

WHY INVEST IN HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS?

POLICY BRIEF

MAKING EVERY SCHOOL A HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL

Children and young people spend a significant proportion of their time in schools, which play a big role in their development. The physical and social aspects of schools influence students' norms, values, and health-related behaviours, often leaving a lasting impact on their lives. Within this environment, they can also learn to become responsible, informed, and constructive citizens.

However, EU countries are grappling with declining levels of basic skills amongst students. One-third of fifteen-year-olds struggle to understand and apply mathematics in real-life situations, and one-fourth fail to understand basic texts or apply simple scientific knowledge.¹ Overweight and obesity levels amongst children and young people across Europe are stagnant at best, or increasing, amidst insufficient rates of physical activity.²

Studies also reflect more problematic use of social media amongst girls and gaming amongst boys³ as well as an overall worsening of mental health and isolation among adolescents since the COVID-19 pandemic⁴. Such worrying trends are further impacted by the growing inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged students, reflecting that education systems are unable to deliver on equity.⁵

The need for school environments to support health and wellbeing is clear. However, achieving this requires close collaboration across sectors and actors, especially in the fields of health and education. Numerous research outcomes demonstrate that students who feel good in school and are healthy have better school attendance levels, academic outcomes, and prospects.^{6,7} When children and young people feel and do better, societies can flourish.





A promising solution: The Health Promoting School Approach

Health promoting school (HPS) approaches are an important entry point for cultivating healthier educational and social environments, providing a framework for closer sectoral cooperation. HPS approaches include but go well beyond the provision of health education and health services in schools. A health promoting school deeply incorporates health and wellbeing into its policies and culture. It is “a school that is constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning, and working”,⁸ contributing to all domains of wellbeing.

The HPS approach is a well-established and effective model first developed and supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) over 30 years ago. In Europe, it was advanced continuously by the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network, which aims to ‘make every school a health promoting school’. The approach involves the whole school community, including pupils, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and parents, who take on an active role in decision-making and activities.

THE SIX PILLARS OF THE HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL APPROACH

Healthy school policies	Clearly defined documents or accepted practices designed to promote health and wellbeing.
Healthy school physical environments	Including the school building, grounds, and surroundings.
Healthy school social environments	High quality of relationships between school staff, students, parents, and the broader community.
Health skills and education	Implementation of curriculum and activities that increase the knowledge and skills of students, teachers, and school staff, while also promoting actions related to health, wellbeing, and educational attainment.
Links with parents and the school community	Collaboration with community stakeholders to support HPS efforts and support the school community in their health promoting actions.
Access to school health services	Local and regional services that are responsible for the pupils’ healthcare and health promotion.

These six pillars overlap with the eight global standards of Health Promoting Schools (Figure 1), which also focus on government, school policies, and resources within the context of their commitment to and investments in HPS.



Figure 1: The Eight Global Standards for Health Promoting Schools (Image based on WHO Implementation guidance – Making every school a health promoting school)

Lastly, the HPS approach is built on three key principles:

1. **Equity:** Ensuring that all students have equal access to health promoting activities and resources, regardless of their background or circumstances.
2. **Sustainability:** Developing long-term strategies that ensure health promoting activities are maintained and integrated into the school culture and contribute to broader sustainability goals.
3. **Participation:** Working with various stakeholders, including health services, local authorities, and community organisations, to support and enhance health promoting activities.

Investing in better health in schools to improve the quality of education generates high returns. **One review found that health promotion interventions have a median cost-benefit ratio of 14.4**, which means that every €1 invested gives a return of €14.⁹ Another study also highlighted the cost-effectiveness of comprehensive health promotion programmes, with a return on investment of 824%¹⁰ through the avoidance of direct healthcare costs.¹¹

Providing schools with the tools and incentives to better promote health and educational outcomes—such as well-resourced national networks and additional funding—can have a positive impact on both our economies and societies. HPS also contribute positively to their communities by, for instance, providing opportunities for social connection, good quality employment, procuring goods and services, and promoting greener urban planning policies.

