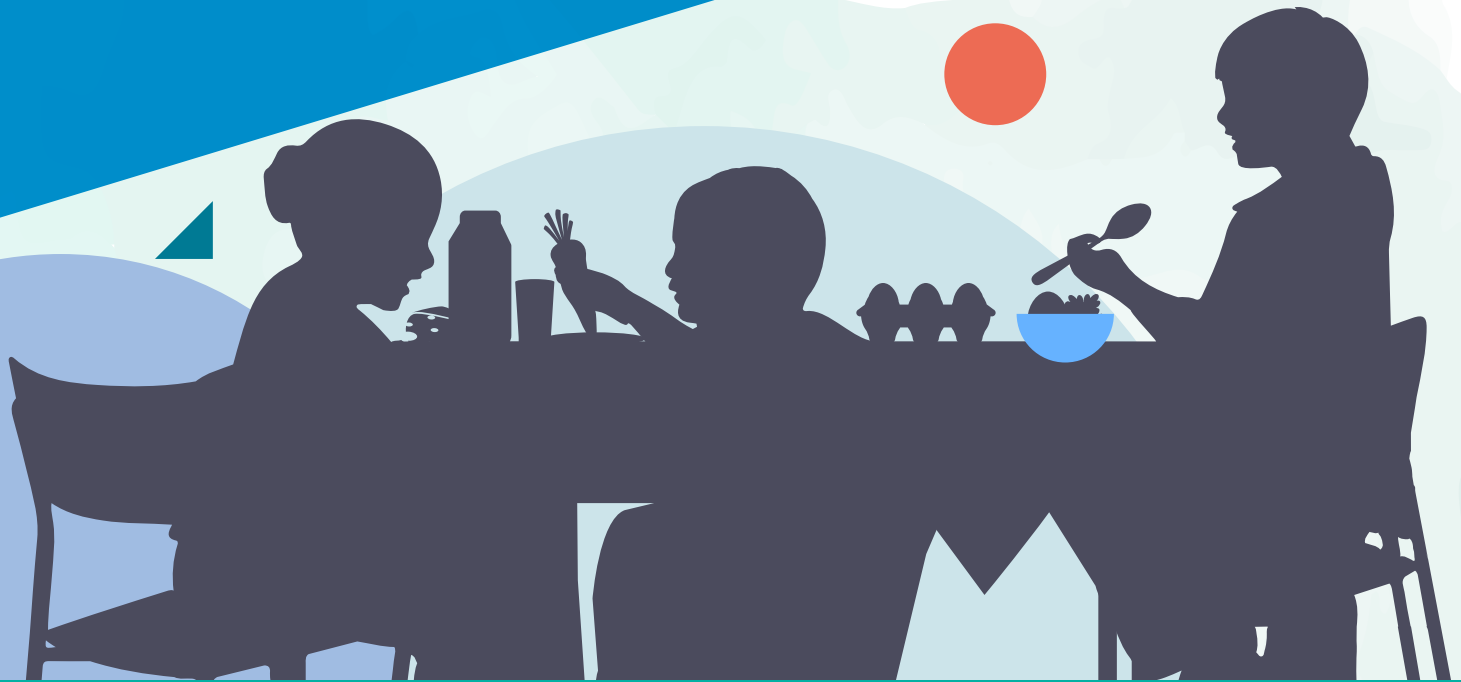




## HOW SCHOOL SYSTEMS CAN IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



### Background

Schools play a key role in providing safe, nurturing learning environments that provide the foundation for learners to grow, learn and become healthy, educated and engaged citizens.

#### What is a health-promoting school?

Health-promoting schools (HPS) are schools with strengthened capacity to be healthy settings for living, learning and working. HPS reflect a whole-school approach, comprising healthy school policies, curricula, environments, communities and health services. A comprehensive school health programme aims to make every school a health-promoting school, which can be achieved by building health-promoting education systems. A health-promoting education system is one that, through intentional, planned actions, institutionalizes health promotion in all its functions, i.e. governance of the educational process and its content, resource allocation, educators' professional development, information systems and performance management.

#### What is new?

Although the concept of HPS was introduced by WHO many decades ago, the aspiration of fully embedded, sustainable HPS within educational systems is yet to be achieved; few countries have implemented HPS at scale. To fulfil the vision of "making every school a health-promoting school", United Nations agencies collaborated on developing global standards for HPS and systems, implementation guidance and case studies from low- and middle-income countries. These evidence-informed resources are intended to be used by national education, health and associated sectors to strengthen their school health programmes in order to build health-promoting education systems.

