

# Public Perception in Evaluating Indonesia's School Zoning Admission Policy: Insight Into the Ongoing Debate

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## ABSTRACT

The New Student Admission (NSA) policy in Indonesia, particularly the zone-based scheme, has sparked public debate. This study examines public perceptions of the policy, identifying key factors influencing acceptance and rejection. A sequential explanatory mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. A survey was conducted among 102 parents across 13 provinces in Indonesia from September to October 2023. Findings reveal diverse public opinions on the NSA policy. Opposition stems from concerns about cheating, limited school availability, declining student motivation, and systemic issues. Conversely, supporters highlight the policy's role in promoting equitable access to education and reducing social class bias. Public sentiment towards policy sustainability is categorized into three groups: those advocating for complete abolition, those favoring improvements, and those supporting full implementation. The persistence of debates suggests the need for policy refinement to address public concerns. The study emphasizes that policy acceptance is closely tied to its perceived effectiveness in ensuring fairness and accessibility. To enhance public acceptance, the study recommends increasing school availability, adapting zoning systems to demographic conditions, intensifying public outreach, and strengthening law enforcement. These measures can improve policy effectiveness and reduce opposition, fostering a more inclusive education system in Indonesia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian New Student Admission (NSA) Policy, specifically the zone-based school admission approach, was launched in 2017 with a vision to balance access to quality education through fair, non-discriminatory practices (Abu Bakaret al., 2020; Ariani, 2021). Unlike traditional merit-based

admission, which often benefits students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, this policy emphasizes proximity, using residential zones to allocate school placements, thus promoting inclusivity for economically disadvantaged students (Alias et al., 2022; Romlah et al., 2023; Rosinger et al., 2021; Suherman, 2021; Sulistyosari et al., 2020). Over the years, the policy has evolved, notably adjusting the admission quotas to better serve diverse student needs, from an initial 90% zoning requirement in 2018 (Permendikbud No. 51, 2018) to a minimum of 50% by 2019 to accommodate merit-based admissions for high-achieving students (Permendikbud No. 44, 2019).

While the policy has undergone several revisions—most notably, adjusting quotas and refining admission procedures to better accommodate diverse student needs (Permendikbud No. 1, 2021; Permendikbud No. 44, 2019; Permendikbud No. 51, 2018)—it remains a topic of ongoing debate. The policy faces challenges, such as cheating during the selection process (Ashri, 2023; Awaludin, 2023; Bagaskara, 2023), inequitable school quality (Aji, 2023; Argiandini, 2023), technical system errors (Prasetyo, 2023), and concerns regarding a perceived decline in educational quality (Choudhary et al., 2024; Rahardjo, 2023). These persistent issues have stirred public dissatisfaction, with some community members calling for the NSA's abolishment (Irham, 2023; Putri et al., 2023). Such responses signal a critical need to evaluate policy effectiveness not just on paper but through the lens of public perception.

Several responses and public perceptions regarding zone-based NSA policy also emerge internationally, including in Australia. The primary goal of schooling in Australia is to provide equitable access to education for all students, regardless of their social background or the schools they attend. However, the distinction between selective and non-selective schools undermines the inclusivity goals. Selectivity in enrollment processes allows selective schools to attract higher SES (socioeconomic status) students and maintain high enrollment levels year after year (Dean et al., 2023). As noted by Tham et al. (2024), attending an academically selective school is not associated with major benefits for individuals. Furthermore, researchers from the UK have found no significant differences in education, income, and life satisfaction outcomes between academically selective schools and government schools when students' socioeconomic backgrounds are accounted for (Henderson et al., 2022). This suggests that the favoritism toward selective schools has no basis, as there are no significant differences in schooling outcomes.

In New Zealand, the tension in society about zoning systems, including calls for the abolishment of school zoning, has been ongoing since the 1970s. These systems have been criticized for undermining parental choice—the freedom of parents to determine which school their children should attend (McCulloch, 1991)—as well as for reducing contestability between schools and eroding real accountability to local communities (The Treasury, 1987). In contrary, the pro-policy group believe that zoning of enrolments should exist primarily to ensure that every student has the absolute right to attend the nearest neighbourhood school (Picot, 1988). Additionally, parents should be welcomed back into neighbourhood schools; their drive and care for their children's education should be utilized for everyone's benefit (Stewart et al., 2021). While zoning is often criticized for significantly limiting choice, it is essential to recognize that the lack of choice is frequently tied to broader socioeconomic factors rather than zoning alone. This perspective underscores the need to address underlying inequalities in access to quality education as part of the zoning debate.

