









## Joint UN Statement on strengthening education, school health, nutrition and well-being

Every school should be health promoting to protect and improve the learning, health, nutrition and overall well-being of students and the school community

We, the representatives of the United Nations agencies<sup>1</sup>, jointly commit our support to the governments of Member States of the South-East Asia Region<sup>2</sup> in their efforts to safely reopen and operate schools during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We also pledge our commitment to working with governments, partners and educational institutions to adopt the Health Promoting Schools (HPS)<sup>3</sup> approach, with a focus on improving learning, health, nutrition and well-being of students and members of the school community.

Prolonged school closure since the onset of the pandemic has caused an enormous loss of learning with the risk of dropout and reduced future employability for millions of schoolchildren across our Region, and significant adverse impact on physical and mental health, nutrition status and overall well-being of children and adolescents, particularly the most vulnerable. With the current evidence indicating that COVID-19 infection and its severity are less in children compared with adults and that the school settings are no more responsible for outbreaks than the surrounding community, prolonged school closures can no longer be justified when other institutions and facilities have re-opened.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of establishing strong and resilient education systems that are able to continue delivering education and health under all circumstances. The regional leadership of UN agencies stand ready to align efforts and work with governments and mobilize support of partners to ensure that health and well-being of the school community are strongly reflected in national and regional agendas; and call for increased investment to restore and enhance the reach and quality of national education, school health and nutrition policies, focusing on those that need it the most.

We highly commend the high-level political will and commitment jointly expressed by the ministers of health and education in the Region to make every school and place of learning health promoting, through the Call to Action at the WHO Inter-Ministerial Meeting to Revitalize Health Promoting Schools in the South-East Asia Region, organized by WHO-SEARO virtually in New Delhi, India, on 12–14 October 2021. The Call to Action strengthens actions on the implementation of the resolution, "Revitalizing school health programmes and health promoting schools in the South-East Asia Region" adopted by the Seventy-fourth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia held virtually in Kathmandu, Nepal, in September 2021.

Furthermore, we pledge harmonized technical support to the national leadership for planning and implementation processes, working across ministries and sectors to promote a holistic and multisectoral approach, including for the following:

- Safe reopening and sustained operations of schools in order to resume learning as early as possible and mitigate the further risks to education, health and well-being of students and school staff. This requires adequate preparedness and use of appropriate public health measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission and to control any outbreak in the schools;
- Planning to ensure effective recovery of the learning lost, to re-establish health and nutrition-related services interrupted during prolonged school closures, and to adopt strategies to reduce inequity in learning, nutrition and health status that has been accentuated during the pandemic;
- According high priority to school health and nutrition programmes and, while building back better, to adopt a 'Health Promoting Schools' approach to strengthen school infrastructure and education content to appropriately meet the needs of learners and school personnel; health services such as assessment and management of health conditions, violence and sexual and reproductive health; related services such as provision of adequate water and sanitation, nutrition including school meals and micronutrient supplementation, mental health and psychosocial support; and preparedness for future emergencies;
- Mobilizing adequate, sustainable finances, appropriate skilled human resources, and essential commodities from all related sectors, and ensuring intersectoral coordination for the effective implementation of health promoting schools at scale with a focus on reducing inequity by addressing its multiple drivers<sup>4</sup>;
- Improve management capacity in relevant sectors to sustain strong systems for implementation of health promoting schools with a whole-of-government and community-centric approach;
- Assume national accountability for results and resources through strong monitoring systems with timely reporting, analysis of relevant disaggregated education, health and related data, and use it for bringing about improvement in the programme; and
- Support collaboration and coordination with donors and partners including civil society and the private sector, as well as opportunities for experiencesharing and learning within and across the countries of the Region.

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<sup>1</sup> Key agencies have joined to broaden UN support for Health Promoting Schools, including, UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and UNFPA that cover countries beyond the WHO-SEA Region; and the HPS initiative is endorsed by Asia-Pacific Technical Working Group on School Health, Nutrition and Well-being.

<sup>2</sup> South-East Asia Region of WHO includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, DPR Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

<sup>3</sup> Making every school a health-promoting school – Implementation Guidance (who.int)

<sup>4</sup> Equity focus means that the services reach all children especially the most marginalized and vulnerable; and common drivers of inequity include poverty, gender, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, disability, geographic location and displacement.