include inadequate funding for education, pervasive corruption, security challenges, a lack of governmental commitment to addressing the problem, widespread poverty, and a high fertility rate. According to a study conducted by (Hove & Samkange, 2026), the classification of individuals categorised as out-of-school children encompasses those who possess disabilities, belong to nomadic communities, are Almajiris, or have been relocated because of hostilities. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of comprehensive evaluation regarding the efficacy of the government's interventions targeting out-of-school children in specific states or localities. Therefore, there is a need for studies that adopt a holistic and sociological approach to better understand how government responses have efficiently addressed out-of-school children in Osun State, Nigeria.

Given this background, it becomes expedient to critically identify government responses that have been implemented for out-of-school children as well as examine the extent to which such responses adequately addressed the issue of out-of-school children in Osun State, Nigeria (Pinga & Okpe, 2024). By employing systems theory and an exploratory design, this research seeks to identify government responses targeted to mitigate the number of out-of-school children in Osun State and how the government responses effectively curb the rate of out-of-school children in Osun State. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, as well as to enlighten policymakers on how efforts should be directed to mitigate the phenomenon of the subject matter.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. This research design was considered most appropriate for the research due to its ability to provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of complex phenomena, while also providing a means of generalising findings to a larger population. Also, the study adopted both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data obtained from fieldwork were garnered using structured questionnaires and an unstructured interview guide applied to selected individuals within the sampled population. Secondary data were retrieved from relevant literature and government reports relating to the subject matter, as well as the digital search engines. Three hundred (300) copies of questionnaires were administered to headteachers, teachers, government officials, and relevant civil society organisations from Osogbo LGA, Ifelodun LGA, Ilesa-West LGA, Atakunmosa-East LGA, Iwo LGA and Irewole LGA. In addition, interviews were conducted with ten (10) purposively selected respondents from the Ministry of Education (2), Ministry of Economy Planning, Budget, and Development (1), Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Development (1), Osun State Universal Basic Education Board (1), Primary Government School Headteachers (3), and Civil Society Organisations (2). Quantitative data were analysed with the use of frequency tables. While qualitative data were thematically analysed.

Result and Discussion

The findings of the study show that the challenge of out-of-school children in Osun State cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it arises from multiple complex factors such as poverty, ignorance, insecurity, gender discrimination, and child labour, among others. Addressing the multifaceted issue of out-of-school children requires comprehensive government interventions, which Osun State has undertaken. Based on the findings of this study, responses gathered from key informants indicate a range of strategies and policies aimed at addressing the issue of out-of-school children.

Osun State Elementary School Feeding Programme (O'Meals)

The study revealed that the Osun State elementary school feeding programme, known as O' Meals, is an intervention that provides free meals to primary school children. The intervention catered to children from primary one to four, and it has been a long-term programme. Beyond addressing the issue of hunger, this initiative enhances students' attentiveness in the classroom. According to the respondent:

... then many of the children who might naturally not want to go to school will be willing to go to school knowing that they have a good meal at school.
– **Participant**

In impoverished households, the prevalence of hunger constitutes a formidable impediment to active participation in formal education (Thomas & Nwokocha, 2022). A child afflicted by hunger not only encounters obstacles in timely school enrolment but also faces challenges in maintaining effective attendance even if initially enrolled. Studies affirm that services like this can significantly improve school attendance as well as enhance students' physical and cognitive development (Mohammed et al., 2021). Although contrary views were held about the challenges faced during the implementation process, which is believed to be a setback in achieving its goals fully. The study revealed a small quantity of food given to the children due to financial constraints, corruption, or inadequate disbursement of resources.

Reversal of The Single Uniform and School Merger Policy

Reversal of the single uniform and change of schools' policy were both seen as another key intervention to address out-of-school children in the state. Before 2018, the policy of a single uniform and the merger of schools across the state discouraged students from coming to school due to the perpetuated crime rate and indiscipline associated with the policy (Wafi & Zaini, 2025). It was revealed in the study that the review of these policies has led to a reduction in crime and thereby encouraged parents to send their children to school. A respondent from the State Ministry of Education affirms that:

The single uniform promoted gross brigandage, and whenever such occurred, you had pupils becoming touts, leaving schools, and not being able to achieve their ambition. – **Participant**

The modification in the merger of schools and school uniforms was aptly corroborated by another respondent:

They recommended that the issue of school uniforms should be reviewed, and of course, the name identification should be revisited so that each school can be identified based on their school uniforms and their initial identity – **Participant**