Excellence requires political will

Two-thirds of European countries have a strategy for health promoting schools,¹¹ but implementation varies greatly, and most of these efforts are focused on primary schools. In most countries, implementation is voluntary, and strategies are underfunded and underemphasised in the face of other priorities. Additionally, challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical crises have and are diverting resources away from schools, contributing to one of the largest reductions in education investment.¹² As a result, schools generally face limitations in resources, time, and expertise to become health promoting environments.



Policies and initiatives supporting HPS approaches

At the international level, there is a wide range of policy initiatives aimed at making every school a health promoting school.

WHO Europe and UNESCO initiatives

- WHO and UNESCO developed a comprehensive guidance package on HPS for governmental agencies to make every school a health promoting school. This package covers [global standards and indicators](#),¹³ [implementation guidance](#),¹⁴ [country case studies](#),¹⁵ and [guidelines on school health services](#).¹⁶ UNESCO and its global partners will also publish a handbook on integrating health and wellbeing into education policy and planning.¹⁷
- WHO is currently updating its [European Child and Adolescent Health Strategy \(2015-2020\)](#).¹⁸ Among other priorities, this strategy encourages the implementation of health promoting school approaches as an important measure of success for educational systems. In 2024, WHO also developed 'Child and Adolescent Health in WHO Europe' factsheets,¹⁹ spanning relevant health topics.
- The [Schools for Health in Europe \(SHE\) Network](#)²⁰ is a network of experts focused on making HPS an integral part of policy development in the education and health sectors. The network also developed a range of guidance tools for implementation.
- The [Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children \(HBSC\) study](#)²¹ is a WHO cross-national study conducted every four years with 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds in schools. Its findings inform policies and practices to improve young people's health and wellbeing.

EU initiatives

- The [European Education Area](#)²² aims to connect high-quality education systems and integrate mobility into students' and teachers' learning, with [factsheets](#)²³ on socio-emotional learning, mental health, bullying, digital spaces, and teacher wellbeing for schools.
- The [2022 Pathways to School Success Council Recommendation](#)²⁴ encourages EU Member States to reduce early school leaving, address underachievement, and promote wellbeing through improved physical and mental health.
- The [European Commission Expert Group on Well-being at School](#)²⁵ developed [guidelines](#) for policymakers and schools to implement a whole-school approach to wellbeing.²⁶
- The [Healthier Together Initiative](#)²⁷ helps Member States reduce non-communicable diseases through coordinated efforts.
- The European Commission's [comprehensive approach to mental health](#)²⁸ includes 20 initiatives for Member States, with a focus on children and young people.
- The [EU Best Practice Portal on Public Health](#)²⁹ helps Member States, organisations, and schools to access and submit evidence-based practices, including school-based interventions.
- The [European Child Guarantee](#)³⁰ supports Member States in developing accessible health promotion and disease prevention programmes for vulnerable children, their families, and professionals working with children.
- EU funding opportunities can support educational actions at the national, regional, and local level, e.g. the Resilience and Recovery Funds, Technical Support Instrument, EU4Health, and Erasmus+.



Examples of promising initiatives

SPAIN – National and Regional Commitment to Health Promoting Schools



In Spain, health and education responsibilities have been transferred to regional governments, making collaboration between national and regional levels crucial. The importance of the health promoting school model became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a renewed focus on this area.

Spain has made significant progress by fostering collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Health to promote a comprehensive approach to school health, covering physical, psychological, social, and environmental aspects. Teachers benefit from micro-training programs offered by the National Institute of Educational Technologies and Teacher Training and are equipped with tools to integrate health in education, such as the [Health Promoting Schools Guide](#)³¹ (developed by an intersectoral working group that includes multiple ministries).

Spain also supports health promoting initiatives through funding, awards, and recognition schemes. Additionally, the Ministries of Education and Health will coordinate a network of regional health promoting school networks.