## TOPIC BRIEF Nutrition

### Why is nutrition important for learners' health and well-being?

Access to healthy, safe, and nutritious food is essential for child and adolescent growth, neurocognitive development, disease prevention and lifelong health. Access to healthy food is a fundamental human right, a Sustainable Development Goal, and a key determinant of socio-emotional well-being. In contrast, poor diets are the main risk factor for the global burden of disease and contribute to a triple burden of malnutrition - underweight, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight - that threatens children's growth and development.

### Why are nutrition and healthy diets important for education and learning?

Schooling does not automatically result in learning. The global learning crisis is due not only to inadequate investment in teachers and school infrastructure but also to lack of attention to the well-being of children and adolescents. Children who are hungry, malnourished or sick cannot take full advantage of learning opportunities. Investing in school health and nutrition is therefore part of the solution to the learning crisis.



Nutritional energy is essential for concentration and participation in school activities. Well-nourished children focus better and learn more in the classroom, leading to better performance. Provision of healthy school meals increases enrolment, attendance and equity in education by supporting the needs of diverse and at-risk learners. Better educational attainment is linked to healthier, longer lives.

### Why are schools ideally placed to improve nutrition and healthy diets?

Children and adolescents spent much of their time at school, presenting an important opportunity to deliver specific food and nutrition programmes (e.g., school meals, micronutrient supplementation, deworming). It also presents an opportunity to develop children’s health and food literacy, embed life-long healthy eating habits and foster understanding of sustainable food systems to address all forms of nutrition. Whole-school approaches to food and nutrition increase knowledge about nutrition and promote healthy lifestyles, including increasing intake of water and nutritious foods, such as fruits, vegetables and healthy snacks.

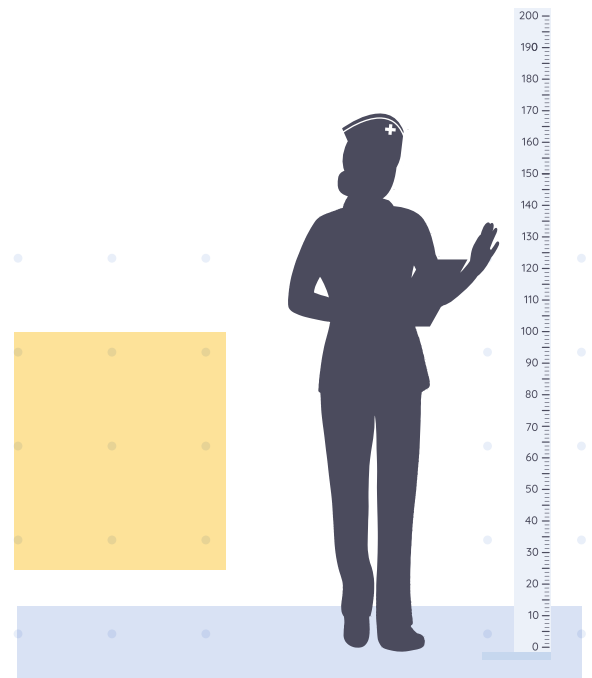
Schools and school communities have an important role to play in promoting sustainable diets, including by encouraging the consumption of locally grown traditional foods, with the added benefit of boosting local economies. A well-nourished, healthy, educated population is the basic prerequisite for growth and economic development. Thus, investment in a whole-school approach to nutrition serves to improve education, health and well-being for learners and also improves the economic outlook of individuals, communities and countries.

### What are the current gaps?

Many schools already implement school feeding and nutrition interventions; however, fewer schools embed these programmes or approaches in an HPS and systems framework.

The multiple determinants of child and adolescent nutrition require action in many systems and sectors, including food, health, education, social protection, water and sanitation. Bringing these together is the essence of the HPS and systems approach.

