HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS:
A framework for action
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Message from the Regional Director

Introduction

What is a health promoting school?

Advantages of a health promoting school

An analogy — A nurturing tree

Key factors

1: Healthy school policies

2: School’s physical environment

3: School’s social environment

4: Community links

5: Action competencies for healthy living

6: School health care and promotion services

Building support

Acknowledgements

Resources
Schools are some of the most strategic places to positively affect the health of children and young people. A health promoting school environment can serve as the foundation for a lifetime of healthy living. Children who attend health promoting schools will find it easier to build health promoting communities later on in life.

Having health promoting physical and social school environments, supported by good policies and an active and involved community is especially important for the World Health Organization’s Western Pacific Region, with its diverse cultures, socio-economic conditions and dietary habits. Although the concept of health promoting schools is gaining ground internationally, within our Region, schools are at different stages of implementing the concept and they also face different challenges: some health professionals and educators are struggling with basic needs, such as safe water and sanitation in schools, while others are fighting an uphill battle against the unhealthy diets that are being promoted to children.

“Health promoting schools—a framework for action” offers schools, parents, teachers, communities and other stakeholders the key principles and simple tools to help them create healthier learning environments. Ultimately, the Framework for Action hopes to enhance the work that is ongoing in the health and education sectors and to contribute to the achievement of other global commitments for child health that are embedded in Health for All, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals.

We hope this document will strengthen action to make every school a health promoting school. We also hope that it will motivate educators, school administrators and other relevant partners to take the bold steps necessary to achieve the highest standard of health now and for future generations.

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Introduction

Substantial evidence indicates that there is a strong link between early and equitable opportunities for learning and the health of children. Similarly, the extent of an individual’s education influences their health over a lifetime.

Governments have a primary responsibility to ensure that the conditions for schooling are the best they can be. These ideal conditions can be achieved by establishing health promoting schools. Health promoting schools organize and link different aspects of the learning environment, leading to improved student performance and better health outcomes in schools. Health promoting schools enable children to learn more about their own health and to transmit positive values to others. Children and young people can influence health of their families and communities as well.

Health promoting schools can be realized only through cooperation between the health and education sectors. Perhaps more important, parents and communities must also be actively involved, by ensuring that governments take action to build healthier schools for all children. Civil society, faith-based organizations, corporations and nongovernmental organizations are also stakeholders in the effort to advance policy for the universal adoption of the health promoting schools concept.

This document provides an evidence-based framework to assist the growth and development of the concept of health promoting schools in the Western Pacific Region. Its purpose is to provide guidance on key principles of health promoting schools. The document also outlines some simple tools that will help stakeholders assess, review and prioritize practical actions that will hopefully lead to effective strategies for establishing health promoting schools. Key stakeholders may use this monitoring tool as an entry point for mobilizing support for the programme, establishing projects and prioritizing actions.

The tool is not prescriptive but instead offers flexibility and freedom of interpretation for different contexts and resource settings. It is meant to be adapted to suit local needs.

The document is intended for use by a wide range of groups such as government ministries, particularly those for health and education, schools (school staff, teachers, students, parents), local governments, nongovernmental organizations and all those committed to improving the health and well-being of young people.

What is a health promoting school?

A health promoting school is one that constantly strengthens its capacity to function as a healthy setting for learning, living and working. A health promoting school allows all members of the school community to work together to provide students and staff with integrated and positive experiences and structures that promote and protect their health. Components of health promoting schools include formal and informal curricula in health; the creation of a safe, healthy and friendly school environment; the provision of appropriate health services; school health policies; and the involvement of the family and wider community in efforts to promote health.

The concept of the health promoting school is being developed internationally, with many countries working on programmes to support schools and their communities as they seek to achieve better health outcomes. The work on health promoting schools complements various World Health Organization (WHO) school-focused initiatives and provides the impetus for mobilizing and strengthening school health promotion and education activities at local, national, regional and global levels.

