

Education and Health: Interconnected Pillars in a Time of Polycrisis

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Introduction

Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends, good day to all of you. Whether you are joining us in person in Brussels or connecting virtually from around the world, it is my great honor to represent UNESCO at this pivotal Educaid.be International Conference.

This year's theme, "*When health educates and education cares,*" speaks directly to the needs of our time. It calls for systems that nurture both our body and mind, recognizing learning and well-being as inseparable foundations of human development.

We come together at a critical moment, one often described as a polycrisis, marked by the convergence of multiple, interconnected crises unfolding on an unprecedented scale. From persistent health emergencies and protracted conflicts to the escalating climate crisis and a resurgence of nationalist policies, these crises do not exist in isolation. They intersect, reinforce, and intensify one another, amplifying their impact on societies everywhere.

In this complex landscape, education and health stand out as two vital pillars—not only to help societies survive these crises, but to empower them to thrive beyond them. Today, I will explore the deep connections between education and health, examine the challenges posed by this polycrisis, and share how UNESCO is contributing to global efforts to strengthen these interconnected pillars in pursuit of a more resilient and equitable future.

The Connection Between Education and Health

Education and health have long been recognized as complementary pillars of human development. At UNESCO, we do not treat them as separate sectors but as

interconnected parts of a holistic system that supports individual well-being, promotes social equity, and advances sustainable development.

Education is among the most powerful tools to improve health outcomes worldwide. Through quality education, individuals gain knowledge, critical thinking, and empowerment necessary to make informed decisions about their health, including nutrition, hygiene, disease prevention, and reproductive health. These informed choices lead directly to reduced illness and improved quality of life.

Conversely, good health is essential for effective learning. Children and youth who are physically healthy, mentally supported, and socially included are more likely to attend school regularly, engage fully, and reach their potential. Without good health, even the most well-designed education systems cannot deliver meaningful learning outcomes.

This interconnection was clearly highlighted at the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, where nearly two-thirds of national statements called for urgent action to safeguard the health, well-being, and safety of learners and teachers. This shared recognition is energizing global efforts to embed health promotion more deeply within education systems.

Some Key Research Evidence

Recent research compiled by UNESCO and partners offers powerful evidence supporting this integrated approach.

For example, the study *Learn to Eat Well (and Eat to Learn Well)* showed that every USD 11 billion invested in school meal programs generates an estimated USD 156 billion in return through improved school attendance and learning outcomes. This illustrates how targeted health investments within education yield enormous social and economic benefits.

The 2023 *Global Education Monitoring Report* revealed that if all girls worldwide completed secondary education, child marriage rates would drop by nearly two-thirds. This represents millions of girls empowered to delay marriage and pregnancy, thereby reducing serious health risks. This ripple effect improves not only individual lives but entire communities.

Research from the *Ready to Learn and Thrive* report by UNESCO and other UN agencies provides valuable insights. In low-income countries, promoting handwashing and malaria prevention in schools has significantly reduced absenteeism. Addressing bullying and violence can cut school skipping rates by half. Meanwhile, school meal programs have increased enrollment by 9% and attendance by 8%.

Additionally, data show that universal primary education for girls could reduce maternal deaths by two-thirds, saving approximately 98,000 lives annually. Secondary education completion further decreases child marriages and increases contraceptive use. These outcomes underscore education as a vital social determinant of health.

Integrating Health and Well-being into Education Policies and Practices

Recognizing these intertwined challenges, UNESCO partnered with the World Health Organization to co-launch the *Global Standards for Health-Promoting Schools* in 2021. This framework offers practical guidance for schools to implement comprehensive health policies, create safe and inclusive environments, integrate health education in curricula, and actively engage families and communities.

Building on this, UNESCO and partners from the Inter-Agency Group for School Health and Nutrition will soon launch *Planning for Healthy and Thriving Learners*, an initiative translating high-level commitments into actionable plans that place learners' health and well-being at the heart of education systems.

In 2023, UNESCO and UNICEF co-launched the *Building Strong Foundations* initiative, focusing on learners aged 5 to 12 and beyond. Early education on health and well-being supports improved learning outcomes, child protection, safety from violence, gender equality, and active citizenship.

Mental Health and Well-Being: An Urgent Priority

Today is also *World Mental Health Day*, a vital reminder of the growing mental health challenges young people face worldwide. As we observe this day, let us reaffirm that a mentally healthy classroom is just as essential to learning as a roof

is to a school. When teachers and students feel safe, connected, and supported, learning truly flourishes.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified these challenges. School closures and the resulting social isolation, and stress led to a surge in anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions among children and adolescents.

Currently, one in seven adolescents lives with a diagnosable mental health disorder, and many more face psychological difficulties affecting learning and development. Yet, many education systems lack adequate resources or capacity to provide psychosocial support or foster inclusive, mentally healthy environments.

