

# HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS AS A LEVER FOR EQUITY IN EDUCATION

## POLICY BRIEF

### MAKING EVERY SCHOOL A HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL

Equity in education—defined as the attainment of educational achievements irrespective of the learner’s background—is increasingly facing significant challenges. Recent outcomes of international assessments, including [PISA scores](#)<sup>1</sup> and the [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study](#),<sup>2</sup> demonstrate an overall decline in student wellbeing and academic performance. [Disadvantaged children and youth](#)<sup>3</sup> are often impacted the hardest, as limited access to supportive resources can lead to lower wellbeing, poorer academic results, and greater exposure to harmful environments.<sup>4</sup>

These challenges not only affect today’s young generation. They also have long-term consequences for education systems and societies at large. A [study on fairness](#)<sup>5</sup> reflects how inequalities in education continue to be passed on across generations, as education systems are unable to take adequate measures to break existing patterns. Instead, existing systems tend to reinforce social inequalities rather than resolve them.

In the education sector, this is evident in the persistent divide between private and public schools – particularly in disadvantaged areas, where public schools are under-resourced and face numerous competing demands, making it challenging to implement effective health and equity initiatives.

Addressing inequalities during these formative years is particularly powerful in the school setting, as it lays a strong foundation for healthier, more equitable outcomes across the lifespan.





## What is needed to break the cycle of disadvantage and deliver on equity in education?

While schools and education systems alone cannot resolve the deep-rooted structural causes of educational inequalities, such as those linked to socioeconomic status or geographic location, their ability to mitigate and prevent these disparities depends directly on the actions of governments.

It is therefore imperative that governments take the lead in guaranteeing that all children and young people attend school and have equitable access to high-quality, inclusive education. In this regard, evidence<sup>6</sup> shows that full-day kindergarten and universal access to early education—especially for children from low-income and minority backgrounds—not only boost academic achievement but also lead to long-term health benefits,<sup>7</sup> with each additional year of education associated with a reduced risk of mortality<sup>8</sup> in adulthood.



Governments must ensure that **all students, regardless of their background, have access to quality education and school settings that support their social and physical wellbeing**. To achieve this, a proportionate universalism approach should be applied, as part of wider efforts, to ensure that all schools offer safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments, while directing additional support to schools and students who need it most.

One example of proportionate universalism is France's priority education policy,<sup>9</sup> which strengthens support in schools facing the greatest social challenges to reduce inequality. Another is the data-driven 'weighting scheme' in the Netherlands,<sup>10</sup> which, since 2019, has provided funding to better support children at risk of disadvantage. It is crucial to recognise that the effectiveness of these schemes hinges on addressing the deep-seated systemic and structural factors that widen the inequality gap.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, proportionate universalism approaches should be seen as a critical part of broader collaborative measures to reduce such educational disparities.

Achieving greater equity in education also requires **recruiting a diverse teaching workforce and offering both new and current educators high-quality training programmes** that equip them to apply inclusive practices that address the varied backgrounds and needs of their students. Fostering a positive school climate and strengthening student-teacher relationships are equally crucial for promoting student engagement and academic success, as they create a safe, supportive environment where students feel valued and motivated to learn. Social and emotional learning initiatives, for instance, help schools build these environments by promoting respectful communication, emotional regulation, and consistent, positive interactions between students and educators.



Schools should actively collaborate with parents and caregivers, including those from socioeconomically challenged backgrounds, by involving them in programmes that support children and adolescents' learning and development. Recognising the challenges of parents' work schedules, schools can offer flexible participation options, such as evening meetings or virtual workshops, to ensure all families can engage. When families are involved in school decisions, support learning at home, and collaborate with teachers, it can significantly improve students' academic success and wellbeing,<sup>12</sup> especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Above all, reducing inequalities in education is a **shared societal responsibility** that extends beyond schools alone. To be effective, education systems must be supported through strong collaboration with other sectors—such as health, social services, and housing—as well as community organisations. Only through coordinated, cross-sectoral efforts can we create the equitable environments children need to thrive.