Health promoting schools must enable the school community to continuously improve its capacity to take action where necessary, while ensuring that positive change can be sustained. A school’s future should not be dependent on the enthusiasm and commitment of a few staff members or an individual school administrator. For this reason the proposed approach is to embed health promotion into school operations through policies, practices and structures.
Advantages of a health promoting school

Most schools already participate in some form of health promotion. In a number of countries, this involvement is not new. However, many of these efforts have been largely confined to the formal curriculum, ignoring other influences on students and staff which may improve their health status. The concept of health promoting schools offers the following advantages.

- It uses a holistic model of health, which considers the interrelationships between the physical, mental, social and environmental aspects of health.

- It can change the attitudes and behaviour of students towards positive, life-enhancing activities that are critical to improving their health and well-being and which contribute to social inclusion and social justice.

- It recognizes the significance of the physical environment (such as buildings, sanitation, fresh water, safe and nutritious food, play areas) in contributing to the health of children.

- It recognizes the importance of the social ethos of the school in supporting a positive learning environment that strengthens healthy relationships and the emotional well-being of students and promotes a sense of responsibility, achievement and self-worth.

- It links regional and local health services with the school to address specific health concerns that affect schoolchildren (such as worm infestations, sight and hearing problems, malnutrition, malaria, psychosocial stress).

- It focuses on active student participation in both the formal and informal curricula in order to develop a range of life-long health-related skills, knowledge and practices.

- It enhances equity in education and health by raising the health competencies of girls, women in the community and children with special needs.

- It provides a positive and supportive working environment for school staff.

- It enables the school, the local community and the health sector to collaborate in health initiatives that benefit school students, their families and community members.

- It involves families by encouraging their participation in the development of their children’s health skills, knowledge and practices.
The concept of a health-promoting school can be envisaged as a nurturing tree. The roots of a tree provide a strong foundation, deeply grounded in evidence. Its sturdy trunk connotes the unwavering strength and support the school provides in health promotion and protection to its surrounding communities. The branches which provide shade represent the six key factors that are fundamental to a positive and healthy learning environment for students and the school community. These are as follows:

**Healthy School Policies**
School policies should be documented and approved practices influencing the school’s actions in promoting health and well-being of its students, staff, families and the wider community.

**School’s Physical Environment**
A school should provide a safe, secure, clean, sustainable, conducive and healthy environment for learning.

**School’s Social Environment**
The school’s social environment should foster good relationships among and between students, staff, parents and the wider community.

**Community Links**
There should be connections and partnerships between schools, families, communities, organizations and other stakeholders.

**Action Competencies for Healthy Living**
These should be formal and informal curricula for students to gain age-related knowledge and life skills.

**School Health Care and Promotion Services**
The school has access to and provides health care and promotion services.

The leaves on each branch represent key components and checkpoints to ensure that every aspect of health promotion and protection is covered and taken care of. They also shield and protect the students from unhealthy and harmful elements which they may encounter outside of the school premises.

The flowers and fruits are results of good nourishment (policy, decisions) and with the cooperation, support and sustenance of the birds and the bees (parents and external communities), cross-pollination occurs ensuring continuous and sustained synergy and growth.

The tree needs constant nourishment from other supporting elements such as the sun (government) and water (NGOs, teachers, parents and other stakeholders). With proper nurturing and care, the tree will flourish and eventually bear healthy flowers and fruits depicting healthy students and staff. These healthy students and staff ultimately personify the continuous regeneration and propagation of a healthy community and a healthy nation.
KEY FACTOR 1
Healthy school policies

Where relevant, the school has documented policies or accepted practices on the following:
- healthy and safe food
- preventing use of tobacco, alcohol and substance abuse
- equitable access to school resources for boys and girls
- distribution of medication
- first aid
- sun protection
- health screening
- closure in the event of emergencies/crises
- safety plan in the event of emergencies/crises
- control of parasitic and infectious diseases and their safe management
- democratic and participatory education by ensuring opinions of students are considered
- limiting exposure to media and marketing strategies for products/services which pose a risk for health
- control of partnerships with external organisations that may sell products and provide services which affect the health of students
- establishing and sustaining a healthy, friendly and safe environment.
KEY FACTOR 2

School’s physical environment

The school:
- provides a safe, secure and healthy environment
- provides adequate sanitation and water
- upholds practices which support a sustainable and energy efficient environment
- if it provides food, ensures it is safe and nutritious
- encourages students to take care of the school facilities and natural environment
- endeavours to enrich learning by ensuring the physical conditions are the best that they can be.
KEY FACTOR 3

School’s social environment

A school’s social environment fosters good relationships among and between students, staff, parents and the wider community.

