



Assessment of Government Communication Strategies, Parental Awareness and Participation in Taraba State Free Education Policy in Rural Southern Taraba

Ingyaken Godwin Ikurav^{a*}, Idi Shadrach^b

^aDepartment of Mass Communication, Kwara University, Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria

Department of Mass Communication, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

*Corresponding email: godwiningyaken@gmail.com

Abstract

The study examined government communication strategies for enhancing awareness, knowledge and participation in the Free Education Policy among rural parents in Southern Taraba State. It adopted a mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Although 384 parents were sampled, 346 valid questionnaires were analysed, representing a 90.1% response rate, while three FGDs involving 30 parents provided qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages and mean scores, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings showed that communication relied mainly on interpersonal and community-based channels, particularly political gatherings, teachers and school heads, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and community meetings, while radio and television had limited reach. General awareness was relatively low, with a grand mean of 2.98, despite high awareness of the removal of school fees. Knowledge was moderate (Grand Mean=3.30), but parents had limited understanding of broader policy provisions, implementation processes and stakeholder responsibilities. Participation was low (Grand Mean=2.25), although school enrolment was relatively high (M=4.06). Major communication challenges included irregular information dissemination, unclear and difficult-to-understand messages, inadequate campaigns, limited dialogue opportunities and weak feedback mechanisms (Grand Mean = 4.05). The study concludes that effective policy implementation requires sustained, clear, culturally appropriate and participatory communication. It recommends integrated multi-channel communication, policy-literacy campaigns, community dialogue, stronger school-based communication and accessible feedback and grievance mechanisms.

Keywords: free education policy, government communication, policy awareness, policy knowledge, parental participation, Taraba State

Introduction

Education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and a critical instrument for reducing social inequality, expanding economic opportunities and promoting sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) therefore calls on countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2025). In pursuit of this goal, governments have adopted different policy measures to remove financial and other barriers that prevent children from entering and remaining in school. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the abolition of school fees and the introduction of free basic education have become important policy instruments for expanding access and advancing educational equity (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009). Experiences from countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Ethiopia demonstrate that eliminating or reducing school fees can substantially increase school participation, particularly among children from economically



disadvantaged households, although implementation also creates challenges relating to financing, infrastructure, quality and community participation (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009; Oumer, 2009). Thus, the effectiveness of free education cannot be understood simply in terms of policy formulation or the removal of school fees; it also depends on whether intended beneficiaries are adequately informed about the policy, understand its provisions and are able to participate in its implementation.

In Nigeria, the commitment to free basic education is anchored in the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). The Act requires governments to provide free and compulsory basic education for children of primary and junior secondary school age and places a corresponding responsibility on parents to ensure that their children attend and complete basic education (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC], 2025). Yet, the existence of a legal and policy framework does not automatically translate into public awareness, understanding or participation. This is why communication occupies an important place in the implementation of education policies (Spillane et al., 2002; Vega-Ramírez et al., 2023). UBEC itself recognises social mobilisation, advocacy, sensitisation, stakeholder partnerships and dissemination of education messages as mechanisms for increasing awareness, community ownership and participation in the implementation of free basic education (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2020).

This issue is particularly significant in Taraba State. In July 2023, the Taraba State Government announced free education in all government primary and secondary schools, with the policy scheduled to take effect from the following academic session (Olorok, 2023). The state government presented the initiative partly as a response to the economic pressures associated with the removal of the petrol subsidy and as an intervention to improve access to education. The policy is potentially important for rural households because the removal of school fees can reduce one of the financial barriers to children's participation in formal education (Olafusi, 2023). However, policy availability does not necessarily mean that parents understand what “free education” entails or know how to access its benefits. A parent may be aware that education has been declared free without knowing the specific services covered by the policy, the schools to which it applies, or the responsibilities that remain with parents.

Despite the importance of these issues, there remains limited empirical evidence on how government communication strategies shape rural parents' awareness, understanding and engagement with state-level free education policies in Nigeria. Existing studies (Ambe & Eyo, 2018; Ekas, 2025) provide evidence on the importance of social mobilisation, community participation and communication for education access, but less is known about how specific government communication strategies work across the different stages of public response to a policy, from initial exposure and awareness to understanding and active engagement. This gap is particularly relevant in Southern Taraba, where rural communities are characterised by diverse social and linguistic contexts and varying access to communication and information resources.

The present study therefore examines government communication strategies and their effectiveness in fostering awareness, understanding and engagement with the Free Education Policy among rural parents in Southern Taraba State. Accordingly, the study examined the communication channels used by the Taraba State Government to promote the Free Education Policy, the levels of awareness, knowledge and participation among parents in Taraba South Senatorial zone, and the challenges that undermine their participation in the policy.



Review of Literature

Government Communication Strategies

Government communication strategies refer to deliberate and coordinated approaches through which public institutions provide information, explain policies, engage citizens and obtain feedback in pursuit of public objectives (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). Effective government communication requires attention to audience characteristics, message clarity, source credibility, channel accessibility, timing, consistency and feedback (Sanina et al., 2017). This is particularly important where policies target populations with different levels of literacy, media access, language competence and institutional trust. In this regard, while mass media such as radio, television, newspapers and digital platforms can provide broad and rapid policy awareness, interpersonal and community-based channels can provide opportunities for clarification, dialogue and contextual interpretation (Ezeah et al., 2020). The critical issue is consequently not which channel is inherently most effective, but whether the combination of channels corresponds with the information needs and communication environment of the intended audience. This distinction is important in rural policy communication, where dependence on a single channel may limit the reach and understanding of policy messages.