*This kind of meaningful collaboration reflects broader societal beliefs about the role of education, since “the activity of teachers as well as the organisation of the school systems are directly connected to [...] society’s values and ways of thinking about what is a good education”.*

*Schools for Health in Europe Network (School health promotion factsheet – Evidence for effective action)<sup>13</sup>*





## Health Promoting Schools: an evidence-based framework to advance equity

Guiding frameworks such as the Health Promoting School (HPS) approach,<sup>14</sup> grounded in the core values of equity and inclusion, can help ensure that all children benefit from an environment that supports learning, health, and social development.

The Health Promoting School approach offers a holistic framework that emphasises meaningful participation and multistakeholder cooperation, addressing the crucial link between health, learning, and equity. Equity is not only a goal of HPS but also a foundational condition for its success. This is further highlighted in the WHO and UNESCO Guidance on implementing the HPS approach,<sup>15</sup> which sets out that education systems must be inclusive for all the members of the school community—including students—throughout the whole process of becoming a health promoting school. Key factors such as the structure of the education system, teaching methods, the learning environment, student assessment, teacher skills and attitudes, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum all play a part in integrating equity into school practices.



To this end, each of the eight global standards<sup>16</sup> of the Health Promoting School approach\* offers opportunities to strengthen equity by addressing the diverse needs of the school community, as exemplified below.

	EQUITY CONSIDERATION	EXAMPLE
<b>STANDARD 1: GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND RESOURCES</b>	Develop national policies that guarantee all students – especially those from underserved communities – have equal access to quality education and health-promoting resources. Policies should embed non-discrimination and cultural sensitivity, and adopt a ‘proportionate universalism approach’.	A government forms a multi-sector committee, encompassing education, health, and social services, to coordinate a national HPS policy framework. As part of this, additional funding and staff are allocated to rural schools with limited resources, ensuring students in these areas benefit equally from health promoting initiatives.
<b>STANDARD 2: SCHOOL POLICIES AND RESOURCES</b>	Design school policies that actively address the diverse needs of all students. Ensure resources are distributed fairly to support inclusive participation.	Schools enrol in relevant (EU, national, or locally-funded) schemes to ensure that students from low-income families receive essential support, such as free or subsidised textbooks, reliable internet access, and nutritious school meals, so they can fully engage and participate in learning alongside their peers.

\* More information on the Health Promoting School approach and global standards can be found in the Schools4Health policy brief on ‘Why invest in Health Promoting Schools?’



	EQUITY CONSIDERATION	EXAMPLE
<b>STANDARD 3: SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP</b>	Foster leadership structures that are inclusive and representative of the entire school community, including students, parents, and staff from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, to ensure decisions reflect all voices.	A school establishes an HPS working group that includes representatives from different backgrounds and community leaders. This team co-develops school health priorities and ensures that policies and practices respond to the varied needs of the school population.
<b>STANDARD 4: SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS</b>	Build inclusive partnerships that actively involve marginalised and underrepresented community members. Ensure that collaboration reflects local needs and supports culturally relevant, equitable approaches to health and education.	The school partners with an organisation offering migrant education support to provide professional development for teachers on culturally responsive teaching strategies.
<b>STANDARD 5: SCHOOL CURRICULUM</b>	Design curricula that are culturally responsive and inclusive, using diverse content, materials, ideas, and assessment methods to address students' varied needs, while actively involving them in the development process.	The school tailors the curriculum to meet different learning styles, incorporating a range of modalities (text, audio, and visual aids) to engage students in a more inclusive manner with the material. It also integrates students' cultural backgrounds by using relevant examples, fostering discussions on different perspectives, and creating opportunities for students to share their unique experiences.
<b>STANDARD 6: SCHOOL SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT</b>	Foster a supportive environment that meets the social and emotional needs of all students. Additionally, prioritise the wellbeing of teaching staff, recognising that their health and morale are essential to maintaining a positive and supportive school atmosphere.	The school incorporates life skills training for both students and staff, focusing on self-awareness, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, teamwork, and effective communication, thereby empowering the entire school community to collaborate effectively.
<b>STANDARD 7: SCHOOL PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT</b>	School facilities must be accessible for all students. Address physical and environmental barriers that may disproportionately affect certain students, and promote well-maintained, safe, and inclusive spaces.	Regulations and funding are in place to ensure schools have the necessary infrastructure for students with mobility challenges, such as ramps and handrails. Additionally, schools provide inclusive signage and designated quiet spaces to support students with sensory needs.
<b>STANDARD 8: SCHOOL HEALTH SERVICES</b>	Provide health services that are accessible to all students, who can benefit from essential healthcare and support services.	A mobile health clinic visits the school weekly to provide students in remote areas with medical checkups, mental health support, and preventive care.



