

The World Health Organization's
INFORMATION SERIES ON SCHOOL HEALTH Document

The Physical School Environment

An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School



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INFORMATION SERIES ON SCHOOL HEALTH DOCUMENT 2

The Physical School Environment

An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School

This document is a joint effort of the Department of Protection of the Human Environment and the Department of Noncommunicable Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

It is jointly published with partner organizations working together in the international initiative to Focus Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH). It is also intended to support the objectives of the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance.



WHO



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The principles and policies of each of the above agencies are governed by the relevant decisions of its governing body and each agency implements the interventions described in this document in accordance with these principles and policies and within the scope of its mandate.

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This document was prepared for the World Health Organization (WHO) by John Wargo, Yale University, New Haven Connecticut.

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Monika Arora, HRIDAY-SHAN, India

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National Council on Education, Uruguay

"The children of today are the adults of tomorrow. They deserve to inherit a safer and healthier world. There is no task more important than safeguarding their environment." This message is emphasized by the Healthy Environments for Children Alliance (HECA), which focuses attention on the school environment as one of the key settings for promoting children's environmental health. HECA was launched at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. This publication is intended as a tool to help schools shape healthy environments for children.

The Physical School Environment: An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School focuses on the physical environment of the school and is complemented by the document *Creating an Environment for Social and Emotional Well-being: An Important Responsibility of a Health-Promoting and Child-Friendly School*. Together, these two resources can help schools provide an environment that is supportive of the World Health Organization's definition of health, "... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

The Physical School Environment: An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School includes information to create a healthy school environment, and to identify and modify aspects of the physical environment that jeopardize safety and health. However, physical interventions alone will not suffice. The document also contains guidance to ensure that positive changes in a school's physical environment are supported, reinforced and sustained by school health policy, skills-based health education and school health services, the core components of an effective school health programme as called for in the international initiative to Focus Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH).

The extent to which each nation's schools provide a safe and healthy physical environment plays a significant role in determining whether the next generation is educated and healthy. Effective school health programmes, including a safe and healthy school environment, are viable means to simultaneously address the inseparable goals of Health for All and Education for All.



Pekka Puska
Director, Noncommunicable Disease
Prevention and Health Promotion
WHO, Geneva, SWITZERLAND



Maged Younes
Senior Advisor, Health and
Environment Coordinator,
Occupational and Environmental
Health,
WHO, Geneva, SWITZERLAND



Mary Joy Pigozzi
Director, Division for the Promotion
of Quality Education
UNESCO, Paris, FRANCE



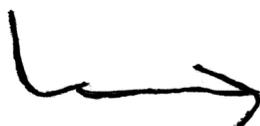
Cream Wright
Chief, Education Section
UNICEF, New York, USA



Leslie Drake
Coordinator, Partnership for Child
Development
London, UNITED KINGDOM



Cheryl Vince-Whitman
Director, WHO Collaborating Center to
Promote Health through Schools and
Communities
Education Development Center, Inc.
Newton, Massachusetts, USA



Fred Van Leeuwen
General Secretary
Education International
Brussels, BELGIUM

1. Introduction

Environmental challenges and opportunities vary considerably among schools around the world, across countries and within communities. Similarly, the resources available to schools to manage health hazards vary as widely as the threats themselves, often creating formidable management challenges, particularly in the poorest parts of the world. Evolving from recommendations of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, *The Physical School Environment: An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School* discusses a range of environmental conditions that exist in a variety of school environments. It presents strategies to improve the health, education and development of children, families, and community members and aims to help communities recognize, manage, and avoid physical, chemical and biological threats that may exist in or near their schools.^{1,2}

1.1 Why did WHO prepare this document?

The World Health Organization (WHO) prepared this document to help individuals, communities, school officials, and governments improve the health of children by reducing their exposure to environmental hazards. This will be accomplished by providing information to help people understand the relationship between the environment and health, identify key hazards in the places where children learn, and recognize children's special vulnerability and exposure to environmental threats. By taking action, health-promoting schools will send messages home to families and communities, encouraging awareness, and building skills to last a lifetime so that protecting children from environmental hazards becomes a way of life.

1.2 Who should read this document?

This document can be useful to:

- Members of the school community, including teachers and their representative organizations, administrative staff, students, parents, school facility managers, and school construction workers.
- Community leaders, local residents, health care providers, and other groups interested in improving public health.
- Members of non-governmental agencies, institutions, and organizations interested in working with schools to promote health.
- Government officials, policy-makers, decision-makers, planners and coordinators at local, district, provincial, national and international levels.

1.3 What is a healthy physical school environment?

The physical school environment encompasses the school building and all its contents including physical structures, infrastructure, furniture, and the use and presence of chemicals and biological agents; the site on which a school is located; and the surrounding environment including the air, water, and materials with which children may come into contact, as well as nearby land uses, roadways and other hazards.

WHO defines a health-promoting school as “one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working.”³ The American Academy of Pediatrics defines a “healthful school environment” as “one that protects students and staff against immediate injury or disease and promotes prevention activities and attitudes against known risk factors that might lead to future disease or disability.”⁴

Provision of safe and sufficient water, sanitation, and shelter from the elements are basic necessities for a healthy physical learning environment. Equally important is the protection from biological, physical, and chemical risks that can threaten children’s health (see Table 1). Infectious diseases carried by water, and physical hazards associated with poor construction and maintenance practices are examples of risks children and school personnel face at schools throughout the world.

Table 1: Components of a healthy school environment

Provision of basic necessities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter • Warmth • Water • Food • Light • Ventilation • Sanitary facilities • Emergency medical care
Protection from biological threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Molds • Unsafe or insufficient water • Unsafe food • Vector-borne diseases • Venomous animals • Rodents and hazardous insects • Other animals (e.g. dogs)
Protection from physical threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic and transport • Violence and crime • Injuries • Extreme heat and cold • Radiation

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