

A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools

Route to Quality Inclusion



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GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION, SPORT, YOUTH
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Progress in relation to inclusive education and equity requires an effective strategy for implementation. A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion gives a guiding plan to all stakeholders within the Education sector towards a more just and holistic education. The overarching vision of this policy is to ensure that all learners have access to quality education, intervention, and support to experience success in learning within a high-quality Inclusive Education System.

This policy is based on the conviction that all our learners are entitled to enjoy a meaningful educational experience which is fruitful and relevant, and one which guides learners to choose individualised learning pathways. A responsive rather than a reactive approach is adopted, one where inclusion and equity are nurtured in principle and practice.

Through the targets set, this policy aims to cultivate inclusive school cultures and environments where learners feel safe, secure, motivated, and most importantly feel a sense of belonging. In this policy, we are acknowledging and celebrating individual strengths in our learners. We are promoting a collaborative culture where all stakeholders work hand in hand towards the removal of all barriers to learning.

We encourage you to join us in this aspiring venture as we seek a more equitable and inclusive education system where every learner, parent and educator is valued, accepted, and encouraged to thrive.

Thank you to all those who made their contribution in one way or another, in the writing of this policy and its framework.

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Background and Context

This policy was developed within the context of the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024* (MEDE, 2014) and the *National Curriculum Framework for All* (MEDE, 2012). This policy also draws on several international commitments to the provision of education for all to which Malta is a signatory, namely, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). It is in the context of *The Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond* (2021-2030), which establishes as its first strategic priority improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training. This policy also adopts a whole-school approach philosophy of how schools are to develop conducive learning environments for all stakeholders supporting the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 4 – Ensure Inclusive and Equitable quality Education and Promote lifelong Learning opportunities for all (UN, 2015).

This policy views individual differences as opportunities for enriching learning (UNESCO, 2005). Hence, it offers flexibility to schools to transform existing pedagogical, personal and professional beliefs, attitudes and discourse, as well as re-design processes and practices in a manner that respond effectively to *all* learners' needs and social realities¹. This transformation will take place by working on various goals related to disability, attendance, gender, promoting a healthy lifestyle and managing behaviour in schools that will address inequalities in our schools². For this policy Inclusive Education is defined holistically in accordance with the conclusions of the council of the European Union (2017, p. 3) and considers issues around intersectionality:

“Available and accessible to all learners of all ages, including those facing challenges, such as those with special needs or who have a disability, those originating from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds or geographically depressed areas or war-torn zones, regardless of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.”

1 The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and deepened social inequalities which above all led to the most unprecedented disruption in the history of education. This policy aims to address these inequalities by ensuring equitable access to a quality education for all.

2 Reference to Annex I-IV

Terminology

| | |
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| Barriers | Refers to factors in a person's environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability (WHO, 2001) |
| College | Refers to a cluster of Primary, Middle and Secondary schools in the State Education Sector in Malta |
| Continuous Professional Education | Refers to training of educators in order to update and enhance their knowledge and skills |
| Disability | Refers to a long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder one's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Equal Opportunities Act, Act XXIV of 2016) |
| Diversity | Refers to differences or dimensions that can be used to differentiate groups and individual persons from one another, including body appearance, ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, social class, level of education, religion, work experiences, life styles and cultures and being sensitive to emerging diversities and needs. |
| Educators | Refers to members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), Teachers, Kindergarten Educators and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) working with learners in educational settings including Child Care Centres, Kindergarten, Primary, Middle, Secondary and Post-Secondary Schools, Resource Centres, Learning Support Centres, Alternative Learning Centres and any other educational institution. |
| Equity | Equity is about ensuring that there is a concern with fairness, such that the education of all learners is seen as having equal importance (UNESCO, 2017. p. 13) |
| Food-based standards | Refers to specific quantities, portions or ranges of foods/food groups that should be included/excluded in a meal/snack. These may also stipulate frequency of provision and/or restriction or prohibition of certain foods. They may be in line with national food-based dietary guidelines. |
| Gender | Refers to people's internal perception and experience of maleness and femaleness and the social construction that allocates certain behaviours in male and female roles which vary across history, societies, cultures and classes. Gender is hence strongly linked to society's expectations and is not exclusively a biological matter. |
| Gender Expression | Refers to people's manifestation of their gender identity, and the one that is perceived by others. Typically, people seek to make their gender expression or presentation match their gender identity, irrespective of the sex that they were assigned at birth. |
| Gender Identity | Refers to each person's internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance and/ or functions by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including name, dress, speech and mannerisms. |
| Gender Variant | Refers to persons whose gender expression differs from stereotypical expectations and to varying degrees does not conform to gender-based norms and expectations of society. |
| High quality education | Refers to a system that serves all learners in such a way that it prepares them for the future. In so doing it makes provisions for a relevant curriculum, appropriate assessment, high quality teaching, collegial leadership and accountability to peers and families. High quality education has high expectations for all. |