Free Education Policy

Free education policy refers to deliberate government intervention aimed at removing or substantially reducing the direct financial barriers that prevent children from accessing and remaining in school (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009). It is based on the principle that education, particularly basic education, should be accessible to all irrespective of household income or social status (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009). Free education therefore generally involves the government assuming responsibility for tuition or school fees that would otherwise be paid by parents, although the specific scope of what is covered varies across jurisdictions and is often associated with the objectives of expanding enrolment, promoting educational equity, reducing exclusion and improving opportunities for children from economically disadvantaged households.

In Taraba State, Governor Agbu Kefas introduced free and compulsory primary and secondary education as a major component of his administration's education reform agenda in 2023 (Olokor, 2023). The policy covers government-owned primary and secondary schools across the state, while the administration separately reduced tuition fees at Taraba State University and the State School of Nursing by 50 per cent (Olafusi, 2023). The policy has also cover WAEC-related fees for 39,536 students in public secondary schools (Nwangoro, 2026).

Empirical Review

Several studies show that effective communication is important for creating awareness, helping people understand policies and encouraging public participation. Ezeah et al. (2020), for example, found that interpersonal communication played an important role in promoting awareness and knowledge of COVID-19 among rural communities in Eastern Nigeria. This finding underscores the importance of communication approaches that allow information to circulate through accessible interpersonal and community networks, particularly where conventional mass-media communication may not adequately address the information needs of rural populations. Similarly, Ambe and Eyo, (2018) reported differences in awareness of free basic education between urban and rural communities, with rural respondents relying largely on word-of-mouth and community meetings for information. These findings indicate that the availability of communication channels and the ability of those channels to reach the intended audience are



not the same thing. Although these studies provide useful evidence on education communication in Taraba State, they give limited attention to whether rural parents consider government messages clear, trustworthy and useful, and they do not specifically examine parents' responses to the current Free Education Policy in Southern Taraba State.

The importance of community-based and participatory communication is also evident in previous studies. Bello et al., (2020) found that community dialogue, stakeholder meetings and local radio programmes improved awareness and participation in girl-child education. This suggests that communication may be more effective when members of the target community are given opportunities to ask questions, express concerns and contribute to the process. In contrast, Moses et al. (2024) found that traditional communication channels were particularly effective in reaching rural and suburban communities in Taraba State, with residents placing considerable trust in information conveyed through traditional councils, places of worship, village gatherings and other community-based channels.

Similarly, Imhanrenialena et al., (2021) found that interpersonal networks were particularly important for building trust and spreading information in rural communities. Furthermore, Akintayo et al. (2022) found that the use of multiple communication channels, including face-to-face communication, town-hall meetings, radio, television, newspapers and online media, significantly enhanced residents' knowledge of Nigeria's National Social Investment Programme. These studies above suggest that government communication is more likely to reach and engage rural communities when formal media are supported by interpersonal and community-based channels. However, much of the existing research has focused on general awareness or acceptance and has given less attention to the difference between simply knowing that a policy exists, understanding its provisions and actively participating in its implementation.

The clarity and form of government messages may influence how people understand public policies. In Nigeria, Bolaji et al. (2016) examined the implementation of the Universal Basic Education programme and found that challenges relating to shared understanding of policy intentions and bureaucratic alignment constrained the attainment of its access objectives. Findings of the study highlight the importance of ensuring that policy objectives are clearly understood by those responsible for implementation. This raises the question of whether the Taraba State Government's messages communicate policy on free education provisions clearly enough for parents, particularly those in rural communities, to understand the policy and participate in its implementation. Studies on government and public-policy communication have shown that the effectiveness of policy messages depends not only on communicating what citizens should do but also on how the rationale, consequences and potential benefits of the recommended action are presented (Huang & Liu, 2022; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). Chiweta-Oduah and Buchanan, (2025). also identified the use of difficult language, technical terms and unfamiliar languages as barriers to understanding government messages in communities with lower literacy levels. These findings show that effective government communication involves more than sending information to the public. The message itself must be clear, simple and presented in a form that the intended audience can understand. For a policy such as free education, this is important because parents need to know not only that the policy exists but also what it covers, who can benefit from it and what is expected of them.

Studies further show that trust and opportunities for feedback can affect how people respond to government communication. Specifically, Abdulkareem et al. (2022) found that



government openness and trust in e-government positively influenced e-participation among Nigerian respondents, while Ezeah et al. (2020) found that source credibility shaped the relationship between interpersonal communication and behavioural responses in rural Eastern Nigeria. Oseni (2024) similarly reported that participatory communication facilitated community involvement through dialogue and negotiation. The studies therefore point to the fact that effective government communication requires more than information dissemination; credibility and opportunities for dialogue can influence audience engagement. However, limited evidence examines these factors in relation to rural parents' understanding and participation in education-policy implementation, particularly in Southern Taraba.

