



Principals Management in Utilizing Scholarships to Improve Education Quality

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Abstract: This study explores how school principals strategically manage student aid programs to sustain educational quality in an underfunded private secondary school in Indonesia. Rather than viewing scholarship management as routine administrative work, the study examines it as a strategic leadership practice connecting financial assistance, school governance, and educational quality improvement. Using an intensive qualitative case study at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, South Sulawesi, the research involved 12 purposively selected participants: the principal, a system operator, five teachers, two administrative staff, and three scholarship recipients. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and internal document analysis, then analyzed thematically using source and method triangulation. The findings reveal four key insights. First, the principal demonstrated strategic and participatory leadership by integrating aid management into institutional planning and stakeholder decision-making. Second, government programs, particularly the School Operational Assistance and Smart Indonesia Program, functioned as important equity mechanisms by reducing financial barriers, supporting student enrolment, and improving access for economically vulnerable students through transparent identification and distribution procedures. Third, implementation faced significant challenges, including budget limitations, administrative complexity, excessive teacher workloads, and inadequate infrastructure. Fourth, although no direct evidence linked scholarship management to immediate improvements in academic scores, effective aid governance was recognized as an indirect foundation of educational quality. It supported enrolment stability, operational financing, stakeholder collaboration, and a more supportive learning environment. The study contributes to educational leadership literature by positioning scholarship management as a strategic leadership instrument rather than merely a clerical function, emphasizing transparency, collaboration, and effective resource management in resource-constrained schools.

Keywords: Principal leadership; scholarship management; educational governance.

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INTRODUCTION

Education serves as the primary anchor for sustainable development, societal mobility, and global economic competitiveness. Under the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 4, access to quality education is explicitly positioned as an indispensable driver for human capital cultivation, social cohesion, and resilient growth. Propelled by globalization and accelerating technological disruptions, national governments have fundamentally recalibrated their educational policy agendas. The priority has decisively

shifted away from basic enrollment expansion toward a rigorous enforcement of quality, equity, and systemic efficiency (Nations, 2023; UNISCO, 2024). On this front, Indonesia has made significant strides in broadening classroom participation. This has been achieved through mandatory schooling laws, decentralized administrative networks, deeper public funding, and targeted student aid initiatives (Haixiang, 2026; Haryanto et al., 2026; Hussen & Onia, 2024; Mincu, 2024).

Consequently, primary and secondary enrollment figures have climbed. Yet, this newfound access has failed to spark a corresponding leap in educational standards. Student learning outcomes, teaching caliber, school resources, and institutional output remain deeply uneven across different regions and school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Word Bank, 2020). The Program for International Student Assessment 2022 metrics clearly underscore this structural worry, placing Indonesian youth well below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average in reading literacy, mathematics, and science. These results serve as a reminder that expanding school rosters cannot replace the urgent need for robust school leadership, instructional rigor, and sound institutional oversight (Kraft et al., 2016; OECD, 2022; Weiler & Lomotey, 2022). This sobering reality has redirected policy debates from raw access toward true educational equity—ensuring fairness in learning opportunities and student outcomes across diverse socioeconomic classes, rather than just filling classroom seats.

Children from marginalized households continue to grapple with financial hurdles that stunt participation, trigger dropout risks, and cap academic performance. Because of this, governments are leaning heavily into financial subsidies, treating them less like handouts and more like strategic tools to level the playing field and force schools to level up their administrative quality (OECD, 2022; UNISCO, 2024). In the Indonesian context, this policy framework relies on two primary pillars: the School Operational Assistance program, which subsidizes daily operational costs, facility upgrades, and fee reductions; and The Smart Indonesia Program, which funnels direct cash assistance to economically vulnerable students to prevent early school leaving (Haryanto et al., 2026; Montero-Sieburth & Turcatti, 2022; Nouwen et al., 2016). While both funding tracks have undeniably anchored enrollment metrics, classroom retention, and student psychological morale, their long-term efficacy is not merely a function of budgetary scale.

On the contrary, the ultimate impact relies fundamentally on micro-level institutional mechanics: how individual schools manage, distribute, and structurally embed these subventions within broader, systemic quality-improvement frameworks (UNISCO, 2024; Word Bank, 2020). Fiscal injections move the needle on educational quality only when paired with decisive leadership, transparent governance, and strategic resource mapping. Schools equipped with mature managerial systems routinely transform the same baseline resources into superior instruction and learning environments compared to institutions crippled by weak oversight (Levačić & Glover, 2020; Word Bank, 2020). Ongoing evaluations of the School Operational Assistance program and The Smart Indonesia Program programs mirror this divergence: schools receiving identical state subventions yield starkly different institutional outcomes—a gap primarily driven by the principal's managerial acumen and the school's internal governance model.

Within this paradigm, principal leadership emerges as a dominant school-level factor shaping educational quality. Contemporary scholarship increasingly moves beyond viewing principals as administrative managers, emphasizing their roles in pedagogical leadership, strategic management, and organizational transformation. Effective school leaders

articulate a shared vision, strengthen teacher professionalism, encourage participatory decision-making, and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement. Their influence on educational quality is primarily indirect, operating through teacher motivation, organizational commitment, positive school climate, collaborative practices, and improved instructional effectiveness. Thus, strong principal leadership becomes essential for sustaining meaningful and long-term school improvement (Boyce & Bowers, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). Leadership matters, in other words, because it mobilizes resources and aligns organizational processes with educational goals.

