

# NAVIGATING EDUCATION AND WELLBEING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## POLICY BRIEF

### MAKING EVERY SCHOOL A HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOL

The places where children and adolescents learn, play, and socialise are increasingly shifting to the digital space. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transition, pushing more aspects of our lives online. As a result, technology is increasingly woven into the fabric of both learning and leisure, shaping how children and young people grow and engage with the world around them.

When safe, online platforms can offer valuable opportunities for creativity, connection, and education. Children and adolescents can be empowered to express themselves, strengthen relationships with their peers, and access knowledge like never before. Unsafe online platforms, however, can have a detrimental effect, exposing children and adolescents to harmful content such as cyberbullying, violence, and unrealistic or unhealthy lifestyles.<sup>1</sup> Trends in Europe show that excessive use of social media is on the rise, from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, highlighting an increase in harmful digital behaviours.<sup>2</sup>

Prolonged screen time, often driven by highly stimulating platform design and content, can impair cognitive, linguistic, physical, and social development. It has been linked to shorter attention spans, sleep disruption, increased risk of obesity and mental health conditions, as well as a decline in real-life interaction and social skills, like managing conflict and discomfort.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, issues faced online may also spill over into offline environments where children and youth typically gather, such as schools. Research shows, for instance, that there are clear links between cyberbullying and difficulties such as lower school attendance, poor academic performance, and even health complaints.<sup>4</sup>





The negative effects of problematic digital use are particularly pronounced among groups in more vulnerable situations, such as children from low-income households or those living in unstable home environments. These groups often lack access to safe online spaces, including moderated educational platforms, privacy protections, and digital tools designed to support wellbeing and inclusion.<sup>5</sup>

As digital spaces continue to shape childhood and adolescence, ensuring safe, equitable, and supportive online environments must become a shared priority across sectors and society.

## What is the role of schools in promoting safer online experiences?

As digital spaces become integral to students' social, educational, and emotional lives, fostering health and wellbeing in schools must also encompass their online experiences. It is therefore essential to support schools in their role as bridges between the physical and digital environment, providing children and youth with the tools to develop healthy digital habits, such as responsible social media use, online safety, and critical thinking.<sup>1</sup>



School-wide policies that provide clear guidance on responsible device use by teachers, students, and parents are just one example of how schools can contribute to fostering a safe and secure digital environment.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on 'responsible use' is key. While limited, findings suggest that, for instance, blanket restrictions on mobile phones may not be the answer, bringing about other challenges or tensions in the classroom. Alternatively, a comprehensive approach that prioritises digital learning, enhances teachers' understanding of online pedagogical tools, and supports students' learning infrastructure can be more effective.<sup>7</sup> Striking this balance is especially important given concerns about distractions from personal devices, with nearly half of 15-year-olds in OECD countries leaving notifications on during class.<sup>8</sup>

Teachers, in particular, play a role in encouraging this wider view of healthier online experiences.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, targeted professional development in ICT and digital safety is essential, especially considering that many educators have reported feeling uncertain about how to navigate online challenges.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as children's digital lives extend beyond the classroom, better links between schools and families can help extend the impact of healthier digital habits, such as screen-free evenings or viewing online content together, to the home environment.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to highlight that awareness-raising and digital literacy efforts carried out by schools are only one piece of the puzzle. **These efforts remain insufficient if not accompanied by legal frameworks that mandate online service providers to design and deliver safe, age-appropriate services as well as national (or sub-national) policies that sustainably embed digital wellbeing and training in education structures.**<sup>11</sup> Collective action across the education, health, digital, justice, and technology sectors, guided by evidence-based frameworks, is therefore a must. Frameworks that promote this type of systemic change can also reinforce the involvement and support needed by schools to build digital resilience among children and adolescents.



## How can the Health Promoting School framework help identify digital safety risks and facilitate the implementation of effective measures in educational settings?