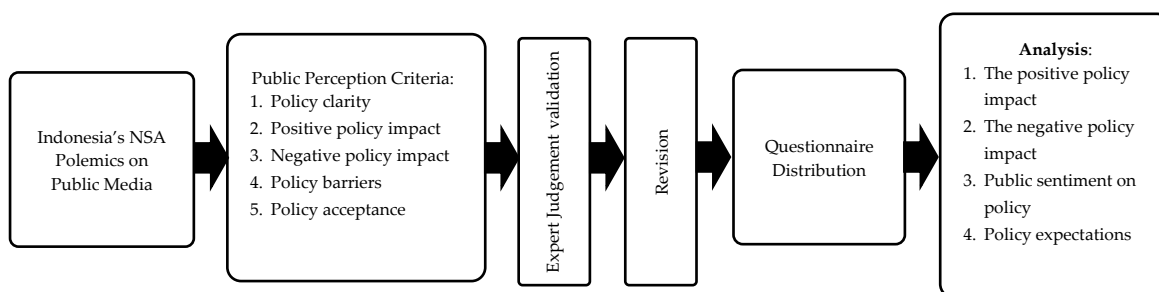
The push for dezoning—policy that prioritize choice over zoning, influenced by US reforms in 1980s, has exacerbated the segregation of school populations. In response, zoning has been gradually reinstated, particularly in New Zealand and Australia. Recently, these education policies regarding school location and student enrollment have prompted many Australian parents to purchase property near schools with high academic performance (within the designated catchment areas). Similarly, the zoning scheme has influenced housing prices in the speculative housing markets of Auckland and other cities in Aotearoa New Zealand (Stewart et al., 2021). For instance, houses located on the high-performing side of primary school zone boundaries are, on average, 2.5% to 3.6% more expensive than similar houses on the low-performing side of these boundaries. This result is in line with previous findings about house price differential between high-performing and lower-performing school zones in the US, UK, and France (Doko Tchatoka & Varvaris, 2021).

Moving beyond debates on NSA Policy, considering public perception in policy evaluation is essential for uncovering real-world impacts and addressing issues often overlooked by traditional metrics (Bastedo et al., 2022). Public sentiment reflects collective experience, revealing unintended consequences, practical barriers, and even areas of potential improvement that align more closely with community needs (Evans et al., 2023). For instance, issues highlighted by parents and students—such as perceived inequities in school quality or barriers due to geographic constraints—suggest that the NSA policy might still be falling short of its goals of equity and access. Evaluating public perception is also essential to bridge the gap between policy intent and implementation, ensuring that the policy evolves based on comprehensive, real-time feedback from those it impacts directly (Desrinelti et al., 2021; Mansur, 2021; Wijaya et al., 2020). Moreover, policies must remain dynamic and responsive to public needs, as static approaches risk undermining their effectiveness (Blakemore & Warwick-Booth, 2013).

In Indonesia's context, while extensive research exists on the early years of the NSA policy (Abu Bakar et al., 2020; PERDANA, 2019; Risna et al., 2020), recent changes in regulations and implementation call for renewed investigation. Moreover, previous studies have been limited in geographical scope and often adopt only one methodological perspective, quantitative or qualitative, which restricts understanding (Madiana et al., 2022; Putra & Andriani, 2020). A comprehensive exploration of public perception—covering multiple locations and employing mixed methods—could reveal deeper insights into the policy's strengths and weaknesses. In addition to producing a more comprehensive approach, mixed methods can enrich the interpretation of results and provide explanations for the complexity of issues with appropriate solutions. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on current community perspectives, ultimately aiming to produce constructive recommendations for refining the NSA policy and enhancing its alignment with Indonesia's educational equity goals.

## 2. METHODS

This research uses a *sequential explanatory method*, namely mixed research methods, starting with a quantitative approach followed by a qualitative approach to provide a more holistic and in-depth understanding of the findings (Creswell, 2017). The focus of this research is the public's perception, especially parents, of the NSA policy which includes five aspects: 1) policy clarity, 2) positive policy impact, 3) negative policy impact, 4) policy barriers, and 5) policy acceptance. The development of policy perception instruments is based on exploring Indonesia NSA policy polemics in various Indonesian media channels. In the qualitative stage, the research focuses on explaining qualitative findings, especially on the aspects: 1) the positive impact of policy, 2) the negative impact of policy, 3) sentiment on policy, and 4) policy expectations.



**Figure 1** Research Process Design

After the question items were developed, the instrument validation was conducted using the expert judgment method. Expert judgment is an estimation or evaluation method based on the experience and knowledge of experts relevant to the issue or topic being researched (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2020; Hughes, 1996). The experts referred to are individuals with a deep understanding of a

specific field or domain, both in theory and practice. The expert evaluators in this study were policy analysts who were involved in formulating the zoning system policy in Indonesia. Several inputs were provided, emphasizing the sensitivity of the question items, the alignment with the goals of school zoning, the coherence of the questions, and the addition of question components relevant to the school-zoning NSA debate. After receiving the evaluations, the question items were revised and distributed to the target respondents of the study.

The population of research respondents is parents who have experience following a series of NSA processes in 2023. This research's respondents are random to accommodate wider data coverage without focusing on certain regional loci in Indonesia. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire method with two types of questionnaires, namely closed questionnaires and open questionnaires. The respondents in this study were 102 parents spread across 13 provinces in Indonesia. Data was collected during the period September - October 2023. In the quantitative stage, the questionnaire was closed-ended and focused on parents' perceptions of the policy. Meanwhile, the questionnaire is open-ended at the qualitative stage, focusing on policy impacts and public expectations.

