

From Awareness to Action

Making Every School a Health Promoting School

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 Schools4Health

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Health Promoting Schools as foundations for a resilient society

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Speaking notes

Welcome,

This Conference marks the end of the Schools4Health project, but **our main focus is on how we can continue to strengthen the links between education and health and integrate health in schools.**

The health-promoting school approach is **not simply about adding health** as an extra subject to the curriculum. It is about **weaving health into the very fabric of school life.** As we will hear a bit later this morning, the health promoting school **movement started almost four decades ago, but slowed in recent years**, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic and events that followed.

Our aim is to revive and strengthen its momentum.

Because when schools cultivate wellbeing, they support things like **concentration, motivation and performance.**

Imagine a school where every child and young person and their teachers feel safe and supported, where adequate physical activity, healthy eating, kindness and inclusion are a normal part of school life. Where mental health is valued, and every student, regardless of background, has a fair chance to thrive.

That is the vision that we are here to act on.

Because research shows that **when students feel better, they do better**

A good example comes from the “Healthy Primary Schools for the Future” programme that was piloted in the South of the Netherlands. It introduced **one hour of physical activity and a free healthy lunch each day.** Evaluations

found that **math scores improved and BMI levels dropped**. There were also **additional benefits: fewer conflicts, less bullying, and wellbeing improved**. The programme also **reduced inequalities**, since all students benefited regardless of background. In one city, **students had 25% fewer contacts with health care services**.

Such impacts extend beyond the classroom. One often cited review found that every euro invested in such public health programmes brings back about fourteen euros -and this doesn't even take into account potential savings to healthcare systems.

So why aren't such programmes that integrate health happening everywhere?

Particularly when **basic academic performance is declining or stagnating** in many European countries, and **mental health among young people is deteriorating**. **Teacher wellbeing also remains well below average for other professions, and stress and burnout remain very high**, even if the situation has **improved somewhat**, following the COVID-19 crisis.

Yet the declines in **academic outcomes mean that schools are under more pressure than ever to perform** -and they are **rarely evaluated on health or wellbeing outcomes**. As a result, **initiatives that promote health are seen as distractions** from core subjects such as reading and mathematics. In many countries, education budgets are being cut, and these kinds of initiatives are the first to go.

The same kind of situation is happening at the EU level, where health and education are competing with many other priorities and at risk of losing out.

We know, however, that health and education systems are **of foundational importance** to achieve the EU's current priorities, like **competitiveness, security, preparedness, resilience, and skills**.

So we must challenge the idea of health as an add-on or a distraction for schools, and embrace it as an essential resource for learning and a solution.

Again, this is **not about adding health topics to the curriculum**.

It is about engaging students, teachers, and communities in an ongoing process of **reflecting on what aspects of school life can be improved**, in relation to, for example, its health policies, physical or social environment.

And then **engaging the school community in shaping actions that address their main concerns**, and in **implementing and assessing them**.

When students grow up in schools that model participation, wellbeing, and respect, they carry those values with them into society.

Throughout the course of the day, we will **explore what tools, programmes, and strategies exist at the international, national, and local levels that can help turn the vision of making every school a health promoting school into action.**

First, we will hear from **international organisations, like the World Health Organization,** where the health-promoting school **concept originated.**

We will also hear from representatives of the **European Commission** on **how EU instruments can support action.**

Then we will hear from **public officials, experts, and school principals and staff, some of whom have considerable experience integrating health in schools, and others who have just begun to focus on this.**

They will share their **experiences, lessons learned, and what they feel is needed** to support every school on this journey.

So I hope that we will all inspire one another today and **connect** and leave here with an even **greater commitment and determination to act, to make every school a health promoting school, as a key approach to a better future.**