Despite the empirical insights provided by existing studies, some important limitations abound. In terms of methods, many previous studies have relied mainly on either surveys or qualitative interviews, with limited use of approaches that combine both methods to provide a fuller understanding of the issue. In terms of focus, some studies have treated awareness and participation as closely related without clearly examining how people move from simply hearing about a policy to understanding its details and eventually taking part in its implementation. Geographically, there is limited evidence on government communication and the Free Education Policy in Southern Taraba State. The Southern Senatorial Zone has many rural communities, different ethnic and language groups, varying access to broadcast media, and strong traditional institutions, all of which may influence how government messages are received and understood. Findings from Jalingo or other parts of Nigeria may therefore not fully reflect the experiences of rural parents in Southern Taraba. This study addresses these gaps by examining the communication strategies used by the government and how they relate to parents' awareness, knowledge and participation in the Free Education Policy in Southern Taraba State.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as its primary theory and Persuasive Communication Theory as its secondary theory. Communication Accommodation Theory was developed by Howard Giles in the early 1970s, initially as Speech Accommodation Theory, to explain how people adjust their communication behaviour during social interaction (Giles, 1973). The theory later developed to address wider social, cultural and interpersonal communication contexts (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Its central assumption is that communicators adjust their language, style and manner of communication in response to the characteristics, expectations and social background of their audiences. Such accommodation may involve adapting language, communication style and other aspects of message delivery to reduce social distance and improve understanding, while failure to accommodate may create misunderstanding or distance between the communicator and audience. The theory is applied by examining whether the communication channels and approaches used by the government are appropriate to the linguistic, cultural and social characteristics of rural parents, and whether these communication approaches facilitate awareness and understanding of the policy.

Persuasive Communication Theory can be traced to classical rhetoric, particularly Aristotle's concepts of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, and its modern development is associated with the work of Hovland and his colleagues on attitude change and persuasion (Hovland et al., 1953). The theory assumes that communication can influence people's attitudes and behaviour when messages are appropriately designed, clearly presented and delivered by credible sources through suitable channels. It gives particular attention to the source of a message, the content of the message, the



communication channel and the characteristics of the audience. In this study, the theory is applied to explain how the content, clarity, credibility and presentation of government messages about the Free Education Policy may influence parents' understanding and willingness to participate in the policy.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining a quantitative survey with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The quantitative component was used to obtain measurable data on parents' awareness, knowledge and participation in the Taraba State Free Education Policy, while the qualitative component provided deeper insights into parents' views and experiences that could not be adequately captured through the questionnaire. A sample size of 384 respondents was adopted for the quantitative survey. A multistage sampling procedure was employed. Southern Taraba Senatorial District was purposively selected, after which five LGAs Takum, Ibi, Donga, Wukari and Ussa were selected. Wards were then selected through simple random sampling, from which three rural communities Gindindoruwa in Wukari LGA, Nyita in Donga LGA and Chanchanji in Takum LGA were selected for the study. For the qualitative component, 30 parents were purposively selected from the three communities, with 10 participants from each community, to form three FGDs. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, to summarise respondents' responses and identify patterns relevant to the research questions while the qualitative data generated from the FGDs were analysed thematically.

Data Presentation

Quantitative Survey Data

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 346)

Item	Response	N	%
Sex	Male	221	63.9
	Female	125	36.1
Age (years)	18–29	24	6.9
	30–39	132	38.2
	40–49	187	54.0
	50 years and above	3	0.9
	No formal education	0	0.0
Educational qualification	Primary education	149	43.1
	Secondary education	80	23.1
	NCE/ND	55	15.9
	Bachelor's degree/HND	48	13.9
	Postgraduate degree	14	4.0
Occupation	Farmer	311	89.9
	Trader	21	6.1
	Civil servant	10	2.9
	Artisan	4	1.1
Number of children in school	1–2	53	15.3
	3–4	131	37.9
	5 and above	162	46.8

Note. N = 346.

Table 4.1 indicates that the respondents were predominantly male, middle-aged adults, with 54.0% aged 40–49 years and 38.2% aged 30–39 years, suggesting that the study largely captured the perspectives of parents with established families and direct responsibility for their

children's education. Most respondents had primary (43.1%) or secondary (23.1%) education, indicating a generally literate population for whom communication about the Free Education Policy should be conveyed in clear, simple, and accessible language through appropriate media and interpersonal channels. Occupationally, the respondents were overwhelmingly farmers (89.9%), reflecting the predominantly agrarian nature of the study setting and suggesting the relevance of community structures, local leaders, schools, and radio as channels for reaching the population. In addition, more than four-fifths of the respondents had three or more school-age children, indicating a strong household stake in the Free Education Policy, particularly given its potential to reduce the financial burden of educating multiple children.

Table 2. Respondents' Exposure to Communication Channels for the Free Education Policy

Communication channel item	SA	A	U	SD	D	M	Dec.
I receive information about the Free Education Policy through radio.	28 (8.1%)	34 (9.8%)	46 (13.3%)	78 (22.5%)	160 (46.2%)	2.11	Reject
I receive information about the Free Education Policy through television.	10 (2.9%)	18 (5.2%)	30 (8.7%)	62 (17.9%)	226 (65.3%)	1.63	Reject
I receive information about the Free Education Policy through community meetings.	118 (34.1%)	97 (28.0%)	56 (16.2%)	39 (11.3%)	36 (10.4%)	3.64	Accept
Teachers or school heads provide information about the policy.	142 (41.0%)	96 (27.7%)	51 (14.7%)	30 (8.7%)	27 (7.8%)	3.85	Accept
Traditional rulers or village leaders inform me about the policy.	104 (30.1%)	101 (29.2%)	63 (18.2%)	42 (12.1%)	36 (10.4%)	3.51	Accept
Religious leaders (churches/mosques) provide information about the policy.	126 (36.4%)	92 (26.6%)	54 (15.6%)	38 (11.0%)	36 (10.4%)	3.67	Accept
I receive most information about the policy from political gatherings or meetings.	168 (48.6%)	92 (26.6%)	44 (12.7%)	24 (6.9%)	18 (5.2%)	4.07	Accept

Note. $N = 346$. Decision rule: $M < 3.00 = \text{Reject}$; $M \geq 3.00 = \text{Accept}$.