**Table 1.** Respondent Distribution Based on Age

Age	Number of Respondent
20 - 30 yo	43
30 - 40 yo	17
40 - 50 yo	28
> 50 yo	14
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>102</b>

**Table 2.** Respondent Distribution Based on Province

Province	Number of Respondent
Aceh	3
Banten	1
DIY	27
DKI Jakarta	3
Jawa Barat	10
Jawa Tengah	43
Jawa Timur	2
Kepulauan Bangka Belitung	5
Kepulauan Riau	2
Lampung	2
Riau	1
Sulawesi Selatan	1
Sumatera Utara	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>102</b>

Data analysis at the quantitative stage uses descriptive methods. The questionnaire was developed using a five-scale Likert scale and analyzed using Azwar's (2012) categorization method. Meanwhile, data analysis in the qualitative stage was performed with qualitative data analysis by Creswell (2017), namely data collection, data reduction through the coding process, and data visualization. The coding process in qualitative stage was conducted with thematic coding technique. The thematic coding involved an inductive coding thematic method which the theme was extracted from the informant statements. The inductive coding is a data analysis process wherein the researcher systematically reads and interprets raw textual data to derive concepts, themes, or process models based on the data itself (Chandra & Shang, 2019).

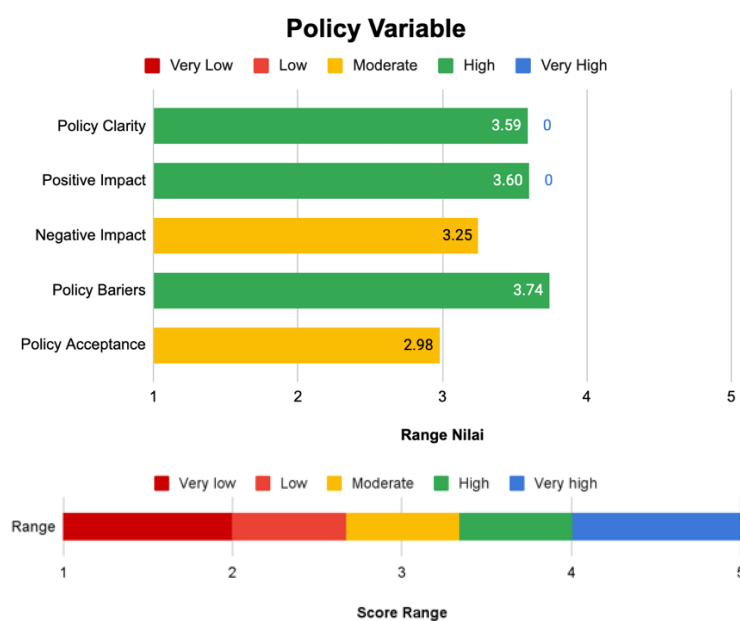
**Table 3.** Score Categorization by Azwar

Category	Formula	Score Range
Very low	$X < M - 1.5SD$	$X < 2$
Low	$M - 1.5SD < X < M - 0.5SD$	$2 < X < 2.67$
Moderate	$M - 0.5SD < X < M + 0.5SD$	$2.67 < X < 3.33$
High	$M + 0.5SD < X < M + 1.5SD$	$3.33 < X < 4$
Very high	$M + 1.5SD < X$	$4 < X < 5$

The author acknowledges the limitations of this research, particularly the limited number of respondents and their uneven geographical distribution across provinces. To address this, future studies are encouraged to include a larger and more regionally diverse sample. Expanding the respondent scope would enhance the reliability and generalizability of findings, considering that regional policies often vary based on the unique priorities of local governments. This approach would also provide deeper insights into the contextual dynamics that influence policy implementation and outcomes across different regions.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Quantitative Survey: Public Perceptions of the Policy



**Figure 2.** Public Perception of The Policy

Before analyzing the policy indicator level, an inferential analysis was conducted to explore the diversity of opinions among respondent groups. This analysis aimed to examine whether there were significant differences in opinions across these groups. The analysis was performed using the Kruskal-Wallis test with SPSS 29. The results revealed that the significance value based on age groups was 0.166, while the value for provincial groups was 0.318. Both values exceeded the threshold of 0.05, indicating no significant differences among respondent groups in terms of age or provincial origin. Thus, it can be concluded that all groups share similar perspectives.

**Table 4.** Kruskal Wallis Test Score Based on Group of Age

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>	
	Final Score
Kruskal-Wallis H	5.082
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.166

a. Kruskal Wallis Test  
 b. Grouping Variable: Group of Age

**Table 5.** Kruskal Wallis Test Score Based on Group of Province

Test Statistics <sup>a,b</sup>	
	Final Score
Kruskal-Wallis H	13.737
df	12
Asymp. Sig.	.318

a. Kruskal Wallis Test  
 b. Grouping Variable: Provinsi

The results based on **Figure 2** reveal a nuanced view of public perception concerning the zone-based School Admission Policy (NSA) in Indonesia. The highest scores are observed in "Policy Barriers" (3.74) and "Positive Impact" (3.60), both falling within the "High" category, indicating that the public recognizes positive aspects and barriers within the policy. "Policy Clarity" also scores high at 3.59, suggesting that the public largely understands the policy's purpose and framework.

On the other hand, "Negative Impact" (3.25) and "Policy Acceptance" (3.02) fall within the "Moderate" range. These results suggest that, while the policy has clear elements and perceived benefits, there are moderate concerns about its negative consequences and public acceptability. This pattern highlights mixed sentiment toward the policy, where perceived drawbacks and acceptance are limited, yet the public acknowledges its structure and benefits. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of these findings, the following table presents the detailed scores for each policy variable across different criteria. This breakdown allows for a closer examination of how specific aspects of the zone-based NSA policy are perceived in terms of clarity, impact, barriers, and acceptance.