These positions were supported by (Divangana Manhas, Ravi Mehta, 2020), who aligned the educational policy reform with confusion initiated with school mergers and miscreants committing crimes in the street because of the confidence and anonymity this common uniform offered to them. The policy reform was, however, influenced by public opinion raised by citizens (Emmanuel Igbalumun Vambe & Abdulkarim, 2024). The modifications to school uniforms and the school merger had a notable impact in reducing the number of school children on the street during school hours due to their identity:

School Policing and Educational Marshal

The study showed that school policing and educational marshal strategies are employed by the Osun State government to ensure that children attend school during school hours. The marshals do raid students found on the street during school hours, arrest them, and take them back to their school or appropriate disciplinary authorities:

The government also introduced the educational marshal so that they will curb lateness of pupils, ensure regularity and punctuality, and chase students who are found on the streets with some gang during the school hours. - Participant

The government's active engagement with communities and the deployment of educational marshals represents a cooperative method for addressing the challenge of children not attending school. These efforts align with research by (Adebisi et al., 2020) on the role of community engagement in improving school performance. The government's active engagement with communities and the deployment of educational marshals represent a cooperative method for addressing the challenge of children not attending school (Raheef, 2026). It was, however, observed during the interview session that the educational marshal has been effective in reducing students roaming the streets during school hours, but operates in only ten of the thirty local governments in the state. Also, the challenge of non-cooperation on the part of the parents was identified:

We engage them in only ten local government areas because we only engage them in the most volatile places. - Participant

Establishment of Early Child Care Development Education (ECCD)

Recognising the importance of early childhood education, the study revealed that Osun State has established centres for children between the ages of 3 and 5. This is to engage children who are not of school age to stop roaming around the streets. According to one of the respondents:

The Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCD) was a proactive initiative of the Osun State Government. The aim was to address the issue of out-of-school children by providing opportunities to children aged 3 to 5. - Participant

This approach reflects the state's forward-thinking stance on education, moving away from the conventional notion that formal schooling should only commence at age six.

Nomadic and Physically Challenged Schools

The establishment of nomadic and physically challenged schools is a means of promoting inclusive education while addressing the menace of out-of-school children in the state. Nomadic schools, designed to address the educational requirements of Fulani children in remote regions, embody the culturally responsive education principles.

Osun has a good number of them. In that sense, they may not run the outright formal educational system. But they have a kind of education that is appealing to them and their parents. - Participant

The government also established disabled schools, which government and non-governmental organisations visit regularly to check their needs – Participant

These schools provide a flexible approach to education, acknowledging that the traditional school hours may not align with the nomadic lifestyle of these communities (Manawa et al., 2025). Respondents noted the establishment of nomadic and physically challenged schools as a means of promoting inclusive education while addressing the menace of out-of-school children in the state. Assessing the effectiveness of these established special schools, the study revealed that the interventions have gone a long way in ensuring proper inclusiveness of quality education, although not without any challenges. Inclusive policies that consider the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations, including children with disabilities and nomadic children, are crucial for ensuring equitable access to education (Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025). However, lack of parental trust and social factors such as discrimination of children with albinism were identified as the major challenges of these policies.

Collaborative Efforts with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

The intricate nature of the elements contributing to the rate of children not attending school in the state calls for collaborative measures from all major stakeholders in the society. It has gone beyond what the government alone can address. The civil society organisations bridge that gap by supporting the government in curbing out-of-school children in the society through the provision of basic needs for the pupils. This was aptly captured in the view of the respondents:

The government allowed some NGOs to intervene to help them to do one or two things in promoting school attendance because in the real sense, the government cannot do it alone. - Participant

The complexity of the nature of out-of-school prompted a collaboration with other stakeholders in society. Although the challenge still boils down to misconception, as affirmed by one of the respondents, and low turnout of the PTA, SBMC, and the old students' association in the form of assistance.

Nonetheless, monitoring and evaluation bodies such as OSMEA (Osun State Mass Education Agency), the Department of Quality Assurance, and the Department of Social Mobilisation were set up to track the progression of the policies and look at how to improve on them. The O'Meals programme is monitored by the state programme manager. While the school policing system is monitored directly from the permanent secretary's office in the state ministry of education. Regular assessments and data-driven evaluations are essential for understanding the impact of policies and making informed decisions (Guanah, 2025).

To buttress the aforementioned, it can be argued that the Osun State government has implemented several policies tailored towards addressing the menace of out-of-school children in the state, and dissenting opinions on the challenges encountered during the implementation process highlight the need for ongoing efforts and improvements. The quantitative findings, however, revealed that the government's responses have reasonably improved the issue surrounding children not attending school in Osun State.