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| Inclusive education | Refers to the valuing and acceptance of diversity, to its value and the rights of learners to not only attend mainstream schools, but also to belong as valued members through active participation and the elimination of the barriers limiting the participation and achievement of all learners, respect diverse needs, abilities and characteristics. |
| Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environment (ILFE) | Refers to a learning environment which provides the optimal conditions for effective learning and teaching to take place. Such an environment welcomes, nurtures and educates all learners regardless of their gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other characteristics (UNESCO, 2015) |
| Individualised Education Plans (IEP) | Refers to the planning for individual learner needs and the process of planning, implementing and evaluating a curriculum programme as well as the holistic development of the learner. |
| Inter-cultural education | Refers to any form of education that acknowledges and fosters cultural pluralism, i.e. culture in the broadest possible sense, encompassing differences in ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, social class, religion and education. It is founded on the principle of education equity for all learners |
| Intersectionality | Refers to the understanding that a person, group of people, organisation or social problem is affected and impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages. It considers everything and anything that can marginalise learners and increase their chances of exclusion. This includes, but is not limited to "...gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes (UNESCO, 2020) |
| Intersex | Refers to persons who cannot be classified as male or female with regard to their chromosomal, gonadal or anatomical sex. The latter becomes evident, for example, in secondary sex characteristics such as muscle mass, hair distribution and stature, or primary sex characteristics such as the inner and outer genitalia and/or the chromosomal and hormonal structure. |
| Learners | Refers to all children who are attending Child Care Centres, Kindergarten, Primary, Middle, Secondary and Post-Secondary Schools, Resource Centres, Learning Support Centres, Alternative Learning Centres and any other educational institution. This policy uses the term "learner" because this term places a certain degree of responsibility for learning on behalf of the individual (Bray & McClaskey, 2014). However, there are many other factors that influence learning and the role of educators and learners together can lead to more effective outcomes. |
| LGBTIQ | Refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer. Although all of the different sub-groups within "LGBTIQ" are often organised together, there are specific needs and concerns related to each community within the acronym. |
| Nutrition guidelines | Refers to recommendations to improve the quality and adequacy of the food provided/ available at schools. |
| Nutrition/Food & Beverage standards | Refers to specific values/quantities, levels or frequencies that should determine food/meal composition. |
| Parent | Refers to the biological or legal guardian of the learner attending the school. |