**Table 6.** Public Perception of the Policy Based on Policy Variable

Aspect/Indicators	Score	Category
<b>Policy Clarity</b>		
Registration option	3.86	High
Admission Procedure	3.76	High
Policy purposes	3.54	High
Policy socialization	3.42	High
Policy consistency	3.28	Moderate
<b>Positive Impact of Policies</b>		
The distribution of outstanding students	3.83	High
Reduces the risk of accidents	3.76	High
Reduce educational costs	3.67	High
Fair access to public schools	3.65	High
Equal distribution of school quality	3.64	High
Improving the quality of less favored public schools	3.47	High
Remove the favorite school label	3.36	High
Eliminate consideration of favorite schools	3.35	High
<b>Negative Impact of Policies</b>		
Deceptive practices	3.76	High
Limiting parent and student choices	3.60	High
Discriminatory against outstanding students	3.41	High
Lowering the quality of schools	3.09	High
Reducing children's motivation to learn	3.06	Moderate
Increasing child delinquency	2.84	Moderate
<b>Policy Barriers</b>		
Parents' IT skills	4.08	Very High

Aspect/Indicators	Score	Category
Absence of assessment standards	4.03	Very High
Perception of favorite school	3.91	High
The distribution of schools does not match demographics	3.80	High
The distribution of schools is still centralized	3.82	High
System error	3.47	High
Availability of public-school capacity	3.41	High
<b>Policy Acceptance</b>		
Satisfaction	3.07	Moderate
Policy sustainability	2.86	Moderate

Policy clarity is essential for the success of any policy, as it helps the target audience to understand and accept the policy framework (Ward & Parr, 2011). In the case of the NSA policy, respondents generally perceive it as clear, with scores indicating a "High" level of policy clarity. However, regarding policy consistency, public perception falls within the "Moderate" category, suggesting that respondents view certain inconsistencies within the NSA policy framework. Additionally, parents largely agree on the positive impact of the NSA policy, with all aspects rated in the "High" category. This consensus underscores a strong positive perception of the policy's benefits, particularly in its ability to promote a balanced distribution of outstanding students across schools, which scored the highest among positive impacts. On the other hand, public perception of the policy's negative impacts is more varied. Aspects such as cheating practices, limitations on student choice, and discrimination against high-achieving students are rated in the "High" category, while concerns about reduced school quality, diminished student motivation, and increased delinquency fall within the "Moderate" range. Notably, parents consider the prevalence of fraudulent practices as the most significant negative impact, as they feel it undermines the fairness of the NSA policy's implementation.

Barriers to the NSA policy also emerge, with parents highlighting challenges related to IT skills and the absence of standardized assessments as significant obstacles. Furthermore, enduring perceptions of "favorite" schools and the uneven distribution of schools are viewed as additional factors that impede the policy's success. Finally, public perception of policy acceptance, including satisfaction with the policy and its sustainability, is in the "Moderate" category, indicating that opinions are balanced between supporting and opposing the continuation of the NSA policy. These findings suggest a complex and mixed public perception, wherein clarity and positive impacts are recognized, but significant concerns around negative impacts, barriers, and acceptance persist.

### 3.2. Qualitative: Explanatory Public Perceptions of NSA Policy

The previous discussion section shows that public perceptions regarding NSA policies are fairly diverse. According to Simbolon (2007), a person's perception is influenced by various factors, one of which is the personal characteristics factor which refers to attitudes, motives, interests, experiences, and expectations. Thus, it is necessary to explore public perceptions regarding zone-based NSA policies further. The following are the results of the analysis of public perceptions regarding NSA policies in Indonesia.

#### 3.2.1. Positive Impact of NSA Policy

##### 3.2.1.1. Opportunities for closer access to education

Parents assess that NSA, especially the zone-based scheme, opens more opportunities for much better access to education for students who live close to schools. Zone-based NSA can bring students closer to school, which has implications for reducing education costs, increasing child safety, and increasing parents' comfort in monitoring their children. This finding is in line with previous studies

which explain that the zoning system reduces the distance to school (Rini Werdiningsih, 2023; Said et al., 2023).

The short distance results in no need for transportation and additional costs to get to school (Sabur et al., 2024). Some parents believe that since the zone-based NSA was implemented, this can reduce the number of traffic jams (Kaffa et al., 2021). This ease of access can create a sense of comfort for students to learn. Parents believe that this can reduce the chance of students being late for school (Amalia & Yani, 2021; Pulungan, 2019). On the other hand, determining access to education based on distance is also seen as making it easier for parents to choose a school. It has become much easier for students and people to choose schools that are closer to where they live.

### 3.2.1.2. Equal access to fair education

Apart from distance, parents also feel more equitable access to education as an impact of the NSA policy. Parents consider that access to education has become more universal/inclusive without looking at a number of prerequisites such as students' learning abilities/intelligence and children's economic abilities. The similar idea was conveyed by Alfian(2019) where the zone-based NSA policy prioritizes aspects of education that are non-discriminatory and fair. Parents also believe that with the zone-based NSA policy, children who come from underprivileged families or those who have low grades still have the opportunity to receive education at public schools for free (Risna et al., 2020).

