

Mental health

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Youth perspectives in focus at high-level meeting on schooling during COVID-19 pandemic

11-12-2020

This week, WHO/Europe hosted a virtual high-level meeting with ministers of health and education from across the WHO European Region to highlight ways to minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the schooling, health, well-being and education of young people.

In a statement, Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, said: "School closures and interventions such as distance learning may have a negative effect on children's long-term educational outcomes. Children living with disabilities are further disadvantaged by school closures and inadequate distance learning measures to meet their needs. We owe it to the next generation, particularly those in vulnerable settings, to do everything we can to reduce vulnerabilities and to keep their in-person learning alive.

"The evidence is growing that targeting transmission in our communities will address the risk of transmission in schools. If proper and consistent measures are in place, schools do not pose a greater risk of infection for children, teachers and other staff than any other public place."

Challenges and cooperation

The need for updated evidence for schools to operate safely was highlighted, as was the necessity of further enhancing the existing framework to support countries on schooling and COVID-19 with evidence sharing. In addition, the attendees explained the importance of evaluating responses to COVID-19 and how they impact the rights of children.

During the meeting, countries highlighted the methods they have employed to ensure that schools remain open as long as possible, while also recognizing the difficulties encountered during the pandemic.

In addition, the meeting heard from partners and collaborators on what they do and how they support countries. They also agreed on continued regional collaboration.

Hearing direct from young people

A group of youth advisors to the technical advisory group on schooling during COVID-19 (TAG), which was established earlier this year, were invited to contribute. The perspectives and participation of young people is vital to the topic of schools and COVID-19.

In their presentation, the youth advisors highlighted some findings from a survey shared with students from across the European Region. Feedback from young people included concerns about the immediate impact on their learning and well-being, as well as whether examinations and long-term plans, such as university, could be negatively affected.

Some students explained that they were feeling under pressure to complete work in a shorter time, while others said that in some cases, they lacked the ability to be properly educated at home; for example, if they have a poor internet connection or live in a vulnerable situation.

The meeting highlighted the importance of providing support to children and young people with disabilities or pre-existing health conditions.

Building on shared experiences

This week's virtual discussion follows on from a meeting that took place in August of this year, highlighting the need for sharing evidence and country experiences on schooling during COVID-19. This resulted in the establishment of the TAG, which has been meeting to discuss the response to COVID-19 and schooling.

Education often has an impact on wider health in society. The closure of schools has led to concerns about some students being left behind, with many more facing mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic.

Leaving no one behind is central to the European Programme of Work, 2020–2025 – "United Action for Better Health". Mental health, and the development of a coalition for mental health, is 1 of the 4 priorities influencing the work of WHO/Europe in the coming years.



WHO
Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge and Dr Dorit Nitzan during the High-Level virtual meeting on schooling during COVID-19

[Joint statement – Towards a consensus on safe schooling in the WHO European Region during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Podcast: Schooling during COVID-19](#)



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WHO Regional Office for Europe
UN City
Marmorvej 51
DK-2100 Copenhagen Ø
Denmark
Tel.: +45 45 33 70 00
Fax: +45 45 33 70 01
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