The World Health Organization's

INFORMATION SERIES ON SCHOOL HEALTH **DOCUMENT 10**

Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-Being

An important responsibility of a Health-Promoting and Child Friendly School

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FOREWORD

"The children of today are the adults of tomorrow. They deserve to inherit a safer, fairer and healthier world. There is no task more important than safeguarding their environment." This message is emphasized by the theme of World Health Day 2003, "Shape the Future of Life: Healthy Environments for Children". The organizations publishing this document wish to call attention to and support this message. We offer this publication as a useful tool to help shape a healthy, safe and friendly environment for all who live, learn and work in schools.

"Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-being: An Important Responsibility of a Health-Promoting and Child-Friendly School" focuses on the psycho-social environment of the school. It is complemented by the document "The Physical Environment: An Essential Component of a Health-Promoting School". Together, these documents can help schools provide an environment that is consistent with 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."

This document and its Psycho-social Environment Profile are designed to help school personnel assess qualities of the school environment that support social and emotional well-being. It is intended to be a starting point, leading to awareness, discussion, and action by school personnel, students and parents. It will help them recognize and sustain those aspects of the school environment that support social and emotional well-being and improve those aspects that do not. It also will help school personnel consider ways to support positive changes in the school environment with school health policies, skills-based health education and school health services -- core components of an effective school health programmeme as called for in the joint international initiative to Focus Resources for Effective School Health (FRESH).

The extent to which each nation's schools provide a safe and supportive environment for all will play a significant role in determining whether the next generation is educated and healthy in body, mind and spirit. The implementation of an effective school health programme, including an environment that supports social and emotional well-being, is a viable means to simultaneously address the inseparable goals of Health for All and Education for All.

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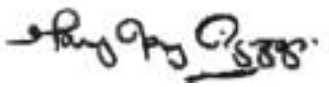

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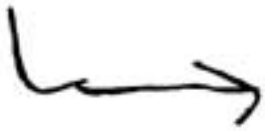

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WHY DID WHO PREPARE THIS DOCUMENT?

There is increasing recognition that health and educational outcomes are inextricably linked, and that the school can be an ideal setting through which to strive for both. A number of international efforts have been developed in the past decade to improve both learning and health through schools. Four important examples include WHO's Global School Health Initiative and its concept of a Health-Promoting School; UNICEF's framework of rights-based, child-friendly educational systems and schools; Education for All (EFA); and the recent inter-agency initiative by WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, Education International, Education Development Center, Partnership for Child Development and the World Bank, Focusing Resources for Effective School Health (FRESH). The characteristics of each of these efforts are summarized in Box 1 below.

One characteristic shared by each of the above initiatives is the importance of a healthy psycho-social environment in schools. For example, the *Dakar Framework for Action (Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments)* promotes a school environment that not only encourages learning but is welcoming, gender-sensitive, healthy and safe. It recommends that schools implement "policies and codes of conduct that enhance the psycho-social and emotional health of teachers and learners." FRESH promotes a positive psycho-social environment that discourages all types of school violence such as the abuse of students, sexual harassment and bullying.

WHO developed this document and its accompanying Psycho-social Environment (PSE) Profile to help teachers, students and parents create a positive psycho-social climate in their school as a means to improve school quality and the mental and physical well-being of young people. While this document may be useful to district- and national-level staff who make decisions on behalf of local schools, it is primarily intended for school administrators, teachers, community leaders and members of school health teams.

Since the school environment is one of many determinants of school quality, the PSE Profile will be most effective if used as part of a broader school effort to create a Health-Promoting and Child Friendly School, meet the goals of Education for All, or implement the four components of FRESH. For example, WHO recommends that the PSE Profile be used in conjunction with the tools in ***Local Action: Creating Health-Promoting Schools (WHO/School/00.3)*** as part of a comprehensive effort to promote health throughout the school (See Annex for more details).

WHAT IS A HEALTHY PSYCHO-SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT?

A school's environment can enhance social and emotional well-being, and learning when it:

- is warm, friendly and rewards learning
- promotes cooperation rather than competition
- facilitates supportive, open communications
- views the provision of creative opportunities as important
- prevents physical punishment, bullying, harassment and violence, by encouraging the development of procedures and policies that do not support physical punishment and that promote non-violent interaction on the playground, in class and among staff and students.
- promotes the rights of boys and girls through equal opportunities and democratic procedures.

A healthy psycho-social environment simultaneously provides support to teachers, students and their families.

BOX 1:

INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENTS TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND EDUCATION THROUGH SCHOOLS

The World Health Organization (WHO), through its Global School Health Initiative, promotes the concept of a **Health-Promoting School**. A Health-Promoting School can be characterized as a school that is constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working. It does this by:

- Fostering health and learning with all the measures at its disposal;
- Engaging health and education officials, teachers, teachers' unions, students, parents, health providers and community leaders in efforts to make the school a healthy place;
- Striving to provide a healthy environment, school health education and school health services along with school/community projects and outreach, health promotion programmes for staff, nutrition and food safety programmes, opportunities for physical education and recreation, and programmes for counselling, social support and mental health promotion;
- Implementing policies and practices that respect an individual's well-being and dignity, provide multiple opportunities for success, and acknowledge good efforts and intentions as well as personal achievements;
- Striving to improve the health of school personnel, families and community members as well as students.