# Policies and initiatives supporting equity in schools

## WHO Europe

- The [European Child and Adolescent Health Strategy](#)<sup>17</sup> (2015-2020), currently being updated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents across the socioeconomic gradient in the region. It highlights the importance of preschools and schools as target settings to implement whole-of-school approaches to health.
- The [Schools for Health in Europe \(SHE\) Network](#)<sup>18</sup> is a European platform for school health promotion, providing guidance on Health Promoting Schools as well as equity, with a dedicated factsheet on 'School health promotion – Evidence for effective action on inequalities'.<sup>12</sup>
- The [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) study](#), conducted in collaboration with WHO/Europe, provides data on the health behaviours and social contexts of young people. It pays particular attention to inequalities, exploring how factors like gender and socioeconomic status affect outcomes.

## EU Initiatives

- The [Council conclusions on inclusive, learner-centred practices in early childhood education and care and school education](#)<sup>19</sup> invite Member States to promote inclusive education cultures through a whole school approach that values diversity, fosters respect, and encourages collaboration among students, families, and educators.
- The [Pathways to School Success Recommendation](#)<sup>20</sup> aims to improve educational outcomes by enhancing basic skills, reducing early school leaving, and promoting wellbeing, regardless of students' backgrounds. It emphasises a whole school approach, early detection of at-risk students, holistic assessments, and professional development.
- The [Education and Training Monitor 2024 tool](#)<sup>21</sup> offers key data on [equity in learning outcomes](#)<sup>22</sup> across Europe, highlighting the impact of a learner's socioeconomic background. It underscores the risks of neglecting inequalities and their detrimental effect on students' academic performance.
- The [EU Child Guarantee](#)<sup>23</sup> aims to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights, such as healthcare, education, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing.
- The [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#),<sup>24</sup> adopted in 2021 and developed with input from over 10,000 children, ensures the protection of children's rights at the EU level, including the right to health and quality education, and secure access to basic services for vulnerable children. The strategy includes the launch of the [EU Children's Participation Platform](#)<sup>25</sup> in 2022 to embed children's voices in EU decision-making.
- The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)<sup>26</sup> outlines 20 key principles and rights essential for fair and inclusive societies. These include access to education, healthcare, childcare, housing, and social protection, thereby also helping children and young people to grow up in supportive environments that promote health and wellbeing.
- The [EU school fruit, vegetable, and milk scheme](#)<sup>27</sup> provides free fruit, vegetables, and milk products to children in schools across the EU, together with educational activities on healthy eating and agriculture. It aims to improve children's diets, shape healthy eating habits early on, and reduce inequalities in access to nutritious food.



## Examples of promising initiatives

### FINLAND – Multiservice schools in Finland, a model for integrated support in education



Multiservice schools in Finland showcase how integrated service delivery can support equity in educational settings. In fact, multiservice schools go beyond conventional education, offering a variety of health, social, and community services. Children benefit from free and high-quality education, as well as free meals, recreational activities, and access to a variety of health and social services directly in the school setting.<sup>28</sup> These services are provided universally to all primary school children, thereby ensuring access to essential services regardless of socioeconomic background.

An important feature of multiservice schools is the use of multiprofessional teams. These include school nurses, educators, social workers, and psychologists who work together to coordinate plans tailored to the individual needs of the students, which is particularly important for children facing disadvantage.<sup>29</sup> Multiservice schools, therefore, not only strengthen early intervention but also ensure that barriers linked to poverty, social exclusion, or health disparities are addressed within the school setting.

