

Asia Pacific promotes health at reopened schools

September 30 2021, by Sanjeet Bagcchi



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Asia Pacific countries, including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia, have resolved to turn schools, now reopening after COVID-19 restrictions, into "health-promoting schools."

Concerned that closure of schools owing to COVID-19 negatively impacted [children](#) and adolescents' [health](#), education, and growth, [member countries](#) of the WHO's South-East Asia region consider it necessary to ensure the safe reopening and operation of schools during the pandemic.

India's operational guidelines on its School Health Programme—a joint initiative of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource and Development—highlights the critical role of schools in "helping students establish healthy behaviors for their lifetime."

"More children than ever are attending school, and for longer periods of their lives, therefore, schools can do more than perhaps any other single institution to improve the wellbeing and competence of children and adolescents," the guidelines say.

At the WHO regional committee's virtual meeting hosted by Nepal this month, member countries resolved to turn schools into health-promoting centers. These involve making schools a platform to impart health education and learning. WHO is also encouraging schools to work with community leaders.

Sanchita Roy, a pediatrician and associate professor of anatomy at the Diamond Harbour Government Medical College and Hospital, in West Bengal, India, tells SciDev.Net that "prevalence of anemia, worm infestations, nutritional deficiencies are some of the real challenges relating to school health programs."

Roy says that school closures in India due to COVID-19 have prevented the monitoring of students' health. She believes school reopening is essential but robust efforts should be taken to implement COVID-19 protocols, including immunization. "Trained health workers should be

appointed for proper screening of affected children at an appropriate time so that judicious management can be provided," she added.

At the regional committee meeting, Poonam Khetrpal Singh, WHO South-East Asia's regional director, said in a press release: "Schools have an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles, life-long healthy behaviors and to nurture human capital for sustainable development of any society. We need a whole-of-government approach to ensure children from all socio-economic backgrounds, including those with special needs benefit from healthy schools."

Anish Ray, a pediatrician at the Cook Children's Medical Center, in Texas, US, describes the WHO South-East Asia initiative as timely given the widely recognized psychological impact of COVID-19 restrictions on school children. "In order to overcome this and to address primary health concerns among children attending schools, adopting such a resolution is a strong stride forward to ensure a healthy future for all," he said.

According to Ray, in the developing countries of South and South-East Asia, there remain logistical hurdles and economic burdens; but measures such as these indicate a desire by the countries concerned to invest in a healthy future.

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Provided by SciDev.Net

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