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| Sex | Refers to the biological term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Common terms are 'male', 'female', and 'intersex'. |
| Sex Characteristics | Refer to the chromosomal, gonadal and anatomical features of a person, which include primary sex characteristics such as reproductive organs and genitalia and/or chromosomal structures and hormones and secondary sex characteristics such as muscle mass, hair distribution, breasts and stature. |
| School | Refers to all State, Church and Independent, Primary, Middle and Secondary Schools, Child Care Centres, and other educational institutions. |
| School community | Refers to the Senior Leadership Team, educators, support professionals and staff members who work in a school, the learners who attend the school and their parents and families, the broader social community and organisations that have a stake in the education of learners. |
| School culture | Refers to the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school. School includes primary, middle, secondary schools, resource centres and learning support centres. |
| School Leadership Team | Refers to school leaders (Head of School and Assistant Head/s of School) working in a particular school, also in liaison with Head of Departments and Head of Department Inclusion. This term also refers to Learning Support Centre Coordinators. |
| Support structures and services | Refers to specialised settings and specialised professionals (college based or private) who offer services to learners through screening, early intervention and throughout compulsory schooling. Ideally, these services are offered in class with professionals in consultation with educators, working in transdisciplinary teams. |
| School Support Management Plan | Refers to the plan by which the school will address the needs of the learner when the learner opens up to an adult. |
| School Transition Management Plan | Refers to the plan by which the school will address the needs of the transitioning learner. |
| Trans | Refers to an inclusive umbrella term referring to those people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans does not refer to a sexual orientation and trans people may have any sexual orientation. |
| Transition | Refers to a complex, multi-step process that can take years in which a trans person aligns their anatomy and/or their gender expression with their gender identity. They go from living and identifying as one gender to living and identifying as another. |
| Unauthorised absence | Refers to situations in which a parent or carer approves their child's late arrival or non-attendance at school. Alternatively, although parents may not approve such absence, they may fail or be able to enforce attendance. |
| Universal Design for Learning (UDL) | Refers to a concept which focuses on how to build flexible learning environments that prioritise access for all, from the point of design, rather than as an afterthought, through multiple means of engagement, representation of content knowledge, and action and expression. (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014) |
| Use of Pronouns | For a more inclusive policy, the use of 'they' shall be used for all genders even when referring to a single individual. |
| Whole-School Development Plan (SDP) | Refers to the procedure whereby schools implement and manage change to enhance quality. This planning emerges from a system of ongoing self-evaluation that enables schools to set priority targets in all areas of school life, set up a plan of action which is regularly reviewed and through it establish ways of consultation with, and involvement of different stakeholders. |

Acronyms

| | |
|--------------|--|
| CPD | Continuous Professional Development |
| DES | Department for Education Services |
| DCLE | Department, Curriculum, Life Long Learning and Employability |
| EHD | Environmental Health Directorate |
| ESP | Education Support Practitioner |
| EU | European Union |
| FAO | Food and Agricultural Organisation |
| FTS | Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools |
| HBSC | Health Behaviour School-aged Children Survey |
| HE | Home Economics |
| HFSS | High in Fats, Sugar and Salt |
| HCN | Head of College Network |
| HoD | Head of Department |
| HPDPD | Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Directorate |
| IE | Institute for Education |
| IEP | Individualised Education Plan |
| LSC | Learning Support Centre |
| LSE | Learning Support Educator |
| LSZ | Learning Support Zone |
| NCF | National Curriculum Framework |
| NG | Nurture Group |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NSSS | National School Support Services |

| | |
|---------------|--|
| PE | Physical Education |
| PESP | Principal Education Support Practitioner |
| SDP | School Development Plan |
| SEBD | Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties |
| SEL | Social and Emotional Learning |
| SESP | Senior Educational Support Practitioner |
| SLT | Senior Leadership Team |
| SSD | Strategy and Support Department |
| SSS | School Support Staff |
| UDL | Universal Design for Learning |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

Guiding Vision and Principles

4

The overarching vision of this policy is to ensure that all learners have access to quality education, intervention, and support to experience success in learning within a high-quality Inclusive Education System. Therefore, it empowers and informs all education providers to:

Create clarity around the concept of inclusion by widening discourses to all possible forms of diversity.

Foster school cultures and environments that are safe, secure and motivating to all learners, to create a sense of belonging for all learners, their families as well as members of the school community in order to enhance development and well-being.

Foster school environments that acknowledge, celebrate and further develop the strengths of *all* learners, ones that nurture a conviction among all educators and families that every learner has the capacity to learn and achieve with the appropriate educational strategies.

Ensure collective responsibility for the teaching and learning of all learners by holding high expectations commensurate with the potential of the learners and to provide meaningful and relevant learning experiences that maximise the potential of the learner.

Nurture a collaborative culture among all educators, practitioners, learners, parents and members of the school community that focuses on strengths, promotes established and successful practices and encourages individual initiatives.

Promote educational sustainability to ensure the effective provision of quality education and support services by assuming collective accountability for all learners' learning by encouraging collaborative school cultures and climates whilst sustaining independent relationships.