Supporting mental health in schools is essential, not only as a health issue but as a core part of enabling effective learning. Learners who receive emotional and psychological support tend to stay in school longer, participate more fully, build meaningful relationships, and perform better academically.

UNESCO has made mental health promotion a central focus, collaborating with partners to develop tools and frameworks that help schools create nurturing environments where every learner can thrive.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is widely recognized as essential for advancing gender equality, promoting healthy relationships, and improving sexual and reproductive health. It has also been shown to positively impact both education and health outcomes.

For UNESCO, CSE is more effective and sustainable when delivered as an age-appropriate, curriculum-based process that addresses the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It equips young people with life-saving knowledge and builds the values, skills, and behaviors they need to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. Importantly, it promotes respect for human rights, gender equality, and diversity.

CSE empowers learners to understand and uphold their health, well-being, and dignity, build respectful relationships, and recognize their sexual and health rights throughout their lives.

Without accurate sexual and reproductive health information, learners face risks that directly affect their education and future. For example, early and unintended pregnancies increase absenteeism, hinder academic performance, contribute to early school dropout among girls, while also impacting the educational opportunities of young fathers.

Safe Learning Environments

We know that violence including bullying in and around schools can have serious and long-lasting effects on learners' physical and mental health, educational outcomes, and ultimately, their futures.

Globally, one in three learners is bullied at school each month. While data on sexual and gender-based violence in educational settings is difficult to gather, the most recent estimates suggest that around 60 million girls are sexually assaulted at or on their way to school each year. Cyberbullying is also a growing concern, affecting as many as one in ten children. Armed conflict, whether at the gang or national level, increasingly impacts the safety and well-being of boys and young men.

Given its far-reaching impact on both health and learning, violence is not only a child rights issue, but it also carries significant costs for education systems when left unaddressed. Education has a critical role to play in promoting peace, preventing violence, and ensuring that all learners affected by school-based, online, or conflict-related violence receive support in exercising their right to both health and education.

Climate Change: A Cross-Cutting Challenge

Climate change is another urgent global issue deeply intertwined with education and health. The growing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters, such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves, not only endanger lives and livelihoods but also disrupt education systems and intensify health risks.

The effects of climate change on education and health are well documented. Schools are often damaged or destroyed during disasters, displacing students and interrupting learning. At the same time, health systems come under additional strain. Climate impacts can worsen maternal and neonatal health outcomes, reduce

access to contraception, and contribute to a rise in gender-based violence and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage.

To address these challenges, UNESCO's *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programme* equips learners of all ages with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to understand climate change and take meaningful action. Through the *Greening Education Partnership (GEP)*, the programme prepares learners to be climate-ready by integrating climate change education across all levels and aspects of learning. It promotes climate literacy, resilience, and adaptive capacity, empowering young people to engage in responses at both the community and policy levels.

It is also about planetary health, emphasizing that human well-being depends on the well-being of our planet. Through education for sustainable development and global citizenship, UNESCO helps learners recognize these connections and take collective responsibility for a healthier planet and population.

In addition, UNESCO advocates for climate-resilient school infrastructure and integrated emergency preparedness measures to protect learning environments and support community health.

Coordinated and Collective Action

Addressing these complex, interconnected challenges requires coordinated, multisectoral, and multi-stakeholder action. UNESCO exemplifies this approach by fostering collaboration among ministries of education, health, environment, social protection, and more.

The 2023 *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development* offers a comprehensive framework uniting diverse thematic programs for holistic responses to learners' needs.

A prime example is the *West and Central Africa Commitment for Educated, Healthy and Thriving Adolescents and Young People*, endorsed in 2023 by health and education ministers from 25 countries. This commitment sets ambitious targets for 2032 to reduce early and unintended pregnancies, HIV, gender-based violence, and education disparities.

It features a robust accountability framework and is implemented through partnerships with UN agencies, civil society, bilateral cooperation, and youth networks.

This builds on the *East and Southern Africa Commitment*, first endorsed in 2013 and renewed in 2021, which led to broad adoption of supportive policies, curricula, teacher training, and multisectoral coordination.

Conclusion

In closing, I leave you with a clear and resolute message: investing in education is investing in health, well-being, equity, and resilience. When education teaches health and health enables learning, we build societies that are not only more resilient but profoundly more humane.

Education and health stand as inseparable pillars, fundamental human rights and essential foundations for building societies capable of confronting and overcoming the complex polycrisis we face today. They are the critical drivers of sustainable development, equity, and hope for future generations.

UNESCO remains steadfast in its commitment to support member states and partners worldwide to turn this vision into reality. Through strengthening education and health systems with inclusive, integrated policies and partnerships, we can guarantee that every child and young person regardless of their background or circumstance has the opportunity to learn, thrive, and contribute to a healthier, more just, and sustainable future.

Together, let us advance this shared mission with dedication and collective action. Thank you for your engagement, your commitment, and your partnership in shaping a better world through education and health.