The Health Promoting School (HPS) approach<sup>12</sup> provides a structured, intersectoral framework to help education systems create environments that foster wellbeing.\* By embedding health-promoting practices into the school culture, HPS can support the implementation of national, EU, and global standards designed to safeguard children, especially in the digital space. More concretely, the global HPS standards and indicators, developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNESCO, can help signal the key priority areas for action and multistakeholder collaboration, as further explored below.<sup>13</sup>



### Digital skills and literacy

#### WHO/UNESCO Global Standard 5 for HPS: digital and life skills as part of health education

Teaching students to navigate digital platforms safely, assess online content critically, and protect their data is key to building resilience against online harms such as cyberbullying, exploitation, and misinformation. The HPS framework encourages schools to integrate digital skills into curricula, while also supporting teacher training – an urgent need cited across countries.<sup>14</sup> Promoting these skills in an age-appropriate, cyclical manner supports students' long-term wellbeing and autonomy.

### Healthy physical and social environments

#### WHO/UNESCO Global Standards 6 and 7 for HPS: safe and inclusive digital learning spaces

The HPS model encourages schools to maintain safe, inclusive learning environments—both offline and online. This can include developing smartphone-use policies, promoting screen-free zones, and implementing safeguards in digital learning platforms, such as activating security settings to prevent exposure to harmful content and selecting platforms that are accessible to students with diverse needs. Coupling these with mental health support and awareness-building around responsible digital use further strengthens students' sense of safety and connection.

\* For more information on the Health Promoting School approach, check out the Schools4Health policy brief 'Why invest in Health Promoting Schools?'



## Participation and students' voice

### WHO/UNESCO Standard 4 for HPS: meaningful student involvement in school policy and planning

Meaningful student participation is essential for designing relevant and effective digital safety policies. The HPS approach promotes student agency, encouraging children and youth to shape rules, report concerns, and take part in peer education. Consultations across Europe show that adolescents want protection without exclusion, and transparent, child-friendly communication from platforms and policymakers.<sup>15,16</sup> Schools can model inclusive consultation processes that elevate all voices, especially those of disadvantaged groups that are often excluded from national debates and disproportionately impacted by unequal access to digital spaces.

## Links to health and support services

### WHO/UNESCO Standard 8 for HPS: access to health services that meet students' physical, emotional, psychosocial and educational healthcare needs

Schools are often settings where signs of digital distress, such as anxiety from online harassment or tech overuse, can be identified. By strengthening the connection to essential health services, the HPS model can provide a framework for students to be better supported in receiving the care they may need. It can help schools respond collectively to cyberbullying, gaming addiction, or digital trauma through school-wide plans that are co-developed with education and health actors.

## Beyond the school gate

### WHO/UNESCO Standard 1 for HPS: multi-sectoral collaboration beyond the education sector, through a 'whole-of-government' approach to promote health and wellbeing

Aggressive marketing of unhealthy food and drink products, algorithmic amplification of harmful content, manipulative design features, and the lack of child-safe defaults can directly undermine children and adolescents' wellbeing. Protecting the younger generation from these harms requires cooperation between government, industry, civil society, regulators and communities. School communities<sup>17</sup> (comprising of students, staff, and families), should also be involved in multi-stakeholder dialogues, advocating for systemic reforms that prioritise children and adolescents' rights in the digital ecosystem.



# Policies and initiatives supporting a wellbeing-focused approach to digitalisation in schools

## UNESCO and WHO Europe

- The European Child and Adolescent Health Strategy (2015-2020), currently being updated by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, recognises schools as key settings for implementing health-promoting approaches that support children's overall development, including in digital contexts.<sup>18</sup>
- The WHO policy brief on 'addressing the digital determinants of youth mental health and well-being' calls for the integration of public health strategies to safeguard young people's mental health in an increasingly digital environment.<sup>19</sup>
- The WHO manifesto for 'making the WHO European Region the healthiest online environment for children' outlines a vision for reshaping digital environments through regulation, education, and industry accountability, urging governments to act on children's digital rights and wellbeing.<sup>17</sup>
- The WHO/UNESCO Global Standards for Health Promoting Schools and Implementation Guidance include specific standards on digital health literacy and equitable access to safe, inclusive digital learning environments, positioning digital wellbeing as integral to a whole-school health strategy.<sup>17</sup>