Several regions have already adopted and adapted the health promoting school model to fit their specific contexts. Since 2015, for example, Andalusia has implemented an HPS programme in public schools, supporting more than 1,191,000 primary and secondary students in the 2024-2025 academic year. Since 2023, the HPS programme has been integrated as an area of knowledge in the Andalusian Programme for Innovation and Improvement of Learning. This well-implemented programme involves collaboration among the health, education, social services, and agriculture sectors and has been positively received.

SLOVENIA - Network of Health Promoting Schools



For over 30 years, the Slovenian Healthy Schools Network has united schools committed to promoting and enhancing the health of everyone in the school community—students, teachers, and parents—through activities addressing physical, mental, social, and environmental health.

The Slovenian Healthy Schools Network, a member of the Schools for Health in Europe Network since 1993, has been coordinated by the National Institute of Public Health from the very beginning. Starting from 12 pilot schools, the Slovenian network has grown significantly. It now includes over 436 schools and boarding schools— 339 primary schools (74.4% of all primary schools), 71 secondary schools (46% of all secondary schools), 9 boarding schools (25.7% of all boarding schools), and 17 institutions for children and adolescents with special needs. Healthy schools involved in this network adopt a holistic approach, integrating health topics into the curriculum and engaging the community, with regular activity reports published annually.



BELGIUM (FLANDERS) – Promoting health and wellbeing in Flemish Schools



Flemish educational goals require integrating health promoting actions into the curriculum. Schools have the flexibility to choose the extent to which they want to include health-related topics. Primary schools tend to focus on physical education and social competencies, while secondary schools tend to address health, social and cultural awareness, digital skills, and sustainability.

Since 2018, schools have been required to develop, implement, and evaluate a student guidance policy under the “Student Guidance” Decree. This decree provides a framework for schools to monitor, maintain, and improve the health of children and young people. Collaboration between health and education ensures schools can adopt an integrated, effective health policy that supports students’ wellbeing and development.

Another policy lever is the Flemish Prevention Strategy, which sets the objective that 80% of primary and secondary schools should have a preventive health policy in place by 2025. This objective aims to increase attention to areas like healthy eating, physical activity, and tobacco and alcohol use. This is addressed through four strategies: health education, environmental interventions that modify the school’s physical and social environment to encourage healthy lifestyles, implementing agreements and rules within the schools, and providing support and guidance to students in collaboration with the Centre for Pupil Guidance.

THE NETHERLANDS – Promoting health and wellbeing in schools: key policies and the Healthy School Programme



The 2015 Social Safety Act requires schools in the Netherlands to meet health promotion standards, including mandatory physical activity for all students and creating a socially safe environment. Additionally, schools are encouraged to participate in voluntary programs, such as the Healthy School Programme ‘Gezonde School’.³² This programme aims to make healthy lifestyles the norm for pupils and students by supporting education professionals to apply the Healthy School approach. It focuses on various themes, including exercise, sleep, wellbeing, nutrition, smoking prevention, and environmental issues, with the cross-cutting pillars of building supportive education environments and monitoring and identifying unhealthy behaviours.

Moreover, the GALA (Gezond en Actief Leven) Agreement, initiated by the Ministry of Public Health, Wellbeing, and Sport, promotes cross-sectoral cooperation between municipalities, health services, insurers, and government ministries to implement integrated prevention policies. These efforts aim to achieve common health goals by 2040 and encourage the widespread adoption of programs like the Healthy School Programme.



ROMANIA – Building capacities to implement the HPS approach at the local, regional, and national level



In September 2024, Romania took a major step forward in adopting the health promoting school approach by introducing a translated version of the SHE manual. Two pilot schools from Cluj County received training, as part of the Schools4Health project, on integrating health and wellbeing into their curricula using the SHE manual's five-step approach.

Other events were organised by the National Institute of Public Health in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, involving local, regional, and national-level stakeholders and authorities, including the Minister of Health. Key discussion outcomes emphasised the need for closer collaboration between the health and education sectors and the importance of a national strategy for health promoting schools.