Scholarship management sits squarely inside this leadership function. Scholarships have traditionally been framed as financial assistance for disadvantaged students, but recent work argues they are better understood as strategic institutional resources for school improvement. Optimizing these resource tracks demands open beneficiary profiling, fair distribution models, rigorous oversight, and ongoing impact assessments. It is these exact operational habits that dictate whether public funding successfully morphs into actual student retention, academic persistence, and classroom growth (UNISCO, 2024; Word Bank, 2020). Viewed through this lens, financial aid initiatives cannot be relegated to the margins as a mere clerical routine; they must be woven directly into the core fabric of strategic school development planning. True effectiveness doesn't happen in a vacuum it is heavily shaped by the broader governance environment.

At the end of the day, top-tier educational quality is born from how well school leadership, teacher expertise, available resources, fair opportunities, and structured quality checks work together (OECD, 2022; UNISCO, 2024). When you bring strong educational governance into the mix, it introduces real transparency, clear accountability, active stakeholder involvement, and decisions backed by hard data. Because of this, schools that actually live out these good governance principles regularly enjoy sharper performance, far less wasted resources, and a massive boost in public trust. Despite substantial research on educational leadership, scholarship programs, school financing, and school quality, important gaps remain. These literatures have largely developed in parallel. Leadership research focuses on instructional, transformational, or distributed leadership and their effects on teacher commitment, climate, and student achievement.

Scholarship research (including studies of School Operational Assistance program and The Smart Indonesia Program) concentrates on implementation, funding distribution, targeting, and financial accountability. Few studies examine how principals strategically integrate scholarship programs into school management to strengthen teaching quality, student engagement, and institutional performance, and most rely on quantitative designs that identify statistical relationships without illuminating the managerial processes that turn scholarship resources into sustained improvement. Conceptually, this leaves scholarships treated as financial assistance rather than as managerial resources supporting institutional development. On top of the theoretical and empirical blind spots, there is a glaring contextual gap here. Most of what we currently know comes from public school data or sweeping national evaluations, leaving financially squeezed private high schools in Indonesia largely out of the conversation.

In these private institutions, principals have to wear multiple hats at the exact same time—juggling instructional leadership and budget management with policy execution and long-term strategy. Because resources are tight, scholarships do double duty: they aren't just student aid handouts, but vital organizational tools that actively shape classroom access, the whole learning atmosphere, and the school's future growth. Up until

now, there has been very little documentation on how principals actually leverage these funding tracks to hit those bigger, systemic goals. This study addresses these gaps by treating scholarship management as a strategic leadership practice at the intersection of principal leadership, educational governance, school financing, and school quality. Rather than a financial-assistance mechanism, scholarship management is examined as a means through which principals allocate resources, coordinate stakeholders, and drive continuous quality improvement.

The empirical setting, *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad* Maros Private Senior High School, represents a financially constrained private secondary school and extends existing literature into an underexplored context. This study addresses a fundamental question: how do school leaders strategically manage scholarship programs to improve educational quality in underfunded private schools? The inquiry examines how leaders plan and implements aid initiatives, safeguard student enrolment, influence teacher engagement and instructional quality, and establish effective oversight mechanisms. To capture these dynamics comprehensively, a qualitative case study design was employed. This contextual approach enabled an in-depth examination of leadership practices, fund distribution, stakeholder coordination, and school governance within the institution's everyday environment. The methodological framework provides a systematic basis for understanding how scholarship management contributes to educational sustainability and quality improvement.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how principals strategically manage scholarship programs to improve educational quality in resource-constrained private secondary schools. The approach enabled an in-depth investigation of managerial processes within their natural setting, particularly the relationship among principal leadership, scholarship management, educational governance, and school quality. The study was conducted at *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad* Maros Private Senior High School, South Sulawesi, from March to April 2023. The school was purposively selected because it implemented major student assistance programs, including School Operational Assistance and the Smart Indonesia Program, despite significant financial constraints. The study focused on leadership strategies, resource allocation, program implementation, stakeholder coordination, and scholarship management's contribution to educational quality and institutional sustainability.

To get the right insights, the study used purposive sampling to recruit a total of 12 informants who are directly on the frontlines of scholarship management and school administration. The breakdown of the participants includes: a) the school principal (1); b) the dedicated school system operator (1); c) faculty members/teachers (5); d) students currently receiving scholarship support (3); e) administrative staff personnel (2). gathering this specific mix ensured that the study captured voices from every stage of the program—spanning planning, daily paperwork, implementation, and final evaluation. Data were collected using three complementary techniques: a) semi-structured interviews; b) participant observation; c) document analysis. Combining multiple data sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of scholarship management practices while enhancing data credibility through triangulation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from the research objectives. The protocol covered four main themes: a) principal

leadership in scholarship management; b) planning and implementation of scholarship programs; c) the contribution of scholarships to educational quality; d) challenges encountered during scholarship implementation. Ranging between 45 and 60 minutes, each face-to-face interview was fully captured via audio recording after securing formal participant consent. These audio files were subsequently converted into verbatim transcripts to prepare for the coding phase. To supplement the narrative data, participant observations were systematically gathered throughout the two-month fieldwork window. Immersed in the school environment, the researcher focused on observing: a) school management meetings; b) scholarship administration; c) teaching and learning activities; d) interactions among principals, teachers, staff, and scholarship recipients.