### SCOTLAND – Whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing



Scotland's national 'Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing' framework,<sup>30</sup> launched in 2021, provides a comprehensive, child-centred, rights-based, and preventative framework to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. It is embedded in national policies and legislations that recognise the importance of early support, inclusive education, and tackling disadvantage. Key underpinning policies include Getting it Right for Every Child,<sup>31</sup> which enshrines the right of every child to receive the right support at the right time, the Curriculum for Excellence,<sup>32</sup> which makes health and wellbeing a 'responsibility of all', and the National Improvement Framework,<sup>33</sup> which aims to reduce the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged children and young people. The framework is also grounded in mental health policies, such as the Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan,<sup>34</sup> which highlights the importance of early intervention, anti-stigma efforts, and access to rights-based mental health services.

The framework outlines eight core principles of a whole school approach to support mental health and wellbeing, placing a strong emphasis on whole community engagement. Schools are encouraged to work closely with local authorities and community mental health services, while also embedding wellbeing across the curriculum and school culture. The framework also explicitly recognises the importance of additional support for children living in poverty or facing prejudice.



## EUROPE – Inclusive Healthy Lifestyle Groups in Schools (IHLGiS)



The Inclusive Healthy Lifestyle Groups in Schools (IHLGiS) project (2022-2025)<sup>35</sup> is a strong example of equity in action, focusing on promoting healthy lifestyles in schools for students with and without intellectual disabilities (ID), seen in Poland, Greece, the Berlin area, and Estonia.

By forming inclusive peer-to-peer groups supported by trained mentors and health experts, the project ensures that young people with intellectual disabilities—who often face structural barriers to health information and activities—can fully participate in school-based health promotion, aiming to improve health outcomes and longevity of people with ID. Over the course of three years, the project is training 200 Youth Leaders and 100 mentors to run inclusive, healthy lifestyle groups for 4,000 young people with and without ID in 100 schools, addressing diverse needs and strengthening social inclusion.

## GREECE – Tackling food insecurity through a whole school approach: the DIATROFI Food Aid and Promotion of Healthy Nutrition Programme



The DIATROFI programme<sup>36</sup> in Greece is a national school-based initiative that promotes equity by addressing food insecurity and encouraging healthy eating habits in schools.

Launched in 2012 by the Prolepsis Institute, DIATROFI targets public primary and secondary schools in socioeconomically vulnerable areas and regions affected by natural disasters. The programme provides free, nutritious daily meals to students throughout the entire school year, while also delivering educational materials and activities that promote healthy eating habits.

A core strength of DIATROFI lies in its whole school approach. The Programme actively involves the entire school community from the outset. Students, parents, and teaching and non-teaching staff all play a role in implementing and evaluating the programme, which is an important aspect of meaningful involvement and a core principle of the HPS approach.

Since its launch in 2012, the programme has distributed over 18.7 million meals to more than 198,580 students in 941 schools across the country. The results gathered so far indicate that in schools where the programme is implemented, food insecurity has decreased by 36%, along with the rate of underweight, overweight, and obese children.

Children's eating habits have also improved, and teachers have observed a reduction in school drop-outs and a strengthening of social bonds within the school environment. The DIATROFI programme therefore helped reduce social and health inequalities, while also building healthier food environments in schools.



## SPAIN – Promoting social cohesion and peer learning through the ‘Momentos Disfrutas’ programme in Andalusia



The ‘Momentos Disfruta’ programme, implemented in Andalusian secondary schools, exemplifies how HPS initiatives can address both social and educational inequalities within diverse school communities.

As part of the Schools4Health project, five schools are implementing an adaptation of the Snack & Chill practice (*‘Momentos Disfruta’*<sup>37</sup> in Spanish) in the Andalusian context. This practice aims to promote the consumption of healthy snacks among adolescents by serving them in an attractive way and in spaces within high schools. ‘Momentos Disfruta’ is being carried out with the participation and support of various entities, including Regional Ministries of Health, Education, and Agriculture, as well as city councils and parent associations. The project also fosters inclusive peer learning and promotes social cohesion, with students leading the preparation of fruit-based snacks.

One of the participating schools, IES Atenea, is in an area of social transformation. It serves a diverse student population, including young people from various ethnic and national backgrounds, foster homes, and groups facing significant family, economic, and social difficulties.

The students participating in the ‘Momentos Disfruta’ programme are enrolled in the Specific Basic Vocational Training in Cooking and Catering course. Many of them have cognitive or physical disabilities. The programme offers them an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the school community, interact with their peers, and build their confidence and self-esteem. In doing so, the initiative promotes not only better nutrition but also social inclusion and equity, addressing the gaps often found amongst underserved groups.