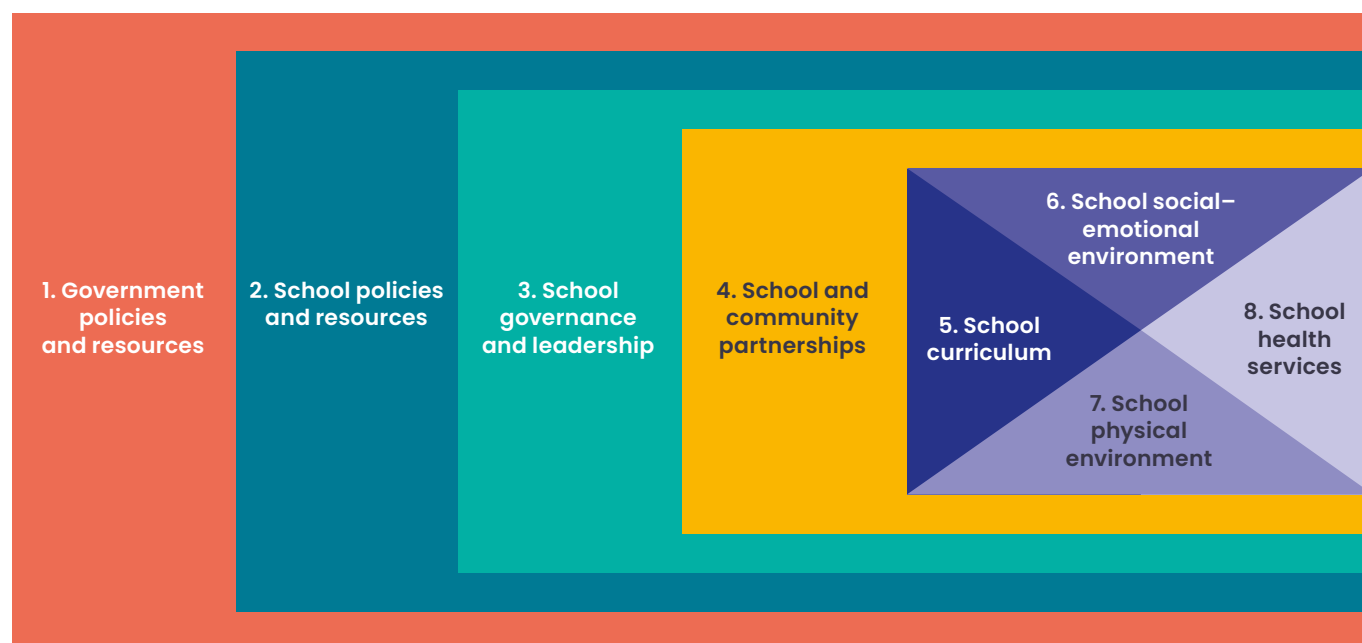
The advantage of this approach is the potential to amplify benefits for well-being, health and education by harmonizing policies and practices in multiple health areas simultaneously, leveraging the resources not only of the school but also those of the surrounding environment and community. This brief explores how policies, curricula, environments and services can be better designed and linked to promote healthy diets and support good nutrition.



## What are health-promoting schools and systems?

The eight global standards are a system of interconnected elements (Fig. 1) comprising governance structures (primarily standards 1–4), community partnerships (standard 4) and school operations (primarily standards 5–8). A systems approach ensures that policies, mechanisms and resources for health and well-being are sustainably promoted in all aspects of school life. This involves cross-sectoral collaboration, participatory processes, models of distributed leadership, capacity-building and effective monitoring and evaluation.

Fig. 1. The eight global standards for health-promoting schools and systems



As in this topic brief, the global standards are designed to be used by various stakeholders involved in identifying, planning, funding, implementing, monitoring and evaluating any whole-school approach (even if the term HPS is not used) at local, subnational, national and global levels, primary and secondary schooling and public and private educational institutions.

## Activating synergies in interventions

### What is the relation between nutrition and WASH?

Poor sanitation, unsafe water and inappropriate food handling can result in diarrhoea and dysentery, which prevent children from absorbing nutrients, impacting their growth and development.

Poor water quality is linked to increased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, which is associated with weight gain and obesity in children.

Access to safe drinking-water is an essential component of a healthy diet.

### What is the relation between nutrition and mental health?

Unhealthy diets are linked to poorer mental health in children and adolescents.

Food insecurity is associated with behavioural issues and increased rates of anxiety, depression and inattention.

Concern about body size and appearance and peer and societal pressures make adolescents vulnerable to eating disorders, which in turn are associated with other mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.



# How can we strengthen nutrition using a health-promoting schools and systems approach?

The following are examples of actions, activities or initiatives that can be conducted to strengthen nutrition in an HPS and systems approach. The list is not exhaustive; actions will depend on the context (e.g., social, cultural, country-specific), and the level of schooling (e.g., primary, secondary) and are ideally generated through engagement with all stakeholders (e.g., teachers, learners, community, caregivers, government, private sector and civil society organizations), based on local data. Solutions that target multiple aspects of education, health and well-being are encouraged as cost-effective ways of amplifying benefits.