Table 2 shows that respondents' exposure to communication channels for the Free Education Policy varied considerably across the channels. Exposure through radio ($M = 2.11$) and television ($M = 1.63$) was below the 3.00 decision threshold, indicating relatively low exposure through these mass media channels. However, exposure through community meetings ($M = 3.64$), teachers or school heads ($M = 3.85$), traditional rulers or village leaders ($M = 3.51$), and religious leaders ($M = 3.67$) was accepted, indicating that these interpersonal and community-based channels were important sources of information about the policy. Political gatherings or meetings recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.07$).



Table 3. Respondents' Awareness of the Taraba State Free Education Policy (N = 346)

Awareness item	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	SD (2)	D (1)	M	Dec.
I am aware that education in public primary schools in Taraba State is free.	214 (61.8%)	78 (22.5%)	26 (7.5%)	18 (5.2%)	10 (2.9%)	4.36	Accept
I am aware that education in public secondary schools in Taraba State is free.	236 (68.2%)	72 (20.8%)	18 (5.2%)	12 (3.5%)	8 (2.3%)	4.49	Accept
I am aware that the government provides school uniforms for pupils under the policy.	161 (46.5%)	84 (24.3%)	45 (13.0%)	34 (9.8%)	22 (6.4%)	3.95	Accept
I am aware that the government provides textbooks and other learning materials under the policy.	28 (8.1%)	36 (10.4%)	54 (15.6%)	82 (23.7%)	146 (42.2%)	2.19	Reject
I am aware that the government is renovating and improving public schools under the policy.	24 (6.9%)	38 (11.0%)	58 (16.8%)	91 (26.3%)	135 (39.0%)	2.20	Reject
I am aware that every school-age child is expected to attend school under the policy.	20 (5.8%)	30 (8.7%)	46 (13.3%)	96 (27.7%)	154 (44.5%)	2.18	Reject
I am aware that the government is registering pupils and students under the Taraba Education Student Identification System (TESIS).	6 (1.7%)	10 (2.9%)	20 (5.8%)	70 (20.2%)	240 (69.4%)	1.47	Reject
Grand Mean						2.98	Reject

Note. N = 346. Decision rule: $M < 3.00$ = Reject; $M \geq 3.00$ = Accept.



Table 3 shows that respondents had high awareness of the core provisions of the Taraba State Free Education Policy but limited awareness of several complementary provisions and responsibilities. Awareness was high regarding free education in public primary schools ($M = 4.36$), free education in public secondary schools ($M = 4.49$), and the provision of school uniforms ($M = 3.95$), all of which exceeded the 3.00 acceptance threshold. However, respondents recorded low awareness of the provision of textbooks and other learning materials ($M = 2.19$), school renovation and improvement ($M = 2.20$), the expectation that every school-age child should attend school ($M = 2.18$) and the Taraba Education Student Identification System (TESIS) ($M = 1.47$). The grand mean of 2.89 falls below the 3.00 threshold, indicating that respondents had low overall awareness of the broader provisions and requirements of the Free Education Policy, despite being well aware of its central provision of free primary and secondary education, suggesting that communication efforts had created awareness of the policy's core benefit but had not sufficiently communicated its wider provisions, implementation requirements, and procedures.

Table 4. Respondents' Knowledge of the Taraba State Free Education Policy ($N = 346$)

Knowledge item	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	M	Decision
The Free Education Policy covers only government-owned public primary and secondary schools.	102 (29.5%)	88 (25.4%)	74 (21.4%)	46 (13.3%)	3.51	Accept
Children attending schools covered by the policy do not pay school fees.	94 (27.2%)	82 (23.7%)	69 (19.9%)	58 (16.8%)	3.36	Accept
Parents are expected to ensure that their children attend school regularly even though education is free.	96 (27.7%)	79 (22.8%)	72 (20.8%)	56 (16.2%)	3.37	Accept
One purpose of the policy is to reduce the number of children who are out of school.	84 (24.3%)	76 (22.0%)	73 (21.1%)	65 (18.8%)	3.24	Accept
Providing uniforms and learning materials is part of the Free Education Policy.	91 (26.3%)	75 (21.7%)	71 (20.5%)	61 (17.6%)	3.29	Accept
Improving school buildings is one of the government's responsibilities under the policy.	86 (24.9%)	80 (23.1%)	70 (20.2%)	63 (18.2%)	3.28	Accept
The registration of pupils and students helps the government to plan educational services effectively.	74 (21.4%)	69 (19.9%)	82 (23.7%)	68 (19.7%)	3.03	Accept
The Free Education Policy aims to improve both access to and the quality of education in Taraba State.	89 (25.7%)	81 (23.4%)	69 (19.9%)	61 (17.6%)	3.31	Accept
Grand Mean					3.30	Accept

Note. $N = 346$. Decision rule: $M < 3.00 = \text{Reject}$; $M \geq 3.00 = \text{Accept}$.