Observation notes were recorded immediately after each session to capture contextual information and support the interview findings. Document analysis was conducted to triangulate and corroborate data obtained through interviews and observations. The reviewed documents included: (a) school strategic plans; (b) scholarship recipient records; (c) administrative documents related to the School Operational Assistance and Smart Indonesia Program; (d) financial reports; (e) meeting minutes; (f) student academic reports; and (g) school achievement records. These documents provided complementary evidence and were systematically examined to verify participants' statements, clarify program implementation processes, and strengthen the credibility and validity of the research findings. The triangulation of observations, interviews, and documentary evidence enabled a comprehensive understanding of scholarship management practices.

The qualitative data were analyzed using six-phase thematic analysis framework, which provides a systematic approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns across multiple qualitative data sources (S. K. Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2008; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, allowing emerging insights from one source to inform subsequent data collection and analysis. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and combined with field observation notes and relevant institutional documents. The researchers repeatedly read the entire dataset to achieve data familiarization and gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences regarding scholarship management and educational quality. Second, initial codes were generated by systematically examining meaningful segments of text across interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence.

Both inductive and deductive coding were employed. Inductive codes emerged directly from the empirical data, while deductive codes were guided by the conceptual framework concerning educational leadership, scholarship management, educational governance, and school quality. Codes with conceptual similarities were then grouped into preliminary categories. Constant comparison was applied across participants and data sources to identify similarities, variations, and recurring patterns while maintaining consistency in code interpretation. The preliminary categories were subsequently organized into broader candidate themes representing key dimensions of principals' scholarship management practices. These themes were repeatedly reviewed and refined against the original data to ensure their accuracy and relevance to the research questions.

Finally, each theme was clearly defined and named based on its central meaning, boundaries, and relationships with other themes.

The final thematic structure represented the interconnected processes through which principals managed scholarship programs and their perceived contributions to educational quality. Finally, the findings were interpreted by integrating evidence from interviews, observations, and institutional documents through methodological triangulation. The interpretation was further strengthened by comparing the emerging themes with previous studies and relevant theoretical perspectives, allowing the researchers to explain not only what occurred but also why particular managerial practices contributed to educational quality within the context of a resource-constrained private secondary school. To develop the themes, codes sharing conceptual similarities were systematically pulled together into distinct categories before being synthesized into macro-level thematic pillars.

This evolutionary process relied on a constant comparative method—cross-examining transcript data, field notes, and institutional records. This iterative looping ensured that each emerging theme stayed anchored to the informants' actual lived experiences while directly answering the core research questions. Fieldwork remained active until theoretical saturation was hit, a point marked by a complete plateau in new conceptual insights, codes, or themes from the incoming data. This saturation points crystallized once all primary stakeholder cohorts had been fully engaged, and the same empirical patterns began to repeat themselves across different data tracks. To keep the study dependable, everything came down to a meticulous paper trail. Every pivot in data collection, initial coding trial, and subsequent analytical shift was thoroughly documented, ensuring the entire research trajectory remains completely trackable, consistent, and open to outside replication.

Confirmability was strengthened by establishing a clear and systematic audit trail that documented each analytical decision and deduction derived from the raw interview transcripts. This process enabled the researchers to trace the development of findings from the original data through coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. To minimize individual researcher bias, routine peer debriefing was conducted throughout the analytical process. The research team collaboratively reviewed emerging codes, categories, interpretations, and themes to identify potential subjective assumptions or overlooked perspectives. Differences in interpretation were discussed and resolved through reference to the empirical evidence. This collaborative process enhanced analytical transparency and ensured that the final thematic structure remained firmly grounded in participants' experiences and statements. Consequently, the findings demonstrated a high degree of credibility, consistency, and confirmability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion present scientific findings derived from the research and supported by adequate empirical evidence. The findings should go beyond merely describing the data by explaining the underlying meanings, relationships, and processes identified through analysis. Each major finding must address the research objectives stated in the introduction and explain what was discovered, why the finding occurred, and why particular trends or patterns emerged. These interpretations should be grounded in relevant theoretical perspectives and contextual phenomena to provide a strong scientific basis. Furthermore, the findings should be critically compared with previous studies

addressing similar topics to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and contribution. Such comparisons help demonstrate the originality and significance of the research. Therefore, the results and discussion should integrate empirical evidence, theoretical interpretation, and comparison with prior research to produce scientifically meaningful conclusions.