The National Institute of Public Health plans to refine the SHE manual and host a national conference in 2025 to further promote school health strategies across Romania.

HUNGARY – A comprehensive approach to school health promotion



Hungary has implemented a comprehensive school health promotion programme,³³ established through policies like the Act CXC of 2011 and Decree No. 20/2012 of the Minister for Education. Launched in 2003 and institutionalised by 2012, the programme integrates health promotion into daily school life through a whole school approach, focusing on healthy eating, physical education, mental health, and health literacy. A digital toolkit supports teachers with resources and teaching plans on topics such as navigating the digital world, healthy environments, health services, physical activity, social relationships, and healthy nutrition, building a healthy future and prevention of harmful habits (e.g., smoking).





Calls to action to make every school a health promoting school

1. Recognise the value of health promoting school approaches as a cost-effective and efficient strategy that can improve both educational and health-related objectives.

- **CONTEXT:** The European Commission's 2024-2029 Political Guidelines call for "a radical step change [...] for all types of training and education" to help the EU navigate an uncertain international context, while ensuring social inclusion.
- **ACTION:** Policymakers and people working across health and education systems must make the case to prioritise investments in "making every school a health promoting school". Children and young people's physical, emotional, and social wellbeing as well as their academic outcomes are interlinked and can be optimised simultaneously by ensuring positive learning environments.

2. Refine and strengthen mandatory requirements and frameworks to integrate the health promoting school approach into education strategies and provide schools with adequate resources to implement this.

- **CONTEXT:** While two-thirds of European countries have a strategy for health promoting schools, implementation varies greatly, as it is generally voluntary and strategies are underfunded and deprioritised.
- **ACTION:** Policymakers in health, education, and social sectors must address barriers to investing in HPS, such as weak legislation, overloaded curricula, and funding gaps. They should design policies that ease the workload of teachers and staff, involve them in policy creation, and improve collaboration across sectors. Strategies should also allocate funding for HPS coordinators to support and scale programs at the local, regional, national, and European levels.

3. Encourage and enable school leaders to embed health promoting school strategies in their school policies and to support relevant initiatives.

- **CONTEXT:** Support from school leaders to embed health promoting strategies in school policies is a prerequisite to consistently ensure school environments that prioritise student wellbeing.
- **ACTION:** School leaders are encouraged to take up relevant training programmes (found on the [Schools4Health Hub](#)) and establish committees with representatives of the school community (students, teachers, school nurses and other staff members, and parents) that are responsible for designing, implementing, and assessing health promoting school initiatives. School leaders would also need to support teachers, who need to be trained accordingly to achieve health and wellbeing outcomes of children at different stages of development.



4. Strengthen the momentum of health promoting schools by investing in communities of policy, research, and practice.

- **CONTEXT:** The Schools4Health partnership aims to create renewed momentum around health promoting school approaches by engaging, in practical ways, policymakers and school communities across the project's policy, practice, and communication workstreams.
- **ACTION:** Interested stakeholders are urged to collaborate to (re)-engage ministries of health and education across Europe. We must work together to scale HPS approaches at the national, regional, and local levels, while strengthening the evidence base on their effectiveness in achieving health, education, and social policy goals. Participating in conferences, e-twinning programs, webinars, and social media is equally essential to raise awareness, share knowledge, and promote good practices on health promoting schools at the EU and subnational levels.



Schools4Health aims to make every school a health promoting school that prioritises the health of everyone in the school community. It strives to introduce, strengthen and sustain the adoption of a whole-of-school approach to health and wellbeing. It engages 16 schools across the EU with special consideration for school settings in deprived areas. To learn more about Schools4Health, go to schools4health.eu.

The Schools4Health policy briefs bring together lessons learned that can support the adoption of health promoting schools approaches, as well as specific best practices in the areas of food, physical activity and mental health that contribute to the approach.

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