*"Underprivileged communities can attend nearby schools within their zone, especially public schools." (M/43)*

Zone-based NSA can expand education access so students can attend the nearest public school regardless of their socio-economic status. This narrative also appears in the view that equitable access to education has increased due to the reduction in the academic competition system in the form of academic score selection (Arif, 2020). By promoting equitable education distribution without relying solely on academic scores, the zone-based NSA has provided significant advantages to the community, ensuring access to proper education and equal opportunities for all students to enroll in quality schools (Rasnan et al., 2021).

### 3.2.1.3. Providing access to education at favorite schools

Discourse regarding favorite schools due to the NSA policy varies among parents. The first perception is related to wider access for students to register to their favorite schools regardless of different learning abilities and economic backgrounds. Students who are closer to the favorite school will easily register to the favorite school, which previously was difficult to achieve due to the competition over favorite schools (Nurlailiyah, 2022). Parents explained that underprivileged children now have the opportunity to go to their favorite school, just like other children (Parameswara et al., 2022). This view reinforces that the perception of favorite schools still exists and is still a consideration for parents when registering their children to school (Habiby & Fiatun, 2020). This is proven by many narratives about the increased chances of students being accepted into their favorite schools because the schools are closer.

On the other hand, parents had different perceptions regarding favorite schools. They saw that with the existence of zone-based NSA, the label of favorite schools disappeared so that every child had the same opportunity to obtain the same quality education (I. A. P. R. Dewi, 2019). This happens because there are no prominent differences between favorite and non-favorite schools (Widyastuti, 2020). Apart from the debate about whether or not there is a favorite school label, some parents believe that the perception of more equal access to favorite schools is not completely wrong. A number of parents also believe that by opening up opportunities for their children to study at their favorite schools, they can provide opportunities for their children to learn better and can increase their

children's competence/intelligence. Therefore, regarding access to favorite schools, parents' perceptions of the positive impact vary.

#### 3.2.1.4. Encourage improving the quality of education

Apart from opinions about increasing access to education through zone-based NSA, research participants also considered that zone-based NSA policies could encourage improvements in the quality of education in schools. Parents believe that with no academic score requirements, smart children will no longer gather in just one school. This finding is in line with Perdana's (2019) study, which states that zone-based NSA can encourage equal input from students enrolled in each school. Zone-based NSA has implications for the disappearance of the school's exclusivity status as a result of many intelligent children entering the school (Risna et al., 2020). Apart from that, zone-based NSA also creates conditions for accelerating infrastructure development to improve the quality of equitable education, especially in rural areas (Saadah et al., 2023).

Furthermore, several parents see the opportunity for NSA to have a positive impact by increasing the distribution of educational quality in each school. This especially happens in outlying schools where infrastructure and applicant interest are insufficient. The demand for equitable quality reinforces the need to accelerate the development of supporting infrastructure in the education sector. The even distribution of applicants among schools can also improve the quality of education. With zone-based NSA, the number of applicants will not be concentrated in urban or favorite schools. In this way, the accumulation of applicants in schools in marginalized areas can also increase.

### 3.2.2. Negative Impact of NSA Policy

The Indonesian government established the NSA policy with a zoning system in the hope of supporting equal distribution of the quality of education in Indonesia. However, this does not necessarily have positive implications for the community (Purwanti et al., 2018). Several findings indicate that the NSA policy contains a number of weaknesses that impact the lack of inclusivity for students in accessing the rights they are entitled to. This is supported by Hardy & Woodcock (2015) who states that inclusion in educational policy is an issue fraught with complex challenges and problems. The negative effects of this policy are not only experienced by students but also affect the wider community (Ula & Lestari, 2020). This research highlights that the current NSA policy continues to generate various negative impacts within society.

#### 3.2.2.1. There is an act of fraud

Fraud in the implementation of NSA is still often found during the process. Fraudulent acts range from misuse of personal data to falsification of registration documents. The community carries out this act of cheating to increase the chances of being accepted at the target school (Putri et al., 2023). Moreover, the intended school is outside the student's domicile zone (Yasmin, 2023). Fraud also occurs in the selection process by giving different assessment weights and gratifications to internal school parties.

#### 3.2.2.2. Limited choice of schools

Residents in areas with a limited number of schools face restricted options for school choice, creating a disparity with communities where school needs are adequately met (Walker & Weldon, 2020). Geographic challenges further exacerbate this gap, limiting access to schools for some communities. Additionally, certain schools suffer from low enrollment due to a lack of applicants (W. E. K. Dewi et al., 2020). These negative impacts stem from a mismatch between school demand and availability, both in terms of access and quality (Ruijs & Oosterbeek, 2019). The issue is further compounded by the presence of "blank school spot" areas in Indonesia—regions lacking secondary school options, which impedes the implementation of a zone-based admission policy. This disparity is

significant, as some areas still have minimal or no school facilities at all (Kaffa et al., 2021). Such problems would be mitigated if school distribution aligned with the geographic and demographic characteristics of each community. Consequently, the NSA policy perpetuates disparities in school access, particularly by limiting school choice and leaving certain areas underserved.

### 3.2.2.3. Community stigma tends to reduce the quality of educational units

A negative societal stigma has emerged, associating the zone-based NSA policy with a perceived decline in school quality (Saadah et al., 2023; Widyastuti, 2020). The community views this decline as evidenced by reduced student enthusiasm for learning, diminished motivation to strive for admission to their preferred schools, and an increased reliance on the regulatory system.