## EU Initiatives

- The European strategy for a better internet for kids sets out a rights-based approach to ensure all children can enjoy safe, age-appropriate, digital experiences through stronger protections, digital literacy, and participation mechanisms.<sup>20</sup>
- The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) promotes high-quality, inclusive digital education and supports the development of digital skills in learners and educators, recognising the importance of safe, effective digital environments in schools.<sup>21</sup>
- The Digital Services Act establishes clear obligations for online platforms to manage illegal and harmful content, enhance transparency, and protect minors online, including rules around algorithmic accountability and default safety settings.<sup>22</sup>
- The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child includes a dedicated thematic area on digital rights, ensuring children are protected online, empowered with information, and meaningfully involved in shaping the digital services they use.<sup>23</sup>
- The Council conclusions on promoting and protecting the mental health of children and adolescents in the digital era urge action to safeguard children's mental health online through safer digital design, stronger reporting tools, media literacy and collaboration with industry, educators, families, and local actors.<sup>24</sup> By the end of 2025, the European Commission will also put together a panel of experts to shape Europe's strategy to tackle children's safety online.<sup>25</sup>
- The EU Action Plan against Cyberbullying (expected in 2026) will focus on the protection of minors, while also addressing broader aspects such as the gender dimension and more vulnerable groups up to the age of 29.<sup>26</sup>



## Examples of promising initiatives

### IRELAND – FUSE – a whole-education approach to online safety programme



FUSE is Ireland's first research-based anti-bullying and online safety programme for primary and post-primary schools, developed by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre. Grounded in over 25 years of prevention research, it connects the entire school community to address bullying and promote online safety.<sup>27</sup>

Aligned with UNESCO's whole education approach,<sup>28</sup> FUSE supports the social, personal, and health education and wellbeing curricula and helps implement Ireland's national Anti-Bullying Action Plan, Cineáltas.<sup>29</sup> Delivered through teacher-facilitated lessons and resources, FUSE builds students' capacity to understand their behaviour, identify bullying and online safety risks, and confidently seek help. With over 400,000 students participating, evaluations show 83% know who to ask for help, 81% feel more confident recognising online harassment, and 79% feel empowered to speak out about bullying.<sup>30</sup>

### ROMANIA – Ora de Net – a national initiative for safe and responsible internet use



Ora de Net is a national programme in Romania promoting digital citizenship and the safe, creative use of the internet for children and adolescents. Launched in 2008, it combines online safety education with support services, including a helpline and reporting line for harmful content.

The programme offers training and resources for parents, teachers, and specialists to empower them as digitally competent facilitators. It also supports online safety in schools through training sessions and peer-to-peer activities, often in collaboration with Save the Children Romania and accredited by the Ministry of Education.

Since its launch, Ora de Net has reached over 650,000 children and 175,000 parents and teachers, providing personalised support to 11,200 children and processing over 30,500 complaints, the largest coalitions that promote the principles of digital citizenship worldwide.<sup>31</sup>



## FINLAND – KiVa - creating a school culture that prevents bullying



KiVa is a research-based anti-bullying programme developed at the University of Turku, Finland, with funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The world's most studied anti-bullying programme, KiVa has proven effectiveness through large-scale trials. Launched nationwide in Finland in 2009, it addresses both face-to-face and cyberbullying through prevention, intervention, and monitoring.

The programme uses a whole-school approach, with a curriculum, online games, and tools for addressing incidents. Annual surveys track bullying, school climate, and wellbeing, providing feedback to schools. The KiVa team, consisting of teachers, resolves bullying cases and collaborates with classroom teachers. Family materials ensure a coordinated approach.

KiVa has significantly reduced bullying and victimisation, with 98% of victims reporting improved situations. Positive impacts on school climate, motivation, and achievement have also been observed. KiVa has been expanded and evaluated internationally, showing its effectiveness beyond Finland.<sup>32</sup>

## ITALY – Generazioni Connesse - Safer Internet Centre



Generazioni Connesse, Italy's Safer Internet Centre,<sup>33</sup> is part of the European Safer Internet Programme<sup>34</sup> and promotes safer internet use among children, parents, and teachers. Coordinated by the Ministry of Education, it involves 12 national partners specialising in digital safety and education.

The initiative encourages schools to adopt e-Safety policies addressing digital skills, online safety, and ICT use, while outlining prevention and intervention measures for harmful digital behaviours. In addition, Generazioni Connesse runs awareness campaigns on topics, providing guidance on the digital aspects that can risk wellbeing, including online additions and body shaming. It also recognises the importance of creating a safer, more inclusive, and participatory digital environment, where children and young people are not only protected, but also actively listened to, valued, and empowered. The programme further fosters youth involvement by establishing a Youth Panel, where young people (ages 14-20) co-create resources, act as peer educators, and contribute to national and European digital policy discussions.