Principal of Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School

The principal has successfully fostered trust and confidence among teachers and education staff involved in implementing school programs. Although the level of comfort and support experienced by each staff member may vary, the principal's leadership has created a supportive working environment that encourages employees to perform their responsibilities. This confidence allows teachers and education staff to contribute actively according to their respective roles while maintaining a shared commitment to providing the best services for the institution. However, the operator acknowledged that the comfortable working atmosphere can occasionally result in a more relaxed attitude toward certain responsibilities. Nevertheless, this condition does not eliminate their commitment to the school. Instead, staff members continue to fulfill their duties when needed, particularly when important administrative tasks and program-related activities require their involvement. This situation was explained by the school operator as follows:

"I continue to carry out my responsibilities as a school operator, although I am not always present at school throughout the week. I usually come to school at certain times, particularly when there are important tasks, specific assignments, or data that need to be completed promptly. My presence becomes more intensive when the school has urgent administrative needs. One of my main responsibilities is managing and updating the school's Dapodik data, as this information is directly related to the institution's administrative requirements and programs. Once the Dapodik data processing and updating are completed, my primary responsibilities as an operator are generally fulfilled. Although I have other work outside the school, I remain committed to performing my duties as a school operator and assisting the school whenever needed, particularly in managing data and administrative matters that support the smooth implementation of school programs."

Muhammad Arief, the school operator at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, is the educator we interviewed. That concludes the message from the interviewee. Rusli, S.Ag., M.Pd., the principal of Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, has dedicated his life to this institution for the past four years. *"I joined the foundation in 2017." I've been here from the beginning, invited by the previous principal. Back then, the number of students at this foundation wasn't very large, but over time, the number of students here has increased. I've been a teacher here for approximately 7 years. Having some freedom and not being too restricted is what makes me feel at home and comfortable. Regarding "Salary payments can't be a source of income because we rely solely on Student Operational Assistance funds, and I also rely on other sources of income. Serving here makes me feel comfortable, and my time here isn't too limited."*

The comments above lead us to the conclusion that the majority of teachers and staff at this institution enjoy working and teaching there. Regarding their work and teaching at this institution, the teaching staff feel comfortable. This comfort is manifested in the freedom of time that allows lecturers to participate in extracurricular activities and

earn income outside of the classroom. One factor that must be considered in the implementation of quality management is productivity. Efficiency at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School. This is evident in the vague responses given by teachers and educational staff at this institution to the leadership. Teachers at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, are seeking other profitable ventures outside the institution to supplement their income, as evident in the interviews above, which do not solely focus their energy and attention on the institution. Relying solely on funding from the institution is clearly insufficient.

The principal's explanation clarifies that the current level of productivity is still relatively low. This is due to the lack of time and attention from educators, resulting in the institution's vision and goals not being fully achieved as intended. *"In my opinion, the foundation has developed a vision, mission, and goals as the direction for the institution's development. However, the institution's primary vision and mission are not yet fully understood by all teachers and educational staff. In our daily activities, our main attention is focused on teaching and ensuring that students receive good educational services. We also continuously strive to increase the number of students from year to year. Therefore, our current focus is mainly on the learning process, student services, and efforts to increase new student enrolment. In the future, I believe that understanding the institution's vision and mission needs to be strengthened so that all teachers and educational staff share the same direction and commitment."*

Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School Scholarship

Educational assistance can be likened to a scholarship. Of course, there are several requirements to receive it. This scholarship is known as a scholarship for the underprivileged. One prerequisite is providing family or parental financial records. Scholarships are one-way Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, recruit's students. The funds provided will increase as the number of students increases. The educational assistance received by Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, takes the form of uniform discounts, or free uniforms. Not only are uniforms free for students at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School but some operational costs are also waived. The organization uses the funds it receives from government assistance to cover the costs of extracurricular activities. This is considered to comply with current regulations, including technical standards for government budget absorption for educational institutions.

An non-governmental group provides educational assistance to Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, in addition to the government. However, this non-governmental is not operational year-round. Furthermore, the institution does not always receive annual support. Teacher incentive funds from the district/city office have been used to fund teacher compensation in addition to teacher salaries. In addition, teachers also receive a portion of the funds allocated for school operational assistance. So, while not significant, educators working at this university also receive an honorarium. Therefore, the principal allows teachers to comfortably explore income-generating opportunities outside of school, as long as they do so responsibly and appropriately. According to Nizammudin, a student at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, scholarships are beneficial for students.

"I attend school and live here at Aswama, where I can stay without paying any accommodation fees. My mother only sends me money to cover my daily food

expenses. The school provides my uniforms and also covers other educational needs and school-related expenses. This support is very helpful because it allows me to continue my education without putting too much financial pressure on my family. I really appreciate the assistance provided by the school. Living here also makes it easier for me to focus on my studies, participate in school activities, and manage my daily routines. I feel comfortable and supported while studying at Aswama. The school environment also encourages me to become more independent, disciplined, and responsible. I am thankful for the opportunities and facilities that the school provides.”

As explained above, the school has carefully considered the policies it has implemented. This indicates that the principal places greater emphasis on increasing student enrollment than on strengthening the overall organizational development of the institution under his leadership. A large student population can also contribute to greater opportunities for students to participate in competitions and achieve various awards. Based on this approach, the principal has been able to expand the institution's educational activities while also providing opportunities for parents to send their children to school. In this way, the school seeks to accommodate more students and provide them with access to quality education. However, greater attention is still needed to ensure that institutional development, educational quality, and student achievement grow alongside increasing enrollment.

