

Healthy Living and Learning for every London Child

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Objective:

To provide an overview of the Healthy Schools London Programme and its impact on promoting child health, wellbeing and academic attainment within the current economic climate.

Background:

England's National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP) was established in 1999 as a joint Department of Education and Department of Health initiative to improve child health, raise academic attainment and promote social inclusion.¹ 97% of London Schools attained healthy schools status under the national programme. The NSHP ended in 2011 and public sector financial cuts forced many London boroughs (the 32 administrative units of London) to stop or reduce investment in school-based health promotion. By the end of 2011 only 47% of London boroughs had a local healthy schools programme.²

This disinvestment in school-based health promotion has occurred against a rising prevalence of childhood obesity, poor child health and widening inequalities.³ 37.4% of ten and eleven year olds in London are overweight or obese⁴, over a quarter of children live in poverty⁵ and over 40% are eligible for free school meals.⁶ London also has a higher proportion of underweight children than the national average⁷ and a government survey found 95% of teachers had experienced a child arriving at school hungry.⁸

In 2011 the Mayor of London agreed to use the health promoting schools model to tackle childhood obesity and in 2013 the Healthy Schools London Programme (HSL) was launched with a wider child health and wellbeing remit.⁹

Evidence base:

Healthier children achieve better at school and educational attainment in childhood is linked to better health in adulthood and increased life expectancy.^{10 11} A recent Cochrane review of school-based health promotion found it to be effective in increasing physical activity, improving diet and reducing smoking and bullying.¹² There is also emerging evidence of how school-based health promotion improves learning and educational outcomes.¹³ However, recent educational reforms in England implemented in response to the recession and with the aim of promoting future economic competitiveness are increasingly focused on test performance at the expense of wider child health and social development.¹⁴

Healthy Schools London Approach:

Schools use a 'whole school approach' to health improvement which brings together pupils, staff, the curriculum, environment and culture of the school to produce partnerships, policies, and programmes of activity to improve health and wellbeing.

The programme supports schools to achieve 3 levels of award:

- Bronze: School must complete a HSL review and achieve minimum requirements across four health and wellbeing themes using a whole school approach.
- Silver: Schools must undertake a needs analysis to identify targeted and universal actions to improve pupil health and wellbeing. They must also include plans for evaluating and monitoring their actions.
- Gold: Schools need to show the impact of the changes they have made as a result of the actions plans produced as part of their Silver Award. They must also demonstrate how they have engaged the wider community and supported others to improve child health and wellbeing.

Impact:

45% of London Schools are registered for the programme and 18% have achieved a bronze award, 2.2% silver and 1% gold. The London programme has also stimulated borough investment with a 73% increase in local borough support for pupil health and wellbeing.

Programme challenges:

The economic recession and resultant public sector funding cuts have put pressure on borough's funding for disease prevention and health promotion. Despite the existing evidence base for the effectiveness of school-based health promotion, local programme evaluations remain an important component of programme sustainability. However, the multi-faceted nature of HSL and schools' autonomy over which elements of the programme to implement makes local evaluations difficult and presents challenges in transferring findings from one school to another. Thus HSL have commissioned an independent evaluation by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, with a report due at the end of 2015.

Conclusions:

Having a city-wide programme championed by the Mayor has stimulated local boroughs to invest in school-based health promotion during a time of economic austerity and public health budget cuts. HSL is an effective programme to improve child health and wellbeing and promote learning and attainment, which in turn supports health throughout adulthood.

References:

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