# Calls to action to support schools in strengthening healthy digital spaces

The following recommendations outline key actions for policymakers, local authorities, and schools to collaboratively improve digital safety and mental health outcomes for children and adolescents.

## 1. Create stronger regulatory frameworks with direct input from schools and students

**CONTEXT:** Schools witness firsthand how harmful platform design and digital manipulation affect students' mental health but lack the authority to mitigate these risks alone. Policymakers and local authorities should ensure that school staff and students are formally included in digital policy consultations and multi-stakeholder dialogues. They should be empowered to share on-the-ground insights, as experts in navigating the digital space, to shape more effective regulation on platform design, data practices, and online harms.

### **ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:**

- Establish structured consultation mechanisms (e.g. national or municipal advisory boards) that include school leaders, educators, and students as experts on the topic, to inform, influence, and shape digital regulation that puts health and wellbeing at the forefront.
- Collect and compile anonymised case studies from schools on online harms (e.g. cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and harmful content) to inform child and adolescent-specific regulatory design.
- Ensure school staff and students are represented in national discussions on age-appropriate design, AI in education, and platform accountability under frameworks like the Digital Services Act.

## 2. Provide schools with guidance and infrastructure to support digital wellbeing

**CONTEXT:** Schools need clear, actionable standards and resources to promote safe digital engagement and protect student wellbeing in an increasingly online world. National and local authorities should co-develop and disseminate practical guidelines, tools, and funding with the involvement of schools to implement digital wellbeing programmes—covering curriculum, teacher training, reporting mechanisms, and collaboration with parents and communities.

### **ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:**

- Develop or strengthen national guidance on digital wellbeing in schools aligned with existing education and health promoting standards (such as the Health Promoting School framework).
- Fund local training programmes to build educator and school staff capacity in digital safety, literacy, and managing online risks affecting student mental health.
- Provide infrastructure grants to improve access to safe and secure digital tools, ergonomic equipment, and confidential reporting systems for digital harms.





### 3. Strengthen national data systems by integrating school-level insights

**CONTEXT:** Current data on children's digital practices is fragmented, lacks nuance, and often excludes younger age groups or the school perspective. Governments should invest in coordinated data collection efforts that include schools as key data sources. Schools can contribute contextualised information –on digital habits, observed impacts on learning and social behaviour, and student feedback– to inform national monitoring and evidence-based policy.

#### **ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:**

- Include considerations around student digital practices, perceptions of online risks, and impacts of digital technology policies in schools in regular school-based surveys (e.g. Health-Behaviour in School-aged Children survey,<sup>35</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment,<sup>36</sup> national well-being reports).
- Develop digital reporting templates or dashboards for schools to share anonymised trends on screen time, tech-related behavioural issues, and support needs.
- Ensure children's views are captured through participatory tools (e.g. digital focus groups and peer-led surveys), with special outreach to disadvantaged student groups.

### 4. Enable schools to act as hubs for digital literacy and cross-sector collaboration

**CONTEXT:** Schools are uniquely positioned to reach children, families, and communities, and can help embed consistent digital literacy and safety practices across sectors. Local authorities and policymakers at sub-national or national level should support schools in building partnerships with child and youth services, mental health providers, and digital companies. Schools should leverage this network to develop internal policies and practices that promote responsible technology use and digital literacy, collaborating with families to reinforce these practices at home.

#### **ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:**

- Facilitate local partnerships between schools and mental health services, digital literacy NGOs, and municipal workers to deliver joint programmes and referrals.
- Enforce EU and national standards that regulate tech companies to co-develop age-appropriate digital tools that prioritise privacy, safety, and ethical tech use.
- Launch community-based digital literacy campaigns involving schools, libraries, parent associations, and local media, tailored to diverse audiences.

**ACTION FOR SCHOOLS:** Embed digital literacy into school curricula and daily practices, ensuring that lessons on responsible tech use are reinforced through policies on smartphone use, screen-free zones, and collaboration with families to create consistent digital safety routines at home and school.



**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.

The Project is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HaDEA). Neither the European Union nor HaDEA can be held responsible for them. This policy brief was developed by [EuroHealthNet](https://eurohealthnet.eu) in collaboration with the Schools4Health Partnership.



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