Table 4 shows that respondents demonstrated an overall acceptable level of knowledge of the Taraba State Free Education Policy, as indicated by the grand mean of 3.30, which exceeds the 3.00 decision threshold. All eight knowledge items were accepted, with mean scores ranging from 3.03 to 3.51. The highest level of knowledge concerned the policy's coverage of government-owned public primary and secondary schools ($M=3.51$), followed by parents' responsibility to ensure regular school attendance despite free education ($M=3.37$) and the provision of education without school fees ($M=3.36$). Respondents also demonstrated acceptable knowledge of the policy's objectives, including reducing the number of out-of-school children ($M = 3.24$), providing uniforms and learning materials ($M=3.29$), improving school infrastructure ($M = 3.28$), supporting educational planning through pupil and student registration ($M=3.03$), and improving access to



and quality of education ($M=3.31$). The findings generally suggest that respondents possessed adequate knowledge of the major provisions, responsibilities, and objectives of the Free Education Policy, although the relatively low mean for student registration indicates comparatively weaker knowledge in this area, suggesting that communication efforts had conveyed the broad objectives and provisions of the policy more effectively than the specific procedures and requirements for registering students.

Table 5. Respondents' Participation in the Taraba State Free Education Policy ($N = 346$)

S/N	Participation item	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	M	Dec.
1	I have enrolled all my children in a public school benefiting from the Free Education Policy.	168 (48.6%)	92 (26.6%)	42 (12.1%)	26 (7.5%)	4.06	Accept
2	I ensure that my children attend school regularly.	36 (10.4%)	44 (12.7%)	58 (16.8%)	82 (23.7%)	2.37	Reject
3	I attend school meetings whenever I am invited.	28 (8.1%)	38 (11.0%)	56 (16.2%)	90 (26.0%)	2.14	Reject
4	I discuss my child's education with teachers or school authorities.	18 (5.2%)	26 (7.5%)	48 (13.9%)	92 (26.6%)	1.98	Reject
5	I encourage other parents to enrol their children in school.	22 (6.4%)	34 (9.8%)	54 (15.6%)	96 (27.7%)	2.14	Reject
6	I report problems affecting the implementation of the policy to the appropriate authorities.	16 (4.6%)	28 (8.1%)	46 (13.3%)	94 (27.2%)	1.98	Reject
7	I participate in activities organised by the school to support the Free Education Policy.	10 (2.9%)	18 (5.2%)	38 (11.0%)	82 (23.7%)	1.73	Reject
8	I encourage my children to take their education seriously because of the opportunities provided by the policy.	8 (2.3%)	16 (4.6%)	34 (9.8%)	76 (22.0%)	1.64	Reject
Grand Mean						2.25	Reject

Note. $N=346$. Decision rule: $M < 3.00 = \text{Reject}$; $M \geq 3.00 = \text{Accept}$.

Table 5 shows that respondents had low overall participation in the Taraba State Free Education Policy, as indicated by the grand mean of 2.25, which is below the 3.00 decision threshold. The only item that met the acceptance criterion was enrolment of children in public schools benefiting from the policy ($M=4.06$), indicating relatively high participation in school enrolment. However, respondents recorded low participation in ensuring regular school attendance ($M=2.37$), attending school meetings ($M=2.14$), discussing children's education with teachers or school authorities ($M=1.98$), encouraging other parents to enrol their children ($M=2.14$), reporting implementation problems to relevant authorities ($M=1.98$), participating in school activities supporting the policy ($M=1.73$), and encouraging their children to take education seriously because of the opportunities provided by the policy ($M=1.64$). The findings imply that while parents participated actively in enrolling their children in schools covered by the policy, their involvement in sustained parental engagement, school–community interaction, monitoring, advocacy, and support for policy implementation was generally low, suggesting that communication efforts had not sufficiently translated initial awareness and enrolment into sustained parental participation in the implementation process.



Table 6. *Communication-Related Challenges Affecting Parents' Participation in the Free Education Policy*

Communication-Related Challenges	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	M	SD	Decision
Information about the Free Education Policy does not reach my community regularly.	162 (46.8%)	98 (28.3%)	42 (12.1%)	28 (8.1%)	16 (4.6%)	4.05	1.12	Accepted
Government messages about the policy are not clear to me.	148 (42.8%)	104 (30.1%)	44 (12.7%)	30 (8.7%)	20 (5.8%)	3.96	1.15	Accepted
The language used to explain the policy is difficult for many parents to understand.	171 (49.4%)	94 (27.2%)	36 (10.4%)	28 (8.1%)	17 (4.9%)	4.13	1.10	Accepted
There are not enough awareness campaigns about the policy in my community.	168 (48.6%)	96 (27.7%)	38 (11.0%)	26 (7.5%)	18 (5.2%)	4.07	1.13	Accepted
Government officials rarely visit my community to explain the policy.	164 (47.4%)	92 (26.6%)	42 (12.1%)	30 (8.7%)	18 (5.2%)	4.02	1.15	Accepted
The communication channels used by the government do not effectively reach parents in my community.	170 (49.1%)	88 (25.4%)	40 (11.6%)	28 (8.1%)	20 (5.8%)	4.04	1.17	Accepted
I do not receive timely information whenever there are changes concerning the policy.	158 (45.7%)	98 (28.3%)	42 (12.1%)	30 (8.7%)	18 (5.2%)	4.00	1.14	Accepted
There are few opportunities for parents to ask questions about the policy.	182 (52.6%)	90 (26.0%)	34 (9.8%)	24 (6.9%)	16 (4.6%)	4.21	1.08	Accepted
Different sources provide conflicting information about the policy, making it difficult to know what is correct.	152 (43.9%)	96 (27.7%)	48 (13.9%)	30 (8.7%)	20 (5.8%)	3.95	1.17	Accepted
The government does not provide feedback to parents' questions or complaints about the policy.	176 (50.9%)	92 (26.6%)	34 (9.8%)	24 (6.9%)	20 (5.8%)	4.10	1.16	Accepted
Grand Mean						4.05	1.14	Accepted

Note. $N = 346$. Decision rule: $M < 3.00 = \text{Reject}$; $M \geq 3.00 = \text{Accept}$.

