

## School Marketing Practices and Enrollment Interest: Evidence from a Public Primary School in South Sulawesi

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### Abstract

School marketing has become a critical strategy for educational institutions seeking to remain competitive and sustainable, especially in rural and underenrolled schools. This study explores the marketing strategies implemented by SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2, a public elementary school in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, to attract new student enrollment. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis with key school stakeholders, including the principal and homeroom teachers. The findings reveal that the school applies direct socialization strategies, including door-to-door outreach to prospective students' families, as well as basic promotional efforts highlighting the school's mission and character education values. Despite limitations in infrastructure, these efforts demonstrate moderate success in generating interest among prospective students and their families. The study also identifies intrinsic factors (such as curiosity and interest) and extrinsic factors (such as peer influence and parental decisions) that affect student enrollment interest. This research emphasizes the importance of proactive, context-sensitive marketing approaches in educational institutions operating in resource-constrained settings. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of educational marketing in developing country contexts and offer practical insights for school leaders aiming to enhance student recruitment efforts.

**Keywords:** Educational marketing, student enrollment, promotional strategies

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, educational institutions have increasingly adopted strategic marketing principles to remain competitive, especially in areas experiencing declining student enrollment. Schools, particularly in rural or less-developed regions, are compelled to rethink traditional approaches to attract and retain students, as educational choices expand for families in both public and private sectors (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Marketing in education is not merely about increasing enrollment numbers; it is fundamentally about communicating value and aligning institutional identity with stakeholder expectations. Educational marketing emphasizes the importance of branding, positioning, and customer engagement, akin to business practices, while maintaining the educational mission (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004).

In Indonesia, the decentralization of education through the School-Based Management (SBM) policy provides schools with autonomy to plan and implement programs according to local needs. However, this autonomy requires proactive efforts to attract students through strategic communication and community engagement (Chang et al., 2014). Without effective strategies, many public schools risk closure due to low enrollment.

SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 represents one of many public schools in Indonesia that faces challenges in student recruitment. Located in a rural part of South Sulawesi, this school competes not only with nearby institutions but also with shifting societal preferences regarding educational quality and school image (Arifin et al., 2021). The school has responded by developing targeted marketing strategies to increase community awareness and interest.

Several factors contribute to parental decision-making in school choice, including perceived academic quality, distance from home, and facilities provided. Additionally, intangible elements such as school reputation, teacher engagement, and character education programs play critical roles (Bunar & Ambrose, 2022; Schneider et al., 2000). These variables reflect consumer-like behaviors among parents in the education sector.

Previous studies have demonstrated that personalized outreach, such as home visits and direct communication with families, can be an effective promotional tactic in rural settings. When schools position themselves as inclusive, caring, and academically capable,

they are more likely to build trust and attract new students (Cucchiara et al., 2011; DiMartino & Jessen, 2018).

Despite efforts in promotional campaigns, many schools still struggle to change perceptions and differentiate themselves from other institutions. This is particularly evident in schools that lack advanced infrastructure or suffer from limited teacher availability, which negatively impacts school image (Priyono & Marlina, 2021). Therefore, marketing efforts must go beyond mere advertisement—they must foster authentic school-community relationships.

The concept of educational marketing must also consider socio-cultural dynamics, especially in collectivist societies such as Indonesia, where familial and peer influence significantly affects educational decisions (Yulianti et al., 2022). Marketing strategies in these settings must therefore be localized, relational, and responsive to community norms and expectations.

This study aims to explore and analyze the school marketing strategies employed by SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 to attract new students. The research highlights the role of socialization, promotional outreach, and infrastructural considerations in influencing parental interest and decision-making. The study contributes to a growing body of knowledge on school marketing in low-resource contexts.

By understanding how public schools in rural areas implement marketing strategies, stakeholders including school leaders, policymakers, and educators can derive insights for replicable and sustainable student recruitment models. Moreover, this study provides empirical evidence for improving educational equity through better school visibility and engagement practices.

## **METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the school marketing strategies implemented by SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 in attracting new student enrollment. The qualitative method was selected due to its suitability for exploring social phenomena in depth, particularly those related to communication patterns, institutional behavior, and community engagement within educational settings. The study was conducted

in the natural setting of the school, allowing the researcher to understand the phenomenon as it occurred, without manipulation or interference.