Educational Quality at Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School

One of the principal's responsibilities is to oversee education at the institution they lead. Therefore, the principal must be able to understand and implement the Learning Implementation Plan in accordance with relevant laws and regulations, namely Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 22 of 2016 concerning process norms. The principal must understand the learning plan in order to supervise learning materials, which is the principal's responsibility at least once a year. Supervision of the learning process is the next step in implementing academic supervision. Currently, there are three stages of learning process supervision: pre-learning, learning, and post-learning. The activity involves a meeting between the teacher to be supervised and the principal, acting as the supervisor, to discuss issues related to the learning process. After the pre-learning interview, the principal joins the class as a supervisor to oversee the teaching and learning process.

Supervisors supervise students from the beginning to the end of their education. Supervisors organize themselves in a way that minimizes disruption to the ongoing learning process. The institution's ability to provide quality instruction can be assessed through supervision. Observing the institution's opportunities and challenges is another benefit of supervision, allowing the organization to quickly decide what needs to be done and what should be avoided. Beyond supervision, the numerous achievements of an institution also reflect the educational quality. Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School, has won various tournaments up to the age of 22, including scouting competitions, flag-raising competitions, Olympiads, and others. Some students do a fairly good job of communicating the lessons taught by teachers throughout the class. However, certain aspects are still missing, such as computer labs and other laboratories that could help combine teaching with practical application.

“Yes, we attend school every day, and our teachers change according to the subjects we study. We have educational textbooks that help us understand the lessons and complete our learning activities. Sometimes, the school also organizes outdoor educational activities, which give us opportunities to learn outside the classroom and experience different learning environments. These activities are useful because they make learning more interesting and provide practical experiences. However, regarding school facilities, we currently only have a computer laboratory. There are no other specialized laboratories for science or practical subjects. Although the computer laboratory is helpful, I think the school needs additional laboratories and learning facilities. More facilities would support practical learning, improve our skills, and provide us with better opportunities to develop our knowledge and abilities.”

The principal's statement above indicates that the educational quality at the institution is good, but the facilities are still lacking. They are constantly seeking information that will help them in the future. The principal's management style has a significant influence on improving teaching standards at this institution. According to the author, the principal's administrative style, including how they treat teachers, how they finance education, and how they handle students, impacts the institution's standards. Furthermore, the availability of scholarships significantly impacts the quality of an institution. While the school successfully enrolls a large number of students, *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School*, still lacks adequate facilities and infrastructure. Given the critical importance of institutional support facilities for educational continuity, the principal must take this into account.

The results of this study indicate that school principals play a central role in designing and implementing scholarship policies as a strategy to improve educational quality. Scholarships have been shown to increase student access to education and boost learning motivation. However, these findings are not isolated and align with the findings of (Amelia & Siahaan, 2025) and (Hartini et al., 2025), which indicate that effective leadership is crucial to the successful implementation of educational policies. Specifically, the leadership model implemented at *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad Maros Private Senior High School* demonstrates characteristics of participatory leadership, where the principal provides teachers with flexibility in carrying out their duties while maintaining their professional responsibilities (Amri et al., 2025; Mufidah et al., 2025). This aligns with the concept of empowering leadership proposed by Stephen Covey and reinforced by Hariyati et al., (2023), who emphasize the importance of the principal's role in creating a learning environment that supports teacher and student well-being.

However, this policy also has limitations. The leniency towards teachers and staff sometimes leads to low discipline and commitment, which impacts the learning process. (Rostini et al., 2022) and (Rosyadi & Pardjono, 2015) emphasize that the principal, as a role model, must demonstrate discipline and exemplary behavior in every aspect of management to improve teacher performance and the quality of learning. The educational quality achieved will also fall short of the established curriculum and standards if principals demonstrate poor management skills (Andriya et al., 2025). Furthermore, the scholarship program implemented has not fully addressed the challenges of school facilities and infrastructure (Nahroji et al., 2023). Schools still lack adequate computer laboratories and classrooms. This reinforces the findings of who stated that educational success is

determined not only by leadership and incentives but also by the availability of physical facilities that support the learning process.

This is consistent with the findings of Laela et al., (2023); Nurkhasanah et al., (2023), who demonstrated that high-quality education is produced by competent principal managers (Agusalim et al., 2025; Listyaningrum & Buchori, 2025; Zaini et al., 2023). This research also broadens understanding of the relationship between scholarship management and educational quality. These findings add to the previously extensive literature discussing leadership from an administrative perspective, as described by Berlanga & Corti (2025), who highlight how effective scholarship management can serve as a concrete strategy for quality improvement in the field. Furthermore, the influence of teacher compensation and welfare is also crucial. This research supports the findings of Supriadi et al., (2022); Nurkhasanah et al., (2023); Fitriyah (2026) who stated that incentives contribute to teacher motivation and performance, ultimately impacting improved teaching quality.

This analysis clarifies the study's specific value it expands our view of the principal's role by reframing student aid as a core tool for school governance. While prior studies often drift toward broad leadership styles, this inquiry shows exactly how scholarship pipelines can be woven into active quality-improvement strategies. Methodologically, the qualitative case study model provided a rich, granular look at on-the-ground operations. Although multi-source triangulation anchored the validity of these insights, some structural boundaries remain. Because fieldwork was bound to a single school over a tight two-month window, these outcomes cannot be universally generalized. Additionally, relying on subjective testimonies means the analytical lens was inevitably shaped by the researcher's own interpretive framework. Consequently, expanding future inquiries to include multiple institutional sites via a mixed-methods lens will be essential to validate and broaden these conclusions.