Table 6 above shows that respondents identified substantial communication-related challenges affecting parents' participation in the Free Education Policy, as indicated by the grand mean of 4.05, which is above the 3.50 decision threshold. All ten items were accepted, indicating that respondents generally agreed that the identified communication challenges were present. The most prominent challenge was the limited opportunities for parents to ask questions about the policy ($M=4.21$), followed by the difficulty of the language used to explain the policy ($M=4.13$), inadequate feedback to parents' questions or complaints ($M=4.10$), insufficient awareness campaigns ($M=4.07$), irregular reach of policy information to communities ($M = 4.05$), ineffective communication channels ($M=4.04$), infrequent visits by government officials to explain the policy ($M=4.02$), untimely information about policy changes ($M=4.00$), unclear government messages ($M = 3.96$), and conflicting information from different sources ($M=3.95$).

Qualitative Data

The participants of the FGDs comprised diverse parents and community members, including farmers, petty traders, civil servants, artisans, and informal-sector workers. They also included parents' representatives, community, religious and traditional leaders, and other opinion influencers. Their educational backgrounds ranged from limited formal education to tertiary qualifications, reflecting varied literacy experiences within the rural communities.



Theme 1. Channels of Communication

Across the three FGDs, 22 of the 30 participants reported learning about the policy through churches and mosques, community interactions, and informal discussions with relatives, neighbours, friends, and colleagues. One participant from Gindindoruwa explained, “I first heard about the free education policy in church. After the service, people discussed it outside, and that was where I understood that children would no longer pay school fees” (FGD 1, Male Participant, Gindindoruwa). Similarly, a participant from Nyita noted, “Most of what we know comes from discussions in the market and from neighbours” (FGD 2, PT 1), while another from Chanchanji stated, “Our pastor and village elders informed us about the programme” (FGD 3, PT 4). A participant further observed that discussions at work and on farms were important because “government officials hardly come here” (FGD 2, PT 8). The findings indicate that trusted interpersonal, religious, and community-based channels played a more prominent role than conventional broadcast media in communicating the policy to parents.

Theme 2. Awareness of the Free Education Policy

All 30 participants recognised the removal of school fees as the most visible aspect of the policy. Awareness of other components, including school infrastructure improvement, TESIS and parents’ responsibilities, was limited. A participant from Gindindoruwa explained, “Everybody in this community knows that the government has stopped the payment of school fees in public schools”, but added that “I honestly do not know much about what else the policy includes” (FGD 1, PT 9). Similarly, a participant from Nyita noted that “education is now free”, while observing that “nobody has taken time to explain the full details of the programme to us” (FGD 2, PT 7). A participant from Chanchanji further stated that “What everyone talks about here is that school fees have been removed”, whereas information about other aspects remained inadequate (FGD 3, PT 6). The insights from the FGDs corroborate the quantitative results, indicating that awareness was relatively strong regarding free tuition but limited regarding the broader provisions, implementation processes and parental responsibilities associated with the policy.

Theme 3. Knowledge of the Free Education Policy

The findings indicated that participants’ understanding was largely restricted to the removal of school fees and the reported provision of uniforms and textbooks, with limited knowledge of the policy’s broader objectives, implementation procedures, government responsibilities, parental roles, school infrastructure development and the Taraba Education Student Identification System (TESIS). One participant from Gindindoruwa stated, “What we know is that our children are no longer paying school fees in government schools”. Similarly, a participant from Nyita observed, “We have never attended any meeting where the policy was properly explained”, noting that many parents could not explain the programme beyond free school fees and the promised materials (FGD 2, PT 4). A participant from Chanchanji further explained, “after that, nobody came back to educate us about how the policy works”, resulting in limited knowledge of complaint channels, committees and parental responsibilities (FGD 3, PT 4). The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by showing that parents’ knowledge was concentrated on the most visible aspects of the policy, while limited communication about its wider objectives, implementation mechanisms and stakeholder responsibilities constrained their understanding and capacity to participate effectively in its implementation.



Theme 4: Parents' Participation

The findings showed that parents' participation in the implementation of the Taraba State Free Education Policy was largely limited to enrolling their children in public schools. Across the three communities, 28 of the 30 participants reported that the removal of school fees encouraged them to enrol or re-enrol their children. A participant from Chanchanji noted, "My responsibility ended with registering my children in school", while another observed that parents generally "do not attend policy meetings, monitor the programme, or report challenges" (FGD 3, PT 8; FGD 3, PT 3). Participants attributed their limited involvement partly to the absence of invitations and inadequate information about the roles expected of parents. These insights suggest reinforce the quantitative results by indicating that the policy successfully encouraged school enrolment but that parents' participation in monitoring, consultation, feedback, advocacy and other implementation activities remained limited.