# Calls to action for healthy schools for all

Addressing health and wellbeing in schools is not only beneficial but also essential for creating equitable education systems. Health Promoting Schools can contribute to narrowing the gaps in health and learning outcomes, particularly for students who face disadvantage. By embedding health into the fabric of school life, this approach can provide the conditions for all children and young people to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The following recommendations outline key actions to strengthen the role of schools as inclusive, supportive environments where every learner can benefit from a fair and positive start in life.

## 1. Identify and measure patterns of inequity among children and adolescents – both within and between schools – to inform the development of targeted policies and programmes that effectively address these disparities.

- **CONTEXT:** Persistent disparities in health and education outcomes reflect broader structural inequalities. Without reliable, disaggregated data, these inequities remain hidden, limiting the impact of policies and practices in responding effectively to the needs of the school community.
- **ACTION:** Governments and schools must collaborate to make equity a core principle in all education and school health frameworks, using evidence-based, inclusive policies and practices designed to reduce disparities across diverse student populations. Policymakers should put in place monitoring and reporting frameworks to track progress and adapt interventions where needed, using tools such as the equity assessments and participatory action research involving students to identify and mitigate inequalities in education.

## 2. Allocate funding and resources to underserved and disadvantaged schools, ensuring both universal and targeted support.

- **CONTEXT:** Schools in marginalised areas often face structural challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, staff shortages, and limited access to health promoting programmes. Such challenges restrict their ability to implement comprehensive Health Promoting School strategies.
- **ACTION:** Policymakers in health, education, and social sectors need to make the case to the respective Ministries of Budgeting and Finance to direct sufficient financial and material resources to all schools, particularly those in more deprived areas or with fewer resources. This can include utilising funding at the EU level (e.g., Recovery and Resilience Funds, European Social Fund, Cohesion Funds), as well as other funding mechanisms at the national or local level. Investments should cover infrastructure, staffing, and inclusive health programmes.



### 3. Engage families and communities as active partners in school health and equity efforts.

- **CONTEXT:** Social and economic conditions outside the classroom deeply affect student wellbeing and learning. Schools cannot address these complex challenges alone. Local authorities, for example, tend to have a great understanding of the interconnected nature of health, equity, and education and the contextual barriers hindering progress.<sup>38</sup> That makes them central to engaging the communities they represent.
- **ACTION:** Local authorities should actively engage with schools to develop strong partnerships with parents, local communities, and cross-sectoral stakeholders. This can be achieved by organising online or in-person meetings, workshops, and community forums that bring together families, educators, and local organisations to discuss and align on student health and equity initiatives. By facilitating early and consistent communication, local authorities can build a shared understanding and commitment to creating health promoting environments.

### 4. Train school staff on inclusive, equity-focused education and health approaches.

- **CONTEXT:** Teachers and school staff play a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive environment, yet they often lack the knowledge and tools to address inequalities in practice.
- **ACTION:** The education sector must integrate training on equity, inclusion, and the social determinants of health into both initial teacher education and ongoing professional development to ensure all staff understand the impact of systemic disadvantages on students. These accredited courses should be accessible to all educators, helping them develop culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and gender-sensitive practices. To guarantee participation, the training should be incorporated into professional development requirements and supported by flexible options, such as online modules and dedicated time during working hours, to ensure accessibility for all teachers.

### 5. Educate and engage students in peer-led, equity-focused school and community programmes.

- **CONTEXT:** Peer-led programmes offer students an opportunity to actively participate in promoting inclusion and equity within their school communities. Yet, many communities lack structured initiatives that empower students to take on these roles.
- **ACTION:** Local authorities, in collaboration with schools, should establish and support peer-led programmes focused on equity and inclusion, such as homework buddy systems, inclusive sports, arts activities, and community outreach initiatives. These programmes should promote collaboration among students of diverse backgrounds and abilities, empowering them to take leadership in fostering a more inclusive environment. To ensure their success, these programmes must be integrated into the school's broader curriculum and supported with training for both students and staff on these inclusive practices.



**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](https://schools4health.eu).

Schools4Health brings 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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