Strategic Leadership in Scholarship Management

The data make it clear that a principal's hands-on leadership is what truly weaves financial aid into the fabric of daily school life. These scholarships are far from just a passive safety net. Instead, they act as active, multi-dimensional lifelines—keeping classroom doors open, reigniting student motivation, and protecting academic momentum for kids facing severe economic hardships. Ultimately, turning these funds into real success stories comes down to the principal's managerial grit, total transparency in how resources are mapped, and a constant effort to keep all stakeholders on the same page. Furthermore, these outcomes show that the actual return on scholarship investments depends entirely on the principal's managerial grit, absolute transparency in resource mapping, and deep stakeholder coordination. Interestingly, despite highly enthusiastic feedback from field informants regarding program execution, the empirical paper trail stops short.

The data did not yield a direct smoking gun proving that clever aid management instantly inflates test scores or systemic school quality. Instead, the mechanisms are indirect: financial aid stabilizes the school infrastructure, creating the secure baseline conditions required for effective pedagogy to occur. On a theoretical level, this research adds a fresh layer to the educational leadership literature, arguing that scholarship governance is a strategic dimension of school leadership rather than an isolated bookkeeping chore (Fabrao & Pacadaljen, 2024; Berlanga & Corti, 2025; Orgianus et al., 2024; Dachyar et al., 2023) It also provides context-dense evidence from an underfunded

private high school ecosystem, charting the complex friction that happens when leadership style, corporate governance, and student welfare allocations cross paths under a tight budget ceiling.

In practical terms, these findings suggest that school leaders should place scholarship initiatives at the center of institutional development planning. This requires strengthening administrative transparency and accountability while integrating financial assistance with active instructional, academic, and student-support programs. Scholarship provision should therefore not be viewed merely as financial assistance but as part of a broader strategy for improving educational quality and student outcomes. Future research should extend the investigation across multiple schools or campuses and employ mixed-methods approaches to obtain more comprehensive evidence. Researchers should also incorporate objective indicators, such as standardized student achievement scores, longitudinal attendance records, retention rates, graduation rates, and post-graduation outcomes. These measures would provide stronger evidence of the long-term effects of scholarship governance on institutional development, educational equity, and sustainable educational excellence.

Scholarship Programs as Instruments for Educational Access

The data clear things up at *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad* Maros Private Senior High School, these scholarships do their heaviest lifting as a financial safety net. Their main job isn't to instantly boost test scores, but to tear down the money barriers that keep low-income students from getting into the classroom in the first place. Rather than being perceived solely as financial assistance, scholarship programs were consistently viewed by participants as essential instruments that enable students to remain enrolled, participate in school activities, and continue their education despite economic hardship. Interview data suggest that scholarship support has become an integral component of the school's strategy to promote educational equity while maintaining student participation. Participants explained that the school administers several scholarship schemes, including the School Operational Assistance, The Smart Indonesia Program, and additional financial support provided by the school foundation for students experiencing severe economic difficulties.

The principal emphasized that scholarship allocation is carried out according to government regulations while also considering students' socioeconomic conditions identified through school records and direct communication with parents. This approach allows the school to prioritize assistance for students who are most vulnerable to financial constraints. Teachers further reported that scholarship recipients generally demonstrated better attendance and were more likely to remain in school than students who did not receive financial assistance (Ahmed et al., 2022; Pluhta & Penny, 2013; Syaridin et al., 2024). According to several participants, scholarship support reduced the financial burden associated with school fees, learning materials, uniforms, and transportation, enabling students to participate more consistently in classroom activities. Although participants perceived these improvements positively, they also acknowledged that the study did not measure changes in academic achievement quantitatively.

Instead, the evidence reflects participants' perceptions that scholarship assistance created more favorable conditions for learning continuity and educational participation. Direct field observations strongly validate these conclusions. The data collection phase revealed that financial aid administration does not operate in an institutional vacuum;

rather, it is deeply embedded in routine school management through a continuous feedback loop linking the principal, faculty, administrative staff, and system operators. Funding criteria were communicated transparently to families, while the evaluation of applicants strictly followed statutory guidelines. This operational framework is further backed by institutional archives, which provide a transparent paper trail demonstrating that student selection was anchored in documented socioeconomic indicators and verified through rigorous compliance audits prior to any fund distribution.

However, actual execution was rarely seamless, with informants identifying several entrenched bottlenecks. Crucially, the aggregate demand for financial assistance routinely outdistanced the institution's allocated funding quotas. This structural imbalance forced administrators into difficult triage scenarios, requiring the application of increasingly strict eligibility criteria to filter candidates. Compounding this challenge, unpredicted delays in government fund disbursements occasionally disrupted students at the beginning of the academic cycle, hindering their ability to acquire instructional materials or cover immediate registration costs (Annand & Jensen, 2017; Khithani et al., 2024; Rodriguez, 2022). During these systemic funding gaps, the institution was forced to intervene with localized stopgap support to stabilize student enrollment until official subventions materialized. These operational realities demonstrate that scholarship governance demands continuous, reflexive executive intervention, far transcending a basic mechanical distribution workflow.