UNICEF has developed a framework of **rights-based, child-friendly educational systems and schools** that are characterized as "healthy for children, effective with children, protective of children, and involved with families and communities -- and children" (Shaeffer, S, 1999). Within this framework:

- The school is a significant personal and social environment in the lives of its students. A child-friendly school ensures every child an environment that is physically safe, emotionally secure and psychologically enabling;
- Teachers are the single most important factor in creating an effective and inclusive classroom.
- Children are natural learners, but this capacity to learn can be undermined and sometimes destroyed. A child-friendly school recognizes, encourages and supports children's growing capacities as learners by providing a school culture, teaching behaviours and curriculum content that are focused on learning and the learner.
- The ability of a school to be and to call itself child-friendly is directly linked to the support, participation and collaboration it receives from families.
- Child-friendly schools aim to develop a learning environment in which boys and girls are motivated and able to learn, and staff members are friendly and welcoming to children and attend to all their health and safety needs.

The 1990s was the decade of Education for All (EFA). The World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien 1990) envisioned that "Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs." The global community reunited in Dakar, April 2000, to assess progress of the EFA decade and to renew its commitment to Education for All by 2015. Strategies for meeting this goal are outlined in the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, and include the creation of safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning. Specifically, the Dakar Framework calls for policies and codes of conduct that enhance the physical, social and emotional health of teachers and learners.

WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank have agreed upon a core group of cost-effective components of a school health, hygiene and nutrition programme, which can form the basis for joint action. Working together to Focus Resources for Effective School Health (FRESH), the agencies call for the following four components to be made available in all schools:

- Health-related policies in schools that help to ensure a safe and secure physical environment and a positive psycho-social environment, and address all types of school violence, such as the abuse of students, sexual harassment and bullying.
- Safe water and sanitation facilities, as first steps in creating a healthy school environment.
- Skills-based health education that focuses on the development of knowledge, attitudes, values and life skills needed to make, and act on, the most appropriate and positive decisions concerning health.
- School-based health and nutrition services which are simple, safe and familiar, and address problems that are prevalent and recognized as important in the community.

WHY IS THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF YOUR SCHOOL IMPORTANT?

Research on work and home environments has shown that there can be a strong relationship between social settings and short and long-term emotional well-being. Considering how much time most children spend at school, psycho-social dimensions of schools have sparked the interest of a growing number of researchers concerned with school effectiveness and the emotional well-being of young people. Below are some conclusions from this research, with specific studies cited as supporting examples. Additional explanations about the importance of each quality area of the school's psycho-social environment are presented in Annex 3, "Worksheets for leading discussions of quality areas." These findings can help you convince others that using the PSE Profile as a way to assess and improve your school is a worthwhile effort.

- A positive social environment at school can influence the behaviour of students.

A study of health behaviour among school-age children coordinated by WHO showed a strong and progressive relationship between indicators of "alienation" from school and health compromising behaviours among students from Australia and Wales (Nutbeam, et al, 1993). The relationship was most clear with smoking and alcohol misuse. The authors recommend not only school health education, but also changes to the school environment and ethos.

Similarly, a study of 12-18 year old students in public schools in Ohio, USA,found that "school connectedness," or the feeling of closeness to school personnel and the school environment, decreased the likelihood of health risk behaviours during adolescence, including cigarette use (Bonny and colleagues, 2000).

• A positive psycho-social environment at school can affect the mental health and well-being of young people.

A sense of connectedness, good communication, and perceptions of adult caring have been shown to be related to a wide range of mental health outcomes (Patton, 2000). For example, a study of the impact of school "climate" on the well-being and mental health of children in the Czech Republic found that schools with a climate of confidence and respect among principals, staff, pupils and parents had the least number of negative characteristics, including general anxiety, school anxiety, emotional and psychosomatic balance, attitudes toward school, etc. (Havlinova and Schneidrova, 1995).

Gadin and Hammarstrom (2000) analysed the relationship between psycho-social factors in the school environment and pupils' health and sense of self-worth in a sample of Swedish pupils. They found that problems in relations with classmates were the most recurrent psycho-social factor associated with ill-health. Lack of self-control at school affected self-worth among girls, but not among boys.

• A supportive school environment can improve student learning outcomes.

In Australia and the United Kingdom, factors like relationships between teachers and students in classrooms, opportunities for student participation and responsibility, and support structures for teachers, have consistently shown to be associated with student progress (Patton et al, 2000). MacIntosh theorizes that "positive reactions to school may increase the likelihood that students will stay in school longer, develop a commitment to learning, and use the institution to their advantage". Thus, a positive, supportive climate at school can make a critical contribution to the academic achievement.

WHAT IS THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT (PSE) PROFILE ?

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