The research took place in SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2, located in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The school is situated in a rural area and has been facing challenges in student enrollment due to various socio-economic and demographic factors. In this context, a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to examine how school leaders and educators conceptualize and implement marketing strategies, and how these strategies are perceived by the surrounding community.

Participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where individuals are chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The informants included the school principal and homeroom teachers, as they play central roles in the planning and execution of school marketing and promotional activities. Their insights were essential in understanding the rationale behind the strategies used and the outcomes observed.

Data collection was carried out using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal and selected teachers to gain a nuanced understanding of the marketing practices employed. Participant observation was used to examine the school's environment, infrastructure, and interaction with the local community. Meanwhile, document analysis involved reviewing internal documents such as enrollment data, promotional materials, and reports on community engagement efforts.

To analyze the collected data, the study utilized Miles and Huberman's interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which involves three main components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction was undertaken by selecting and organizing relevant information from the raw data. This was followed by data display, in which the information was arranged in visual or thematic formats to facilitate interpretation. Finally, the researchers drew conclusions based on recurring patterns and insights that emerged from the data, linking them back to the research objectives.

The validity and reliability of the findings were enhanced through triangulation, involving the use of multiple data sources and collection methods. To further ensure the

trustworthiness of the research, member checking was conducted by sharing initial interpretations with the participants for confirmation and feedback. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how rural public schools in Indonesia, such as SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2, navigate the challenges of student recruitment through context-sensitive marketing strategies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The findings of this study reveal that SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 has undertaken various school marketing strategies to attract new students, despite facing significant challenges in terms of location, facilities, and public perception. One of the primary strategies utilized by the school is direct socialization with prospective students and their families. This approach includes home visits conducted by school leaders and homeroom teachers to introduce the school, explain its mission and programs, and address parental concerns.

Socialization efforts were described by participants as being both personal and community-focused. Rather than relying on mass media or passive enrollment campaigns, the school actively engages with families in their homes, creating a direct line of communication and trust. According to the school principal, this door-to-door method is essential for rural settings where information dissemination through digital or institutional channels may be limited.

In addition to socialization, the school also implements promotional strategies, albeit in modest forms due to resource limitations. Promotional activities focus on communicating the school's values, such as discipline, character education, and community integration. These promotions are usually verbal and informal, often embedded within the socialization visits, rather than through structured advertisements or media outreach.

Despite limited infrastructure, school facilities and learning environments are strategically framed in a positive light during the marketing process. For example, the lack of a dedicated sports field is compensated by shared access to neighboring facilities, reflecting a spirit of adaptability and resourcefulness. Teachers and school leaders emphasized that they communicate these adaptive solutions to prospective parents to reassure them about the school's commitment to delivering quality education.

The study also found that student interest is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. On the intrinsic side, students demonstrate curiosity and personal interest after initial exposure to the school's environment and teachers. Teachers noted that many students express enthusiasm after informal visits or trial participation in school activities.

Extrinsic influences, on the other hand, include strong community and familial effects. Many parents decide to enroll their children based on recommendations from neighbors, friends, or relatives who are already familiar with the school. Moreover, the proximity of the school to students' homes and the perceived safety of the environment were noted as significant contributors to parental decision-making.

Parental perceptions are further shaped by the school's emphasis on character development and moral values. The headmaster frequently communicates that academic success must be accompanied by strong personal ethics a message that resonates with local cultural and religious values. This alignment between school messaging and community expectations strengthens the school's positioning.

However, the research also uncovered barriers to effective marketing, particularly the absence of modern promotional tools such as brochures, banners, and digital outreach. While the school relies heavily on personal interactions, this limited visibility restricts its ability to reach a broader audience beyond immediate surroundings. As a result, some parents remain unaware of the school's offerings or achievements.

Nevertheless, the overall perception of the school within the local community is gradually improving, due in part to consistent socialization and the dedication of teachers. The school has managed to maintain stable enrollment numbers, and in some cases, slightly increase student intake compared to previous years. Participants expressed optimism that

continued effort and minor improvements in promotional strategy could further boost enrollment.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the marketing strategies of SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 especially direct engagement through socialization, clear communication of values, and leveraging community ties have had a positive though still limited impact on attracting new students. The study emphasizes the importance of relational marketing in rural education settings and the need for adaptive strategies that align with local social realities.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the importance of relational and community-based strategies in educational marketing, particularly in under-resourced rural public schools like SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2. The school's approach, centered on direct socialization and personalized promotion, aligns with the literature that underscores the significance of relationship-building and trust in school choice, especially in collectivist cultures (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Yulianti et al., 2022).