Theme 5. Perceived Implementation Challenges

The findings revealed several perceived implementation challenges affecting parents' confidence in and participation in the Taraba State Free Education Policy. Across the three communities, 28 of the 30 participants questioned the extent to which the policy was being implemented as initially announced, particularly because some promised benefits, such as learning materials, had not been realised. A participant from Gindindoruwa stated, "some of the things we were told, such as learning materials and other support, have not reached our schools", leading parents to question the implementation of the programme (FGD 1, PT 7). A participant from Nyita similarly observed that politicians sometimes "talk about the Free Education Policy as though it belongs to them" during campaigns and political meetings (FGD 2, PT 5). Concerns about unofficial charges were also expressed, with a participant from Chanchanji noting, "Although we were told education is free, there are occasions when some schools still ask parents to bring money for different things" (FGD 3, Male Participant, Chanchanji). Another participant emphasised the lack of reporting mechanisms, stating, "One major problem is that parents do not know where to take their complaints" (FGD 3, PT 6). This suggests that the policy is bedevilled by several challenges, corroborating the quantitative findings.

Discussion of Findings

The study sought to identify the communication channels used by the Taraba State Government to reach rural parents with messages of free education in the Southern Senatorial Zone. The findings from the two data sets indicate that interpersonal and community-based channels, particularly political gatherings, teachers and school heads, religious leaders, community meetings and traditional authorities, are predominant. This is consistent with Ezeah et al. (2020), who found that interpersonal communication was effective in creating awareness and improving knowledge among rural communities in Eastern Nigeria. It also agrees with Moses et al. (2024), who found that communication in rural and suburban settlements of Taraba State was constrained by limited access to modern communication channels and highlighted the relevance of community-based communication approaches. Similarly, Imhanrenialena et al. (2021) found that indigenous communication systems, including the use of indigenous languages and town criers, facilitated the dissemination of financial literacy information among rural communities in Nigeria. Bello et al. (2020) also demonstrated the usefulness of radio programming in promoting girl-child education in rural communities in Bauchi State.



In addition, Akintayo et al. (2022) found that the use of multiple communication channels, including face-to-face communication, radio, television, newspapers and online media, significantly enhanced knowledge and participation in the National Social Investment Programme. These findings suggest that government communication is more likely to reach rural communities when mass-media channels are complemented by interpersonal and community-based channels. Theoretically, the finding is consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory, which suggests that communication becomes more meaningful when it is adapted to the social, cultural and linguistic contexts of audiences. It also accords with Persuasive Communication Theory, particularly the importance of source credibility in message acceptance. This suggests that effective policy communication in rural communities requires an integrated approach in which interpersonal and community-based channels provide trust, interpretation and clarification, while mass media complement them by extending reach.

Regarding parents' level of Awareness of the Free Education Policy, the quantitative finding demonstrates that parents' awareness of the Free Education Policy was selective rather than comprehensive, with stronger awareness of the abolition of school fees and other immediately visible benefits than of less visible provisions, implementation mechanisms and parental responsibilities. The qualitative evidence similarly indicates that parents generally understood the policy through its direct effect on household educational expenses but had limited knowledge of its broader components. This finding is consistent with Ezeah et al. (2020), who found that interpersonal communication was effective in creating awareness and improving knowledge among rural communities, indicating that exposure through accessible communication channels can contribute to awareness and understanding. It also agrees with Akintayo et al. (2022), who found that communication channels significantly influenced knowledge and participation in a government social investment programme. Kuranchie and Adjei-Yeboah (2024) further found that mass media alone were insufficient for effective school-enrolment enlightenment campaigns in rural areas of Oyo State and recommended integrating conventional media with indigenous communication systems, indicating that exposure to government communication does not necessarily produce comprehensive understanding, particularly where communication channels do not adequately address the information needs of rural audiences. From the perspective of Persuasive Communication Theory, exposure constitutes only an initial condition for effective communication; audiences must also attend to, understand and retain relevant information before communication can translate into meaningful engagement.

The study also examined Parents' Knowledge of the Free Education Policy whereby the finding indicates that parents possessed a functional but incomplete understanding of the Free Education Policy. Their knowledge was stronger regarding the basic scope and immediate benefits of the policy but less developed in relation to its broader objectives, implementation processes, institutional responsibilities and mechanisms for stakeholder involvement. This distinction is important because awareness of a policy does not necessarily constitute sufficient knowledge to enable beneficiaries to understand, monitor or participate in its implementation. The finding supports Akintayo et al. (2022), who found that communication channels significantly predicted knowledge and participation in Nigeria's National Social Investment Programme. It is also consistent with Ezeah et al. (2020), who demonstrated that interpersonal communication could improve knowledge among rural communities. Kuranchie and Adjei-Yeboah (2024) provide further support by showing that conventional mass media alone were inadequate for rural



education-enrolment enlightenment and that indigenous communication systems could help orientate and mobilise parents in rural communities. Oseni (2024) also found that participatory communication facilitated community involvement through dialogue and negotiation, suggesting that communication processes that allow community members to interact with information providers can support deeper understanding. The present finding therefore suggests that the communication process has largely informed parents about what the policy offers without adequately equipping them with knowledge of how the policy operates and what roles different stakeholders are expected to play. Persuasive Communication Theory helps explain this outcome because effective message processing depends not only on exposure but also on comprehension and retention. Similarly, Communication Accommodation Theory underscores the importance of appropriate language, context and communicative forms in facilitating understanding.