*"What concerns me the most about the zone-based NSA policy is that it often reduces competition and motivation among students living near the school. As a result, they become less driven to study because they know there's a 90% chance of getting accepted, even with poor grades." (M/34)*

This sentiment suggests a potential decrease in the quality of educational institutions, as the policy may inadvertently discourage academic ambition and individual effort.

### 3.2.2.4. The emergence of child delinquency

The zone-based NSA policy is perceived to contribute to an increase in deviant behaviors and potential delinquency among students. This perception is linked to the policy's impact on social dynamics, where the diverse backgrounds of students create heterogeneous social interactions that may lead to various forms of delinquency (Amalia & Yani, 2021). While this diversity broadens students' social interactions, it also introduces a potential for social deviations, as students adapt to differing environments and characteristics. Such interactions may increase the likelihood of issues such as brawls, juvenile delinquency, and other disruptive behaviors (Maulana & Nugroho, 2019).

### 3.2.2.5. The emergence of digital problems

The community faces challenges with limited digital capabilities in the NSA process. Various issues arise in the zone-based NSA selection, including a lack of public understanding of IT applications and frequent system errors during the selection process. Specifically, one notable issue in the digital sector is inaccurate data synchronization within the selection system, further complicating the process (Safitri & Yusran, 2021).

## 3.2.3. Public Sentiment on NSA Policy

Policies cannot fully accommodate all interests, in fact, policies are always accompanied by acceptance and rejection. Essentially, the government's role through policy is to fulfill the public interest (Wijaya et al., 2020). A policy that is perceived by the public as conflicting with the public interest may lead to policy rejection (D. S. K. Dewi, 2022). The multitude of pros and cons of the NSA, especially the zone-based NSA policy, present various public sentiment. These sentiments can be classified into positive, neutral and negative views.

### 3.2.3.1. Positive sentiment on the policy

In general, the community perceives that the zone-based NSA policy has been implemented effectively, smoothly, and has provided satisfaction for parents. Several indicators are seen as positive aspects of this policy, including the improvement of educational quality equity, particularly in facilitating access to schools, including those considered as "favorite schools." This improved access aligns with the objectives of the zone-based NSA policy, which aims to ensure that quality education is accessible more equitably and without discrimination. This means that the zone-based NSA policy has

attempted to eliminate the perception of schools being considered favorites. The findings and studies of the Policy Research Center reveal several factors that make schools perceived as "favorite" by the community, such as school reputation, teacher quality, learning culture, school environment, accreditation, and completeness of school facilities (Joko et al., 2020).

Apart from that, this policy is also considered to ease the burden on parents from lower to middle economic groups. This is based on the fact that parents no longer need to spend extra money to enroll their children in private schools due to the increased opportunities to attend public schools (Habibah, 2023). Parents also do not need to spend more on transportation costs due to the proximity of the schools (Risna et al., 2020). The majority of parents from lower to middle economic groups do not have an orientation to enroll their children in favorite or leading schools but rather seek opportunities for easy and affordable access to education (Said et al., 2023).

### 3.2.3.2. Neutral views on the policy

Communities with neutral sentiment generally consider that the zone-based NSA policy is running well as it should but still has negative aspects that need improvement. In summary, the community expressed that this policy certainly has both positive and negative sides. Parents with this neutral sentiment can explain the positive impacts of the NSA policy but also feel some of the negative impacts arising from this policy.

### 3.2.3.3. Negative sentiment on the policy

There are several factors contributing to the negative sentiment of the community towards the NSA policy. First, there are a number of individuals falsifying documents, both family cards (Kartu Keluarga) and Certificates of Financial Hardship (SKTM), leading many parents to feel cheated. This condition often occurs when people desire their children to be accepted into specific schools (Yasmin, 2023). The cheating that occurred represents a form of social conflict stemming from parents' disappointment with the zone-based NSA policy (Putri et al., 2023). This disappointment serves as the beginning of conflicts between parents as guardians of students and schools as representatives of the government.

Second, the socialization of the zone-based NSA policy is perceived to be incomplete, both in terms of the offered mechanism and the required documentation. Additionally, the numerous administrative requirements need to be juxtaposed with parents' unfamiliarity with information technology. This condition aligns with previous findings that a lack of understanding of the NSA implementation mechanism is one of the obstacles in the field and resulting in schools lacking students (Nora, 2022).

Third, some parents' express concerns about their children's declining academic performance. The NSA policy leads to students becoming lazy to study under the assumption that they can more easily obtain their desired schools because selection is based on the distance from home to school rather than high grades (Yasmin, 2023).

Fourth, there is a disparity between the number of schools in an area and the unbalanced demographic conditions.

*"There is a policy that needs improvement. Some areas are affected by blind spots, meaning they are overlooked in the zoning mapping. Geographically, they are close to a certain school, but in terms of zoning distance, they do not meet the criteria. As a result, students from these areas generally end up attending private schools. This issue has persisted for three years without any policy adjustments."*  
(F/42)

This issue is also discussed by Nora (2022) in her research, stating that such conditions often make it difficult for prospective students residing in densely populated areas with minimal public schools to enter "favorite" schools, and vice versa. This has become a crucial issue because many parents still believe that "favorite" schools can provide a better education for their children, particularly in terms of

academic achievements, extracurricular activities, and success in various competitions, both academic and non-academic (Dahlia et al., 2023). Consequently, these negative views signal that the ongoing NSA policy still requires further improvement and review.

