



School Health and Nutrition

Essential to Achieving the Goal of Education

Health and nutrition problems among school-age children prevent them from attending school regularly, impair their ability to learn, and often cause them to leave school early. Many of the common conditions of ill health among school-age children can be managed effectively, simply, and inexpensively through school-based health and nutrition programs.

The most recent Education for All Global Monitoring Report released by UNESCO found that "Other barriers to Universal Primary Education also have to be removed if the 2015 targets are to be achieved... Ill health and malnutrition undermine school attendance and learning capacity for millions of children."

EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2009, UNESCO

Proper Nutrition is Essential to Child Development and Learning

- Child malnutrition is a worldwide epidemic, affecting one-third of all children under the age of five. It is associated with over half of all child deaths in developing countries.
- Malnutrition has long-term impacts on physical and mental capacity and the ability to learn.
- Vitamin A deficiency is the single greatest cause of preventable childhood blindness. Even mild Vitamin A deficiency causes impaired immune function, which makes young people more susceptible to other infectious diseases.
- Iodine deficiency is the single most common preventable cause of mental retardation and brain damage in children.
- School feeding has significant potential benefits: it can improve students' nutritional status, reduce short-term hunger and associated learning deficits, and bring more children to school.
- A USDA-funded Food for Education program in western Afghanistan has contributed to an increase in attendance from 23,000 students to more than 80,000 students in just three years.

Parasitic Worm Infestation Negatively Affects School Attendance and Learning

- Two billion people worldwide – and 400 million school-age children – are affected by parasitic worms – specifically Soil Transmitted Helminths (STH) and Schistosomes. 300 million of those infected suffer severe illness, and over 150,000 die annually.
- Children in low and middle income countries are particularly vulnerable, with worm infections causing health problems that both impair physical and mental development and limit attendance and performance in school.
- Worms can limit nutrient absorption and cause internal bleeding, leading to anemia and malnutrition, thereby making children either too sick or too tired to concentrate in class or attend school.

- In 2001, the World Health Organization established a target of deworming 75 percent of at-risk children by 2010. As of 2006, only 10 percent of children had been treated.
- Mass school-based deworming is inexpensive, safe, simple and highly effective. The cost is less than 50¢ per child per year, and can be administered by teachers with minimal training required.
- A Harvard University study found that deworming children in Kenya reduced absenteeism by 25%. Given the low cost of deworming treatment, an additional aggregate year of schooling could be “purchased” by this program for only \$3.50.

HIV/AIDS Creates Barriers to Education, Particularly for OVCs

- Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) are profoundly affected as their parents fall sick and die, often dealing with a mixture of hardships including withdrawal from school, economic distress, malnutrition and illness, psychological suffering, and stigma and discrimination.
- Orphans who had lost both parents were on average 12% less likely to attend school.
- Orphaned girls are extremely vulnerable. Forced to quit school, many become victims of sexual violence or become sex workers to earn money to support younger siblings.
- HIV/AIDS-affected children who are able to attend school often face discrimination. In India, one report found that discrimination against children affected by HIV/AIDS is common. Teachers and principals often separate these children from other students or deny them admission entirely.
- Children’s absence from and discrimination at school may prevent them from learning about HIV/AIDS and how to avoid infection. They may also be more susceptible to abuse and exploitation, which further increases their risk of contracting the disease.
- It is estimated that if all children completed primary education, 700,000 new cases of HIV/AIDS in young people could be prevented each year, totaling seven million cases in a decade.

In 2000, when the world’s leaders met in Dakar and agreed upon a number of principles designed to achieve Education for All, they called the creation of “safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning, with clearly defined levels of achievement for all” and specifically stated: “Learning environments should also be healthy, safe and protective. This should include: (1) adequate water and sanitation facilities, (2) access to or linkages with health and nutrition services, (3) policies and codes of conducts that enhance physical, psycho-social and emotional health of teachers and learners, and (4) education content and practices leading to knowledge, attitudes, values, and life skills needed for self-esteem, good health, and personal safety.”