## 1 Government policies and resources

- Develop national policies for HPS and school nutrition, ensuring alignment with the ministry of education across all relevant sectors (e.g., health, environment and water, agriculture).
- Allocate a budget and human resources to support HPS, including school health and nutrition.
- Develop public procurement policies and national nutritional standards for foods and beverages served or sold in and around schools to promote healthy diets, address food safety and encourage consumption of locally grown foods.
- Make education on food and nutrition (including discussions of body image and gender-equitable access to nutrition) a key part of the comprehensive national health and well-being curriculum.
- Include fortified foods in school meal programmes (e.g., staples and oils fortified with iodine, iron, vitamin A, zinc) as required.
- Regulate food and beverage advertising in and around schools (including vending machines in schools and the distance of fast-food restaurants from schools).
- Develop legal, fiscal and agricultural policies and regulations to influence food choices (e.g., taxes on sugar, subsidies on healthy foods, mandated nutrition labelling).



## 2 School policies and resources

- Develop and communicate relevant policies and standards (e.g., school health policy; school meal standards; school food and nutrition standards; anaphylaxis (food allergy); anti-bullying to reduce weight-based stigmatization; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)).
- Ensure that school meal programmes comply with national standards and guidelines, when these exist, and include healthy local foods.
- Implement a healthy school cafeteria strategy (e.g., no sugary drinks, emphasis on selling “everyday foods” and local foods).
- Support professional development for school staff (e.g., on HPS, nutrition, food preparation and safety, physical education, school garden programmes).
- Provide access to school employee wellness programmes to improve school staff health and well-being, and support teachers in role-model exercise and healthy eating.

## EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS, FRAMED WITHIN THE GLOBAL STANDARDS FOR HPS AND SYSTEMS



## 3 School governance and leadership

- Involve teachers, school health staff, student representatives, caregivers and community leaders in decision-making to promote HPS and nutrition.
- Ensure that school leaders encourage learners to share their opinions and be active in school health and nutrition (e.g., member of the student representative council on school nutrition committee).
- Encourage teachers to eat with learners to reinforce healthy eating and hygiene practices while strengthening social relationships.
- Nominate a focal point for nutrition who is responsible for monitoring and evaluating nutrition and healthy eating.



## 4 School and community partnerships

- Engage with local community groups (e.g., local farmers, cooking schools, food swaps and co-ops) to promote consumption of locally-sourced fresh foods, and increase dietary diversity (e.g., cooking demonstrations).
- Provide parents and caregivers with practical guidance on providing healthy school lunches.
- Ensure that the food provided at school activities (e.g., school parties, dances, performances, after-school care) respects school food and nutrition standards.



## 5 School curriculum

- Ensure that high-quality, evidence-based programmes are used to deliver the national comprehensive health and nutrition curriculum.
- Integrate nutrition education into other parts of the curriculum to optimize learning and create synergies with other educational opportunities (e.g., home economics, kitchen garden programmes, drama, physical education, analysis of food advertisements in media studies).

## 7 School physical environment



- Ensure that cooking, food preparation and storage facilities are consistent with national standards, with zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind against those preparing food.
- Ensure access to clean, safe, shady spaces to eat, with adequate seating areas.
- Ensure that clean, safe, freely available drinking-water is accessible in all recreation and eating areas.
- Place posters, stickers, and other health promotional materials to identify areas for handwashing, drinking-water and healthy foods.



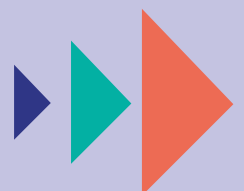
## 6 School social-emotional environment

- Run gardening and cooking clubs.
- Link nutrition to science, technology, engineering and mathematics clubs (e.g., kitchen gardens as a learning laboratory).
- Avoid food prizes and rewards (e.g., alternatives could include extra playtime, stickers, certificates of recognition).
- Provide a respectful, inclusive environment for diversely sized bodies (both learners and staff).



## 8 School health services

- Facilitate access to health services to address the needs of individual learners (e.g., for growth and nutrition concerns).
- Integrate de-worming services with school immunization programmes and regular micronutrient supplementation (in contexts where this is required).



## How does a systems approach work in different contexts?

### The National Multi-sector Adolescent Nutrition Strategy, Malawi

**Background:** Poor nutrition of children and adolescents remains a public health challenge in Malawi, particularly for adolescent girls, who have a heavy burden of anaemia.

**The approach:** The National Multi-sector Adolescent Nutrition Strategy (NMSANS) 2019–2023 was developed with the input and advocacy of many stakeholders for prioritization of a nutrition programme for adolescents. The NMSANS requires inputs from numerous systems and Government departments: education, health, WASH and food systems. Pilot implementation involved two components: a weekly iron folic acid supplementation programme and a nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA) programme. To ensure the acceptance and success of the programme, adolescent girls were involved in the design and implementation of the iron and folic acid supplementation programme. Focal students were identified to assist teachers. Schools facilitated integration of the NMSANS, with school health and nutrition teachers providing health education talks, individual counselling to students and support for the NSA programme. In the NSA programme, adolescents use nutrition demonstration plots to learn diverse methods of food production and preservation to ensure the continued availability of a variety of safe, nutrient-dense foods. They are taught food preparation techniques with crops harvested from demonstration plots and other locally available foods provided by the community. In adolescent nutrition groups, nutrition education is complemented by education on sexual and reproductive health, WASH and other life skills. Groups also include physical activity (netball and football) and support community social mobilization.