Direct socialization, as practiced through home visits and face-to-face engagement with parents, reflects what DiMartino and Jessen (2018) describe as "relational branding"—where the school does not merely promote its offerings but engages in authentic dialogue with the community. In rural settings, where digital access and media exposure are limited, such relational strategies are not only effective but necessary. This confirms Nguyen et al. (2020)'s assertion that educational marketing must be context-sensitive and culturally embedded to achieve desired outcomes.

The study also reveals that promotional activities, though limited in scope and resources, serve an important symbolic function. Communicating the school's mission, character education, and adaptability to limited infrastructure resonates with the values of parents in the local community. According to Cucchiara et al. (2011), marketing in low-income or underserved contexts often depends less on material attributes and more on perceived sincerity, alignment with values, and moral leadership.

Furthermore, the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on student interest is consistent with consumer behavior models in education, where parents and students act as

educational consumers (Bunar & Ambrose, 2022). Intrinsic interest stems from exposure and emotional appeal, while extrinsic motivators—such as proximity, peer recommendations, and family traditions—play a decisive role. This dual-influence framework supports the findings of Schneider et al. (2000), who showed that school choice is a function of both rational analysis and social cues.

Despite its proactive efforts, SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 faces persistent challenges, including limited promotional materials and infrastructure. These barriers are well-documented in the literature as constraints that disproportionately affect public schools in rural or low-income regions (Priyono & Marlina, 2021). While commitment and creativity can offset some of these deficits, the long-term solution requires systemic support, investment in basic facilities, and capacity-building for school marketing competencies.

One notable strength of the school's strategy lies in its integration of character education into the promotional narrative. By framing the school as not only a place of academic learning but also of moral development, the institution taps into the cultural expectations of Indonesian society. This supports findings by Chang et al. (2014), who emphasized that educational institutions in decentralized systems must tailor their value propositions to local beliefs and identities.

The study's implications extend beyond the local context. It contributes to the growing discourse on educational marketing in the Global South, particularly how small-scale schools utilize social capital and cultural resonance to attract students in the absence of commercial advertising. As Kotler and Fox (1995) argued, effective educational marketing is not about competing through superiority alone, but through strategic alignment with stakeholder needs.

However, sustainability remains a concern. The school's reliance on personal visits and word-of-mouth promotion may not be scalable in the long term. As noted by DiMartino and Jessen (2018), relational strategies require high labor and time investment, which may burden school leaders if not complemented by broader institutional support and digital outreach. Introducing basic marketing training and low-cost communication tools could enhance effectiveness while preserving authenticity.

Lastly, while this study offers valuable insights, it also points to the need for future research that includes parental perspectives directly. Understanding how parents interpret and respond to the school's marketing messages could provide a more comprehensive view of effectiveness and help refine strategies further.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that school marketing strategies play a crucial role in shaping public perception and attracting new student enrollment, especially in under-resourced rural settings. At SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2, the implementation of direct socialization strategies, such as door-to-door outreach, has proven to be a practical and culturally appropriate method for building relationships with prospective students and their families. Although the school faces infrastructural limitations, its ability to communicate values such as character development, community trust, and educational commitment has partially offset these deficits.

The findings further reveal that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors significantly influence student interest. Intrinsic motivation, such as curiosity and personal engagement with the school environment, and extrinsic influences like peer suggestions, family decisions, and geographical proximity, contribute to enrollment outcomes. These insights affirm that educational marketing in rural schools must go beyond material offerings and instead focus on relational trust and community alignment.

Overall, the experience of SD Inpres 12/79 Walenreng 2 illustrates that even schools with minimal resources can attract students through strategic, personalized, and values-driven marketing approaches. For long-term sustainability, however, it is recommended that such schools receive broader institutional support, particularly in developing low-cost promotional tools and capacity-building for school staff in educational communication and outreach.

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