

Research in Brief:  
**Health Promoting Schools**  
**Framework for Improving**  
**Student Health and Well-Being**

**Background**

Child health and education are strongly related; healthy children tend to perform better in school, providing a foundation for improved health in later life. Due to their wide reach and long-term exposure, schools represent an ideal setting to promote healthy behaviours in children. In response to the limited success of traditional health education approaches, the Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework was developed in the late 1980s by the World Health Organization (WHO).

This framework promotes healthy behaviour throughout the entire school environment rather than solely through health education curricula. In addition to formal health curricula, student health and well-being are promoted through the culture, attitudes, and values of the school, and through collaboration with the outside community.

The HPS framework acknowledges the importance of a formal health curriculum to provide students with necessary knowledge and skills to make informed, healthy choices. It then extends this curriculum to be supported by a school-wide “hidden” curriculum. For instance, schools could implement bicycle racks to promote exercise, or provide healthy cafeteria options to promote nutrition.



Lastly, through engaging with families and community organizations, there can be a joint effort to reinforce the health messages delivered at school. Overall, the HPS

***Why does this matter?***

- ⇒ Schools represent an ideal setting to promote healthy behaviours and well-being in students.
- ⇒ Traditional, isolated health curricula at schools have yielded limited success.
- ⇒ The WHO Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework is a potential mechanism to promote student health and well-being by considering individual, school, and community contexts in tandem.
- ⇒ The WHO Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework includes a formal health curriculum, supported by school-wide changes that promote health, and the involvement of families and communities.

The Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being is a project of the **Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research** ([www.knaer-recrea.ca](http://www.knaer-recrea.ca))

Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

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KNAER and the Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being are funded by the **Ontario Ministry of Education**

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# The WHO Health Promoting Schools Framework for Improving Student Health and Well-Being

framework recognizes the individual, school, and broader community factors that affect health, and it seeks to address all three levels to promote student well-being.

Given the varied research evidence, a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of the HPS framework for improving student health and well-being was conducted in 2014. HPS interventions were defined by three elements: input to the curriculum; changes to the school's ethos and/or environment; and engagement with families and communities.

## **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers performed a systematic review and meta-analysis assessing the impact of the HPS framework on student health and well-being. Studies were selected from a comprehensive list of 25 databases in both 2011 and 2013, including CENTRAL, OVID Medline, EMBASE, PsycINFO, and ERIC, regardless of publication status or language. Abstracts, conference proceedings, and other grey literature were also obtained. Studies were eligible if the sample consisted of children and youth (4-18y) attending schools or colleges that incorporated all three aforementioned elements of the HPS framework. A control group was also selected, consisting of schools with no intervention, or only one or two of the HPS elements. Primary health outcomes included: obesity, physical activity, and emotional well-being. Secondary outcomes included: school environment changes, and the presence of community engagement.

## **What is a meta-analysis?**

A meta-analysis is a type of study that combines together the results of multiple relevant studies on a specific research question. The purpose of a meta-analysis is to draw a collective conclusion that provides stronger statistical evidence than any single study. This research method involves: 1) framing a specific research question; 2) running a comprehensive search in the literature; 3) screening the retrieved articles for relevance; 4) assessing the research quality of the relevant articles; 5) abstracting results from the

relevant articles; and 6) combining the results of the relevant articles to draw a conclusion.

## **What did they learn?**

From over 48 000 individual records retrieved, a total of 67 studies were deemed eligible for inclusion. The results of the meta-analysis revealed that:

- HPS interventions aimed at reducing BMI, increasing exercise, and increasing healthy eating were effective
- There were positive effects for HPS programs seeking to reduce tobacco use and bullying
- Students in a school with an HPS intervention were 23% less likely to smoke at follow-up compared to students in a school without HPS intervention
- Students who received an HPS intervention reported a 17% reduction of being bullied compared to students in a school without HPS intervention
- HPS interventions focusing specifically on depression had no effect
- HPS interventions focusing on mental health as a whole produced a small, but non-significant increase in student depressive symptoms
- Researchers noted that future interventions should consider not just benefits, but also the potential harms that they may cause

Overall, the researchers identified a large number of eligible HPS interventions focusing on a wide variety of health outcomes. However, actual numbers of studies reporting data on a single outcome were often small. HPS interventions targeting obesity, physical activity, and nutrition had the greatest amount of evidence. On the other hand, few studies focused on substance use, violence, sexual health, or mental health. It is important to note that further research evidence is needed to draw definitive conclusions.

*This brief summary was prepared from: Langford, R., Campbell, R., Magnus, D., Bonell, C. P., Murphy, S. M., Waters, E., ... & Gibbs, L. F. (2011). The WHO Health Promoting School framework for improving the health and well-being of students and staff. Cochrane Database Syst Rev, 1.*