**Results:** Adolescents had better nutrition knowledge and steady increases in dietary diversity. The programme is now being scaled up for nationwide coverage.

**Message:** A systems approach to school nutrition involves numerous stakeholders in Government departments, health services and the community, including young people. Interventions can target interrelated health topics to provide broader support for health and well-being.

**Reference:** Matonga D, Nyirenda K, Chigamba J, Kang'ombe D. An integrated multi-sector approach to improve the nutritional status among school-age children and adolescents in Malawi. Kidlington (Oxon): Field Exchange; 2021 (<https://www.enonline.net/fex/66/nutritionalstatusschoolagechildren>).

### Nutrition-friendly schools initiative – West Bank and Gaza Strip

**Background:** There is a concerning prevalence of anaemia among children and adolescents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

**The approach:** The Nutrition-friendly Schools Initiative provides a framework for integrated intervention programmes to improve the health and nutritional status of school-aged children and adolescents. The aim of the programme is to support the Government in implementing a school-based multi-sectoral approach, with cooperation between the health and education sectors, to address malnutrition. Since 2018, UNICEF has supported this initiative in 34 schools in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

**Results:** The ministries of Education and of Health promoted healthy eating and physical activity through both extracurricular and updated curricular activities. The Ministry of Education updated the National School Nutrition Strategy to incorporate principles from the Nutrition-friendly Schools Initiative, and the initiative has been endorsed to be scaled-up.

**Message:** Multi-departmental partnerships are powerful tools for action. Advocating for policies that create an enabling environment for teaching good nutrition practices is important.

**Reference:** Schools and nutrition – better results for children in Palestine. New York City (NY): United Nations; 2021 (<https://palestine.un.org/en/159804-schools-and-nutrition-better-results-children-palestine>).





# Resources

## Health-promoting schools



**Making every school a health-promoting school: global standards and indicators**

<https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240025059>



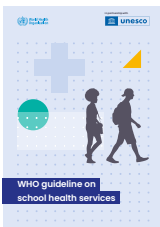
**Making every school a health-promoting school: Implementation guidance**

<https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240025073>



**Making every school a health-promoting school: Country case studies**

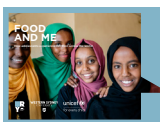
<https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240025431>



**WHO guidelines on school health services**

<https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240029392>

## Children and young people's voices



**Food and Me. How adolescents experience nutrition across the world**

<https://www.unicef.org/media/94021/file/Food-and-me-adolescents-SOWC2019-companion-report.pdf>



**Fix my food: children's views on transforming food systems (Western Sydney University and UNICEF)**

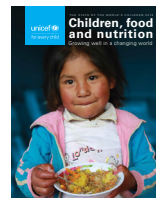
<https://www.unicef.org/media/107206/file/Fix-My-Food-Children's-views-on-transforming-food-systems.pdf>

## Nutrition



**Nutrition, for Every Child: UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020-2030 (UNICEF)**

<https://www.unicef.org/reports/nutrition-strategy-2020-2030>



**The State of the World's Children 2019: Children Food and Nutrition - Growing well in a changing world (UNICEF)**

<https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children-2019>



**State of School Feeding Worldwide 2020 (WFP)**

<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-000123923/download/>



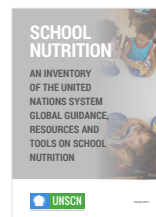
**A Chance for Every Schoolchild: partnering to scale up School Health and Nutrition for Human Capital (WFP)**

<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-000112101/download/>



**UNICEF Programming Guidance: Nutrition in Middle Childhood and Adolescence (UNICEF)**

<https://www.unicef.org/media/106406/file>



**An Inventory of the United Nations System Global Guidance, Resources and Tools on School Nutrition (UNSCN)**

<https://www.unscn.org/uploads/web/file/School-Nutrition-Inventory-Oct-2020.pdf>



**Home-grown School Feeding: Resource Framework (FAO & WFP)**

<https://www.wfp.org/publications/home-grown-school-feeding-resource-framework>



**Life Skills Education School Handbook: Prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases: Approaches for Schools (WHO)**

<https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240005020>

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