Collectively, these findings show that educational subsidies play an important role in supporting student retention by reducing the effects of socioeconomic difficulties. However, financial assistance alone cannot guarantee the effectiveness of scholarship programs. Their success also depends on the institution's operational resilience and administrative capacity. This requires careful verification of student eligibility, effective coordination among stakeholders, transparent scholarship governance, and continuous adjustment of support mechanisms according to students' changing needs. Therefore, scholarship administration should not be understood merely as a routine clerical task. Instead, it should be considered a strategic component of school management. Effective scholarship governance can strengthen educational equity, support student well-being, reduce dropout risks, improve retention, and contribute to sustainable improvements in educational quality. In this way, financial support becomes an integral part of institutional development and educational excellence.

Organizational Challenges in Scholarship Implementation

The data clear things up while these scholarships do a fantastic job of opening doors for students, running them at *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad* Maros Private Senior High School comes with a heavy dose of organizational and managerial friction. Field informants repeatedly pointed out that simply throwing money at the problem isn't enough. True effectiveness depends on things like the school's internal capacity, how ready the staff is to handle the paperwork, how well everyone communicates, and the reality of working with tight resources. These moving parts dictate how scholarship policies actually play out and get tracked on the ground. One of the most frequently identified challenges concerns the school's limited financial capacity. Although government-funded scholarship programs, particularly the School Operational Assistance and The Smart Indonesia Program, provide substantial support, participants explained that these funds are insufficient to address all operational and educational needs.

School administrators reported that available funding must be distributed across multiple priorities, including instructional materials, facility maintenance, administrative activities, and student support services. Consequently, school leaders are often required to make strategic decisions regarding resource allocation while ensuring that scholarship recipients continue to receive appropriate educational support. Another challenge relates to the administrative complexity of scholarship management. According to the participants, running the scholarship program is an intricate balancing act. It means double-checking every student's financial eligibility, pulling together the right paperwork, and staying strictly inside government guidelines while constantly checking in with district education boards. Administrative staff and school operators explained that scholarship management involves substantial documentation and reporting responsibilities, particularly during the submission and monitoring of School Operational Assistance program and The Smart Indonesia Program.

Observation data confirmed that these administrative activities require continuous communication among the principal, school operator, teachers, and education offices to ensure that scholarship implementation complies with established procedures. Participants also highlighted challenges associated with human resource capacity and organizational coordination. Several teachers acknowledged that scholarship management requires active collaboration among school personnel; however, differences in workload, administrative responsibilities, and teaching commitments occasionally affect the efficiency of coordination. Some participants noted that teachers often perform multiple roles beyond classroom instruction, including administrative duties related to scholarship verification and student supervision. These overlapping responsibilities sometimes delay administrative processes and increase the workload of staff directly involved in scholarship management.

Beyond internal organizational bottlenecks, field data brought to light several hurdles rooted in the volatile socioeconomic realities of the student body. Faculty members pointed out that a household's financial stability is rarely static; families slip into sudden economic crises or, conversely, climb out of poverty over time. This fluidity makes keeping an accurate, real-time ledger of who qualifies for aid a constant battle. A family's financial situation can take a sudden turn halfway through the term, meaning administrators can't just look at a spreadsheet from the first week of school and call it a day. Instead, they must continuously audit eligibility to ensure that finite resources are funnelled to those facing the most acute deprivation. Keeping this volatile environment under control is impossible without continuous collaboration. Teachers, administrators, and families must maintain an open, active dialogue that stays active from the first day of the school calendar to the last.

Similarly, direct observations and archival analysis confirmed that upholding transparency and accountability is an active, everyday executive duty. Although scholarship execution is anchored by standardized state mandates and compliance guidelines, informants stressed that paperwork alone is insufficient. True accountability hinges on open, accessible communication with students and parents regarding how selection filters, application pipelines, and cash distributions actually work (Orgianus et al., 2024). Beyond the formal audit trails and institutional ledgers verified by district authorities, informant testimonies revealed a critical psychological dynamic. True accountability did not stop at compliance paperwork. Instead, maintaining an open-door

policy regarding fund distribution functioned as a trust-building mechanism, neutralizing potential friction and local suspicion surrounding the final allocation choices.

Despite navigating these intense operational currents, stakeholders widely agreed that a cooperative leadership model was the school's saving grace (Widodo & Wiyani, 2024; Dachyar et al., 2023). Routine sync meetings, distributed clerical tasks, and an open communication loop linking the principal, faculty, registrars, and system operators served as tactical shields against implementation crises. Ultimately, these results prove that masterful aid governance requires far more than just a liquid bank account. The program's real success depends on a mix of institutional teamwork and quick administrative reflexes. Instead of relying on a rigid hierarchy, schools need a transparent governance model. This flexibility is what allows administrators to adapt their strategies on the fly when government mandates change or local economic realities shift.

Perceived Contributions of Scholarship Management to School Quality

The findings suggest that participants perceived scholarship management as an important supporting factor in creating conditions conducive to educational quality at *Darud Da'wah wal Irsyad* Maros Private Senior High School. The empirical data stop short of framing scholarship portfolios as an immediate catalyst for academic excellence or systemic school quality. Rather, the consensus positions them as institutional anchors valued for safeguarding student participation, underwriting basic operations, and optimizing the daily learning environment. This diagnostic remains consistent across all qualitative tracks—including informant testimonies, on-site observations, and documentary analysis. The evidence demonstrates that financial subsidies operate via an indirect pathway; by dismantling material barriers, they insulate the school ecosystem, enabling both youth and personnel to focus their attention fully on educational outcomes.