The school:

- promotes the mental, spiritual, emotional, financial and social resources of students and staff
- creates an environment of care, trust and friendliness
- provides appropriate support and assistance to students who are at a particular disadvantage
- provides a fully inclusive environment in which all individuals are valued and differences are respected
- is responsive to the educational needs of teachers and parents and how these can influence the well-being of students.
KEY FACTOR 4  
Community links

Community links are connections and partnerships between the school and the students' families, key local groups and individuals.

The school:
- fosters family and community involvement
- is proactive in linking with its local community.
KEY FACTOR 5

Action competencies for healthy living

Students gain age-related knowledge and skills which enable them to build competencies in taking action to improve the health and well-being of themselves and others.

- The curriculum approaches health issues in a coherent and holistic way.
- The curriculum is designed to improve students’ understanding about health issues and to provide age- and developmentally appropriate opportunities for them to develop and apply skills in addressing these issues at the individual, family and community levels.
- Teachers are adequately prepared for their role as key participants in health promoting schools.
- Teachers and students gain knowledge and understanding of media messages related to health, and competencies in analysing the messages.
- Schools facilitate learning opportunities about healthy living in the local community and society in general.
KEY FACTOR 6

School health care and promotion services

- Local and regional health services responsible for child and adolescent health care and promotion are provided to schools.
- Basic prevention, promotion and protection health services are available to students and staff.
- Local health services contribute to the school’s health programme.
- Health services contribute to teacher training.
Becoming a health promoting school requires engagement and collaboration by multiple sectors working jointly towards:

- engaging health and education officials, school staff, teachers, students, parents and community leaders in efforts to promote health
- providing a safe, healthy environment, both physical, mental and social
- providing effective skills-based health education
- providing access to health services
- implementing school policies and practices that support health
- striving to improve the health of the community.

Education and health can be mutually beneficial, and nurturing this interaction will ensure that investments in schools will bring the greatest results.

The important first step in building support is to share ideas about how your community can take action. Creating a task force for planning, implementation and monitoring at the local level may help you get started.

In order to launch the health promoting school initiative, we have developed a Monitoring Tool Kit for your school to track your progress. The kit includes a monitoring tool, a health promoting school tree poster and a sticker booklet.
Resources

WHO Resources

Food safety education – 5 keys to safer food
http://www.wpro.who.int/health_topics/food_safety_education

Global School Health Initiative
http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/gshi

Health Promoting Schools
http://www.who.int/healthy_settings/types/schools

Health Promoting Universities
http://www.who.int/healthy_settings/types/universities

Healthy Settings
http://www.wpro.who.int/health_topics/healthy_settings/

School health and youth health promotion
http://www.who.int/school_youth_health

WHO Collaborating Centre to Promote Health Through Schools and Communities
http://www.hhd.org

Other organizations

Australian Health Promoting Schools Association

Queensland Health Education – Storybook of Success Stories

Registry of Health Promoting Schools in the Western Pacific
http://www.healthyschoolregistry.org

UNESCO – Focusing Resources on Effective School Health.

UNICEF – Life Skills
http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/

From WHO Information Series on School Health
http://www.who.int/school_youth_health/resources

Creating an environment for emotional and social well-being

Family life, reproductive health, and population education

Healthy nutrition

Improving health through schools: national and international strategies

Local Action: Creating Health-Promoting Schools

Malaria Prevention and Control

Oral health promotion through schools

Preventing HIV/AIDS/STDs and related discrimination

Promoting physical activity in schools

Skills-based health education and life skills

Strengthening interventions to reduce helminth infections

Sun protection

Teacher’s exercise book for HIV prevention

The physical school environment

Tobacco use prevention

Violence prevention