



European Forum for Freedom in Education

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For a Healthy School

Sustainability and Responsibility in Education and Health Promotion

Exposé

Recognition of the need to make schools healthier is not new. The ancient world saw a strong connection between physical, mental and emotional health as exemplified by the Greek “gymnasion”. Success in these three areas of health provides a foundation for motivated and successful learning.

In many countries citizens expect schools and other educational institutions to play a role in promoting and securing health in the population. It should be self-evident to not only promote the mind but also the body in equal measure. However, we should not forget that while a healthy body is a good basis for a healthy mind, a healthy mind can also exist in an unhealthy body and a healthy body can host an unhealthy mind.

The recognition of the importance of different aspects of health is in contradiction with the data and facts concerning pupils and teachers across Europe. Despite a high number of projects at national level aiming to improve the general situation, the impact has been minimal. The tendency is alarming as more and more pupils and teachers become ill each year. Be it underdeveloped motor skills, obesity¹ or stress: **There is a lack of health in European schools!**

This phenomenon has already been recognised at international level and measures have been taken. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the European Union (EU) have identified the tremendous impact healthy development in the early years has on physical and mental well-being throughout one's whole life. Therefore, the connection between education and health has been

¹ In the European Union 22 billion children are overweight, more than 5 billion of those are suffering from adiposis. There are 400 000 more cases each year.



taken up and dealt with, with varying levels of success. The EU has created several initiatives relating to education and health. **Education and health cannot be seen separately from each other; they are complementary.**

In order to be able to create this link we first need to ask **“What exactly is health?”** The WHO defines health as: *“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”*²

Health or disease cannot be seen as conditions but rather as processes. Aaron Antonovsky’s ‘salutogenesis’ concept can further illuminate our understanding of health. While searching for an answer on how health comes into existence he drew the conclusion that health exists, or can come into existence, if a “sense of coherence” is developed. This means a sense that you can understand events in your life, the belief that you have the ability and support to manage things and a belief that there is a good reason to care about what happens. In Antonovsky’s view, health and disease are on the one hand subjectively experienced events and on the other hand situations limited by objective factors. Health is a multi-dimensional condition and strongly connected to social and cultural contexts. Symptoms of disease are seen as alarm signals displaying that the sense of coherence is out of balance.

All three areas of physical, mental and social well-being recognised in the salutogenesis approach must be taken into consideration when talking about health in schools, and schools taking on more responsibility in securing and promoting health. On the one hand, there is a need to maintain existing levels of health and prevent disease and illness. On the other hand, we must eliminate health threatening factors that are not only diseases and illnesses in the commonly understood sense but in light of a holistic approach.

This conference will look at all the different areas of health in connection with school and education. Not only the preservation, but also the development of health in pupils, teachers and parents will be discussed.

² Constitution of the World Health Organisation, Introduction.