Assess the effectiveness of government policies on the issue of out-of-school children in Osun State. The findings revealed a spectrum of opinions among respondents. Firstly, when assessing the effectiveness of government policies, 74.2% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the Osun State government had implemented effective policies to address the issue. In contrast, 18.3% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this notion. Regarding the impact of these policies on diminishing the number of children not attending school, 60.3% of respondents expressed agreement, suggesting that government policies had led to fewer out-of-school children in the state. On the other hand, 26.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this perspective.

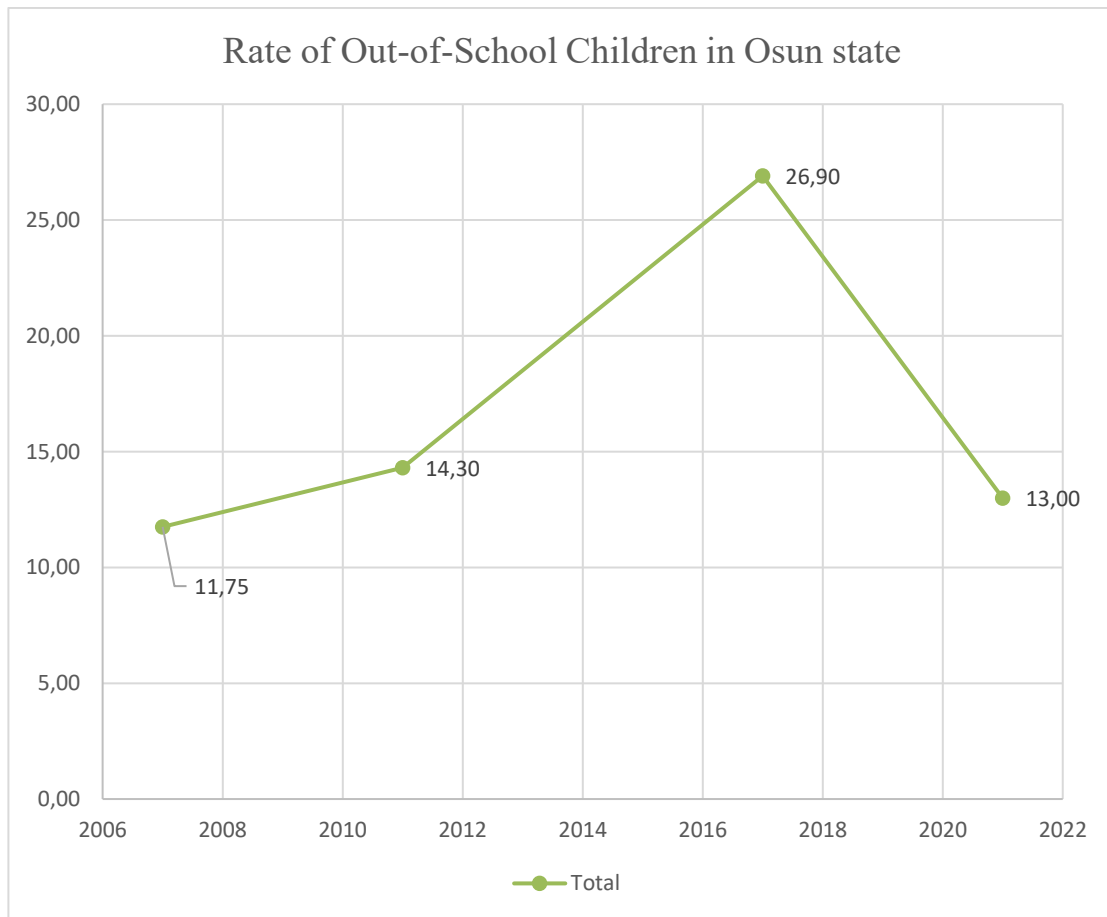
Furthermore, the inclusiveness of policies towards marginalized groups garnered considerable support, with 67% indicating agreement. However, 18% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that these policies covered marginalized groups effectively. When it came to support services provided by the government, such as school feeding programmes, 73.4% of respondents agreed with their beneficial impact. Conversely, 16.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this viewpoint.

In terms of government collaboration with civil society organisations, 70.8% of participants agreed that the government has collaborated with civil society organisations to curb out-of-school children. Only 19.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Also, regarding government assessments and evaluations of programmes targeting out-of-school children, 56.5% agreed with their existence, while 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In an overall assessment, 67.8% of respondents believed that the government's response had significantly improved the issue of children not attending school in Osun

State, while 20.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this assessment.

Reports from the multiple cluster survey (MICS) further showed the possibility that government policies over the years had improved school enrolment and attendance, as there was a decrease by 13.9% (13%) in the number of out-of-school children in 2021.