### 3.2.4. Expectations for NSA Policy

The NSA policy has received various responses from the public. The responses present point to three different public expectations. Agustino (2006) explains that differences in expectation for a policy can occur because of aspects that conflict with the existing value system. In the NSA policy, the response that emerged created public expectations regarding the sustainability of the policy. There are three public expectations regarding the NSA policy reflection, namely that it is completely removed, needs to be continued with improvements, and is fully continued.

#### 3.2.4.1. The Indonesia NSA policy is completely removed

Public opinion highlights several negative impacts associated with the NSA policy. By requiring students to attend schools close to their homes, the policy overlooks disparities in educational quality across regions, disadvantaging those in rural areas. This finding aligns with previous studies, which indicate that access to quality education is lower in rural areas compared to urban centers (Asriati, 2017; Suhelayanti, 2019; Syafii, 2018). Muhaimin et al. (2020) further emphasize that low teacher competency contributes to the subpar educational quality in remote areas. This perceived lack of quality reduces competitive learning environments, leading to decreased student motivation as they feel less compelled to excel academically. Research by Hidapenta et al. (2022) similarly notes that the zone-based NSA system, which prioritizes proximity over merit, results in lower motivation, as students place less value on academic achievement under the system.

Moreover, Furthermore, there is a call from the public to abolish the NSA policy, as it is seen as limiting parents' freedom to choose the best school for their children according to their individual preferences. This view is supported by Trimantara (2007), who stated that school selection is a crucial step for parents in Indonesia in shaping their children's future, considering that schools are a continuation of education at home. The quality of education offered by a school is one of the primary indicators in this decision-making process. Therefore, many parents perceive the NSA policy is viewed as exacerbating educational disparities rather than promoting equal access. Winarti et al. (2023) reveal that the NSA policy fails to achieve an equitable distribution of both access and quality in education, as "favorite" schools are perceived to offer more comprehensive learning experiences compared to standard schools. This perception of favouritism within the education system contributes to a societal push against the policy (Habiby & Fiatun, 2020).

Additionally, concerns have arisen regarding the NSA policy's impact on students' university prospects. Schools with lower educational quality, often tied to low accreditation, are seen as barriers to students aiming to qualify for the National Achievement-Based Selection (SNBP) for university entry. The SNBP quota system favors students from higher-accredited schools, with quotas of 40% for Accreditation A schools, 25% for Accreditation B schools, and only 5% for Accreditation C and below (Kemdikbud, 2024; Setyaningsih, 2017). Consequently, students from less prestigious schools have limited opportunities to qualify through the SNBP, forcing them to seek alternative admission scheme.

Furthermore, the NSA policy has been marred by reports of fraudulent practices during the selection process. According to education experts at UMM, the NSA system is prone to manipulation, such as officials placing students into preferred schools through unofficial channels (Yasmin, 2023). These acts of fraud undermine fairness and foster unhealthy competition, disadvantaging students who deserve admission based on merit.

These concerns, voiced predominantly by parents, underscore the public's hope for the immediate abolishment of the NSA policy. The criticisms largely center on two issues: equitable access to quality education and the integrity of the selection process. Addressing these concerns requires the government to enhance educational access, especially in remote areas, to ensure that all students receive

high-quality education regardless of their location. Additionally, stronger oversight of NSA implementers is essential to reduce fraud and ensure fair competition. Risna et al. (2020) argue that zone-based policies can effectively promote educational equality if all stakeholders adhere strictly to established regulations.

#### 3.2.4.2. The Indonesia NSA policy needs to be continued but with improvements

While many recognize the current shortcomings in the implementation of the NSA policy, this acknowledgment does not translate to a desire for its discontinuation. Instead, there is strong public support for targeted improvements to optimize the policy's future application. The community particularly stresses the need for enhancements in the registration selection process, which currently allows opportunities for fraudulent practices. A critical area of improvement involves strengthening the integrity of NSA implementers within schools, ensuring they are fair and impartial with all applicants by preventing nepotism, bribery, and other unethical behaviors. Additionally, there is significant need for improvements in the registration application's usability. Many parents report challenges with the online registration and login processes due to technical issues, causing some schools to resort to offline registration methods (Savitri & Rahaju, 2021). These technical barriers suggest that implementers have not fully prioritized user-friendliness in the system, underscoring the need for a redesigned application that enhances accessibility in future NSA process.

Concerns also extend to the equitable distribution of schools and educational infrastructure across Indonesia, as existing resources are not yet sufficient to support equal access to quality education (Kurniawati, 2022; Rajagukguk et al., 2023; Suncaka, 2023). Ensuring more widespread access to quality educational facilities is essential for sustainable success of the NSA policy. Furthermore, there is a call for rebalancing the admission quotas between zone-based and merit-based scheme. Currently, the merit-based scheme is only available if quotas for the zone-based, affirmation, and parent domicile transfer scheme remain unfilled (Permendikbud No. 1, 2021), which restricts high-achieving students' freedom to choose schools that align with their needs. Sihombing and Hadita (2021) argue that this restriction conflicts with the right to access a better education for outstanding students.