According to field informants, the most immediate dividend of student aid programs lies in safeguarding classroom access and ensuring educational continuity for youth from socioeconomically vulnerable households. Faculty members pointed out that these subsidies acted as an institutional anchor, keeping marginalized students on the school roster when severe financial hardships threatened to force them out. This observation aligns with the students' own lived experiences; many shared that the funding effectively lifted the heavy mental burden of school costs, giving them the breathing room to attend classes consistently and engage in school life without being crushed by financial anxiety. Field observations reinforced this reality, showing that aid recipients were fully immersed in daily lessons and extracurriculars. Because the institution lacked concrete performance data to establish a clear link to higher grades, stakeholders didn't treat the funding as an immediate academic driver.

Instead, the consensus positioned these initiatives as structural enablers, valued more for protecting educational equity and classroom access than for forcing raw score improvements. The institutional footprint of these funding streams extends far beyond student welfare, fundamentally shoring up the school's broader operational threshold. Based on participant accounts, state-backed allocations like the School Operational Assistance grant function as the financial lifeline required to clear administrative bottlenecks, purchase instructional texts, and maintain classroom amenities. This diagnostic was confirmed by administrative personnel, who noted that such funding injections keep core academic services viable despite acute fiscal limits. This resource

mapping is explicitly detailed in the school's fiscal records, which show that student aid packages consistently absorb baseline instructional costs.

Rather than treating scholarship management as an isolated clerical task, the community recognizes it as an essential mechanism that protects everyday teaching from systemic institutional poverty. Beyond that, the field data show that overseeing these funding programs did not happen in a vacuum—it actively pulled different school stakeholders together. Managing the financial side of things required constant teamwork, which naturally broke down communication barriers between the administration, faculty, and families. Participants highlighted that running a successful scholarship program hinges on a constant loop of dialogue, tying together everyone from school leaders, faculty, and administrative clerks to the students, their families, and district oversight boards. By keeping these communication channels open, the school cultivates a deep sense of collective ownership.

Stakeholders work in tandem to pinpoint the right candidates, double-check compliance paperwork, track student progress, and ensure strict alignment with state mandates. Regular coordination meetings and audit logs observed during fieldwork suggest that this administrative process acts as a catalyst for stronger institutional communication, creating a collaborative environment that benefits overall school management well beyond the aid program itself. Instructors also observed that this administrative oversight indirectly elevates the classroom dynamic by stripping away student anxieties. A number of educators noted a distinct psychological shift in recipient students, observing that they carried themselves with greater confidence during lessons once the immediate stress of securing learning materials and covering basic fees was removed. That being said, informants were careful not to treat financial aid as a lone silver bullet for institutional excellence.

They consistently acknowledged that educational quality is shaped by multiple factors, including teacher competence, pedagogical practices, student motivation, family involvement, facilities, and school leadership. Therefore, scholarship programs were viewed as important supporting mechanisms rather than the sole determinants of academic quality. A review of institutional archives also supported these findings, showing that scholarship administration is integrated into routine school planning and financial governance. Student aid records, School Operational Assistance documents, Smart Indonesia Program reports, and strategic planning documents indicate that educational subsidies are managed systematically according to institutional priorities and government regulations. Although these records demonstrate that effective scholarship management supports operational continuity and student access, they do not provide sufficient empirical evidence to establish that scholarship administration directly improves student achievement or overall institutional performance.

In sum, the empirical evidence indicates that scholarship governance is not merely a bookkeeping activity but a strategic managerial instrument that expands educational access, supports operational stability, and strengthens collaborative school governance. The findings do not establish a direct or linear relationship between student financial aid and improved academic achievement. Instead, scholarship programs function as operational catalysts by creating supportive conditions and classroom readiness that facilitate meaningful learning opportunities. However, their transformative potential depends on effective school leadership, transparent administration, accountable financial management, and active stakeholder participation. When these conditions are present,

scholarship programs can contribute to student retention, educational equity, and institutional stability. Thus, scholarships should be understood as enabling mechanisms that support school quality rather than definitive guarantees of improved educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Empirical evidence demonstrates that school principals serve as essential managerial anchors by integrating scholarship initiatives into core institutional practices. Rather than functioning merely as financial assistance, scholarship programs operate as multidimensional support systems that maintain students' access to education, strengthen motivation, and sustain academic engagement amid economic hardship. However, the effectiveness of scholarship investment depends largely on strong leadership, transparent resource management, and coordinated stakeholder involvement. Although informants expressed positive assessments of program implementation, the findings do not establish a direct causal relationship between scholarship management and improved test scores or overall school quality. Instead, the mechanism appears indirect, as financial assistance creates stable conditions that enable effective teaching and learning. The study therefore positions scholarship governance as a strategic component of school leadership. Practically, principals should integrate scholarship programs into broader school development planning, strengthen administrative transparency, and combine financial assistance with instructional and student-support programs. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method approaches across multiple schools to assess long-term educational outcomes.

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