Figure 1: Rate of Out-Of-School Children in Osun State



Source: MICS Reports (2007-2021)

The figure showed that the rate of out-of-school children was 11.75%, which can be considered low in 2007. The trend, however, showed a slight increase to 14.3% in 2011, which could be credited to some factors identified in this study. Notably, however, there was a spike in the rate of children out of school in 2017, with an increase of 12% (26.9%) from the previous year; this could be because of certain policies that discouraged parents/guardians from enrolling their wards in public schools. These policies include restructuring of the school administration, introduction of a single type of school uniform across all public schools, merger of schools, and other policies. According to MICS (2018), which indicated that the policy impacted the withdrawal of children from school because of lack of trust in the intent for the policy, the result in 2021 showed the possibility that the policy had an impact on children been out of school as there was a decrease by 13.9% (13%) in the number of out-of-school children which showed that the recent government have taken right steps to reduce the number of children out of school and significantly the policies introduced like the reversal on the single uniform and school merger, which lack public acceptance, other policies such as school marshal, nomadic

schools, ECCD with other significant steps had effectively reduced the number of children out of school which showed that policy has been effective in curbing the menace, however, government needs to brace up on their efforts in addressing the issue to bring a zero level to the menace.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

By integrating the perspective of David Easton on system theory, (Kukawa et al., 2025) this study expands the analysis of government responses tailored towards addressing the menace of out-of-school children in Osun State. These responses are borne out of the interactions that occurred within the political system in the form of inputs (demands) and outputs (outcomes) to address the pressing issue of out-of-school children in society (Murtala Bello Mustapha et al., 2025). This inter-theoretical approach strengthens the sociological contribution of the study by examining out-of-school children as a structural educational problem that is not merely related to individual factors but also to the limited effectiveness of government initiatives and the capacity of educational institutions. Generally, social risks such as poverty, disability, trust issues of parents, and peer pressure, among others, interact with policy implementation to produce the exclusion of some pupils (KOURA Abdelghani et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The study revealed that the Osun State government's response, through the implementation of several policies, has reasonably addressed the issue of out-of-school children in the state. These policies include O'Meals, a school policing system; establishment of early childhood care development and nomadic schools; and collaboration with major stakeholders to address the issue of out-of-school children. Despite these notable interventions, the issue of out-of-school children persists, attributable to multifaceted factors. Economic factors such as financial constraints, poverty, and payment of fees and levies may discourage parents from enrolling their children in schools. Also, social factors encompassing misconceptions about vulnerable children, societal attitudes toward children with albinism, infrastructure challenges, and the reluctance of some parents to entrust their children to ECCD teachers. Additionally, a deficiency in the student database and monitoring of the O'Meals exercise affected the effective implementation of the exercise.

Consequently, the government should extend the operation of the education marshals to all local government areas in the state; recruit more skilled and qualified teachers to promote quality education; ensure the continuity of the O' Meals feeding programme effectively to make schools more attractive to the children; and also make provision for out-of-school children in the state's annual budget. Then, consistent collaboration with civil society organisations, old student associations, community-based management, and international organisations should be encouraged to raise funds for these programmes.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A. T. O. E.; methodology and data analysis, A. T. O. E.; investigation and data collection, B.F.B.; writing—original draft, A. T. O. E.; writing—review and editing, I. R. O.; supervision, A. T. O. E; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript

Funding: The paper was a collective effort of the authors. There is no external funding for the research. Therefore, there is no conflict of interest.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study.

Declaration of Generative AI: I have stated before that this article was written independently without the use of generic artificial intelligence technology. The process of writing, drafting, and developing of text content is all done independently. Every idea, analysis, argument, and formulation of sentences comes from the writer's own thinking and effort. All reference points are clearly provided according to current scientific writing standards. With this statement, I take full responsibility for the truth and integrity of the work made.

Acknowledgments: The writer thanks everyone who helped, helped, and contributed to the creation of this research. The most special thanks go to tutors who have given guidance, advice, and constructive criticisms from the stages of planning to the completion of the research. The author is also grateful to informants who have taken the time to share their information and experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the data of research. In addition, I would like to thank my fellow research and institutional teams who have provided moral support and facilities during the research. In time, the author realized that the study could not be done without the help of many people, both directly and indirectly. We hope that this discovery will benefit the advancement of science, especially the study of sociology in politics.

Conflicts of Interest: The study is done independently without any peer pressure, intervention, or interest connected with the subject discussed. The writer also notes that no conflict of financial or non-financial interests can affect objectivity, integrity, or research. The study is done in accordance with current research ethics and academic honesty during the process of data collection, analysis, and writing. Cooperation with certain institutions or parties does not affect the interpretation or conclusions that result from the study.

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