Another proposed adjustment is to expand the criteria regarding "distance" in the zone-based NSA policy. Due to uneven distribution of state schools across regions, prioritizing proximity has limited effectiveness. Wahyuni (2019) observes that distance-based prioritization is often problematic in areas with limited schools, resulting in student shortages at some institutions. These various deficiencies have become focal points for community and parental input, leading to widespread calls for NSA policy continuation with strategic improvements. By addressing these issues, the policy could achieve more effective implementation and ensure greater fairness for all involved parties in the coming years.

#### 3.2.4.3. The Indonesia NSA policy needs to be fully continued

Several parents and guardians express strong support for the full continuation of the NSA policy, particularly the zone-based mechanism. The community believes that the NSA policy reduces the need for students to compete through achievement-based admissions, thereby offering a more inclusive opportunity for students to attend schools within their locality. Prior to the implementation of the zone-based NSA policy, students residing near a school risked being denied admission due to intense competition, often excluding those who lived nearby. By maintaining the zoning policy, the government promotes more equitable and fair access to education, benefiting students across different social backgrounds. These findings align with previous studies, which have highlighted the zoning system's role in promoting equal access to education within communities (Arif, 2020; Widyastuti, 2020).

### 3.3. Policy Recommendation

The public debate surrounding the zone-based school admissions policy (PPDB Zonasi) in Indonesia highlights the need for further improvement by the Government. At the policy level, recommendations should focus on enhancing the policy to achieve higher levels of public acceptance. Based on the findings, several policy recommendations can be proposed for both central and regional governments. *First*, there is a need to improve access to schools through the provision of new public schools, particularly in areas with a limited schools (insufficient capacity). Limited access to education increases the level of competition within school zoning, which is also a root cause of policy violations by the community (Felicia et al., 2023).

A study by the Center for Education Policy Studies indicates that more than 46% percent of all regions in Indonesia face insufficient public school capacity (Felicia et al., 2024; Pratama et al., 2024). In these areas, children lack access to public schools, leading to intense competition and persistent NSA-related controversies. Additionally, improving the equitable distribution of education quality is necessary to build parental trust in enrolling their children in nearby schools. Conversely, fraudulent practices such as falsification of domicile documents will likely continue.

*Second*, adjustments to the school zoning system based on demographic factors are essential. Parents frequently complain about the limited availability of schools near their residences. In some cases, their homes fall within school blind spots, restricting the options available for school enrollment. Conversely, some schools experience low enrollment due to their distance from residential areas. A zoning system tailored to demographic conditions, including determining school zoning areas based on population density and school-age residents, is required. This approach would allow for dynamic zonation distances that align with regional characteristics, thereby addressing both low enrollment and limited school choice issues.

*Third*, increasing the intensity and efficiency of policy socialization to the public is crucial. Public acceptance of a policy is influenced by the clarity of its information. This is important to prevent misconceptions within the community. Campaigns promoting NSA Policy, founded on the non-discrimination school admission principle, should be intensified despite the policy having been implemented for over five years. Strengthening public outreach can enhance societal understanding of the objectives and vision of the PPDB policy, thereby fostering greater public acceptance.

*Fourth*, the government should reinforce law enforcement strategies to address policy violations, particularly those constituting criminal acts. Fraud within the zone-based NSA system is a criminal offense that can be legally prosecuted. Punishment procedure, such as the cancellation of students' admission status, can serve as a deterrent to parents considering fraudulent actions. Furthermore, a robust integrated monitoring system should be developed to detect violations early. This requires cross-sectoral collaboration involving agencies such as the Population and Civil Registry Office (*Dukcapil*), the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo), and Social Services offices (*Dinsos*). By implementing these recommendations, the Government can address the challenges associated with Zone-based NSA Policy, ultimately improving the policy's effectiveness and public acceptance.

## 4. CONCLUSION

After more than five years of implementation, the public's perception of Indonesia's NSA policies, especially the zone-based mechanism, remains mixed. Various polemics continue to influence public acceptance of these policies. Policy acceptance is largely driven by its positive impacts, such as expanding access to education in a more non-discriminatory manner, reducing biases based on social class. Conversely, policy rejection is primarily due to issues such as cheating, limited school availability, decreased motivation to learn, and systemic challenges still faced by the community.

The variation in public perception, particularly regarding support for the policy, highlights that despite the ongoing debates, there are positive impacts of the policy that cannot be ignored. Rather than

focusing the discourse solely on whether to continue or abolish the policy, it would be more constructive to direct discussions toward enhancing the policy's effectiveness and efficiency in implementation. Public acceptance of the policy influences views and expectations about its sustainability. There are three groups of people with differing hopes: those who wish for the policy to be completely abolished, those who want it to continue with improvements, and those who support its continuation in its current form. The findings in this research can serve as recommendations for stakeholders to improve the policy if the NSA policy is to be continued in the future.

Even though this research used a sequential explanatory mixed method, it had limitations in the process of collecting qualitative data, which was taken through an open-ended survey. This method has limitations in exploring qualitative findings. The hope is that future research can collect qualitative data through the in-depth interview method so that it can explore people's views on policies in more depth. The researcher also recommends that future researchers study the different aspects of NSA policies in each region.

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