Objective four of the study sought to examine parents' level of participation in the Free Education Policy. The finding reveals a clear distinction between parents' participation as beneficiaries of the Free Education Policy and their participation as stakeholders in its implementation. Parents' involvement was principally expressed through enrolling or re-enrolling their children in public schools, while more participatory activities such as attending policy meetings, engaging school authorities, monitoring implementation, reporting challenges and supporting policy-related activities remained limited. The qualitative findings reinforce this pattern, suggesting that many parents understood their role primarily as sending their children to school rather than contributing to policy implementation and accountability.

The finding above is consistent with Akintayo et al. (2022), who found that communication channels were significantly associated with participation in the National Social Investment Programme, demonstrating the importance of communication in enabling citizens to engage with government programmes. It also accords with Abdulkareem et al. (2022), who found that openness of public organisations and trust in e-government positively influenced e-participation among Nigerian respondents. Oseni (2024) further found that participatory communication facilitated community involvement through dialogue and negotiation, while community development initiatives that incorporated participatory communication were reported to support greater community involvement. The implication is that increased enrolment should not automatically be interpreted as comprehensive parental participation. Enrolment represents an important behavioural response to the removal of financial barriers, but meaningful participation also involves communication, consultation, monitoring, feedback and collective problem-solving. The finding therefore suggests that the communication structure surrounding the policy has positioned parents more strongly as recipients and beneficiaries than as active implementation stakeholders.

Furthermore, the study sought to examine the communication challenges undermining parental participation and the finding identified irregular information flow, unclear and difficult language, inadequate awareness activities, limited community-level engagement by officials, ineffective communication channels, delayed updates, insufficient opportunities for questions, inconsistent information and weak feedback mechanisms. The qualitative evidence further indicates that these communication weaknesses interact with broader concerns about policy implementation, accountability and trust. This finding is consistent with Oseni (2024), who found that communication targeting rural communities could be ineffective when government and non-governmental actors relied on English while targeting populations that primarily used indigenous languages. The study further found that the lack of community participation in the communication



process contributed to poor understanding. Moses et al. (2024) similarly identified the media-disadvantaged status of rural and suburban communities in Taraba State, noting constraints associated with access to modern communication channels, socio-economic conditions and literacy levels. The finding also supports Abdulkareem et al. (2022), who found that openness of public organisations and trust in e-government positively influenced e-participation, highlighting the importance of transparency and trust in citizen engagement. Akintayo et al. (2022) further demonstrated that the use of multiple communication channels was associated with knowledge and participation in a government programme. Critically, the findings suggest that communication problems cannot be treated as a peripheral aspect of policy implementation because they affect parents' ability to understand the policy, assess its implementation, seek clarification and demand accountability. Where official messages are not sufficiently clear or consistent, and where accessible mechanisms for questions and complaints are absent, parents may remain dependent on informal sources of information, which can increase uncertainty and create room for conflicting interpretations. The communication challenge is therefore simultaneously an issue of access, comprehension, trust, responsiveness and accountability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the outcome of this study, the central challenge facing the Taraba State Free Education Policy is not merely the dissemination of information but the extent to which communication enables parents to understand, engage with, and contribute to policy implementation. The existing communication pattern has succeeded in communicating the most visible aspect of the policy, particularly the removal of school fees, but has been less effective in communicating its wider provisions, responsibilities and implementation processes. Therefore, parents have largely responded as beneficiaries through school enrolment rather than as informed stakeholders involved in monitoring, feedback and community-level accountability. This phenomenon suggests that the effectiveness and sustainability of the policy depend partly on transforming communication from a predominantly one-way process of announcing government interventions into a continuous, participatory process that connects government, schools, parents and community institutions. Such a shift would enable communication to perform not only an informational function but also a clarificatory, participatory, feedback and accountability function, thereby strengthening parents' capacity to understand the policy, monitor its implementation and contribute meaningfully to its success. The study therefore recommends that:

1. The Taraba State Government, through the Ministry of Education and relevant agencies, should establish a coordinated multi-channel communication system that combines community meetings, schools, religious and traditional institutions with radio and other appropriate media. Government should provide standardised policy messages to these intermediaries to ensure consistency, while radio programmes and community meetings should be used regularly to reinforce information and allow parents to seek clarification.
2. The government should develop simple, periodic and locally appropriate information materials explaining all major components of the Free Education Policy, including eligible schools, free services, government commitments, parental responsibilities, educational requirements and available support. These messages should be communicated repeatedly through schools, community institutions and accessible local-language channels rather than relying mainly on initial policy announcements.



3. The Ministry of Education should organise regular policy-literacy sessions for parents and community stakeholders at school and community levels. Teachers, school heads, traditional and religious leaders should receive standard briefing guides to ensure that they communicate accurate information about the policy, its objectives, implementation procedures, TESIS and stakeholder responsibilities.
4. The government should institutionalise school-community forums and parent participation mechanisms through which parents can attend periodic meetings, discuss implementation, monitor policy-related activities and communicate concerns to responsible authorities. Each participating school or community should have a clearly identified feedback and complaint channel, with designated officials responsible for receiving and responding to complaints, particularly regarding unofficial charges and other implementation problems.

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ChatGPT and Gemini were used for brainstorming and editing. The authors verified the content and take full responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.