Diversity Wheel

Schools are transforming into inclusive settings with a required shift from a 'one size fits all' educational model towards a socially just education that aims to increase the system's ability to respond to all learners' diverse needs, as evident in the Diversity Wheel below:





Cognitive & Learning Diversity

- › **Learners with intellectual disabilities**
- › **Learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties**
- › **Learners who are gifted, talented or manifest high ability**



Multiculturalism & Language Diversity

- › **Learners from ethnic minorities**
- › **Learners who need support to learn English and/or Maltese as an additional language**
- › **Asylum seekers**



Religious Belief Diversity

- › **Learners with various religious beliefs**



Socio-Economic Diversity

- › **Looked after children**
- › **Learners who are at risk of disaffection or exclusion**
- › **Learners at risk of poverty due to socio-economic difficulties**



Gender & Sexual Diversity

- › **Learners of different genders**
- › **Learners with different sexual orientations**
- › **Learners of different gender identities and expressions**
- › **Learners with LGBTIQ parents**



Physical & Psychological Diversity

- › **Learners with physical impairments**
- › **Learners with sensory impairments**
- › **Learners with emotional and behavioural challenges**

6

A Thematic Approach

This policy views inclusive education as a continuous developmental process focused on understanding how children learn, identification and removal of barriers to learning and participation in all schools. The transformation process is founded on 10 pillars/themes which are discussed in more detail and with best practice indicators in the *A National Inclusive Education Framework* (MEDE, 2019a):

1 **Inclusive and Strategic Leadership**

2 **Whole School Development Planning**

3 **Whole School Inclusive Environment**

4 **Collaboration with Parents and Community Engagement**

5 **Individual Education Planning**

6 **Teaching and Learning**

7 **Learner and Staff Well being**

8 **Continuous Professional Development**

9 **Positive Behaviour Management**

10 **Support Structure and Services**

Benchmarks

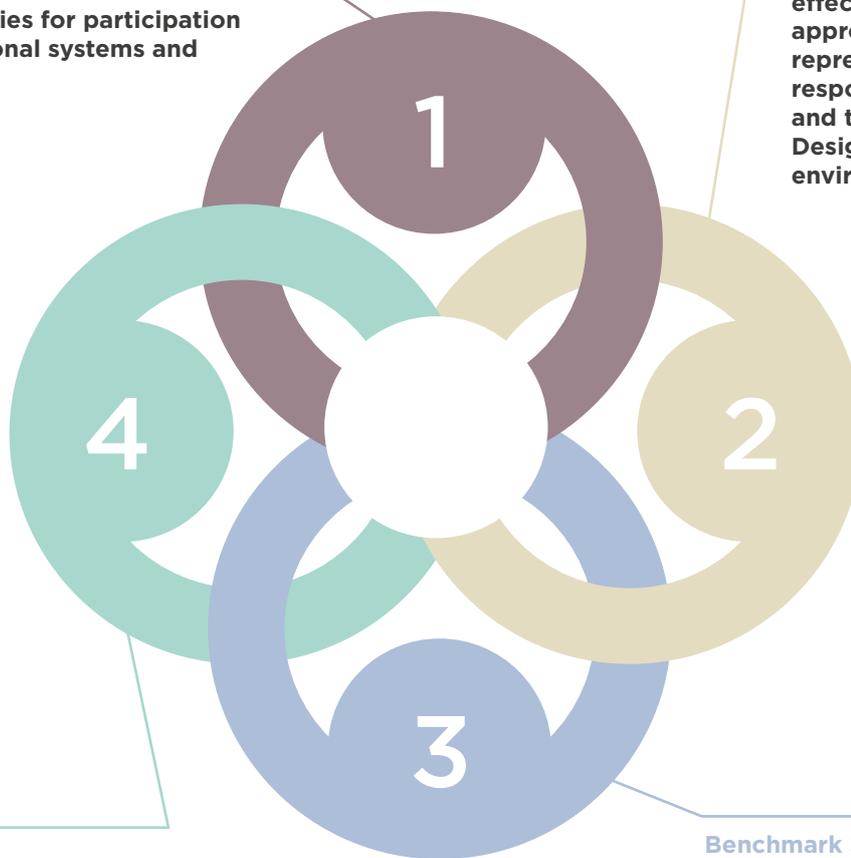
The Inclusion policy is built on the below four benchmarks:

Benchmark 1

All learners have access to opportunities for participation in educational systems and structures.

Benchmark 2

All educators employ effective teaching approaches that are more representative of and responsive to diversity and that foster a Universal Design for Learning environment.

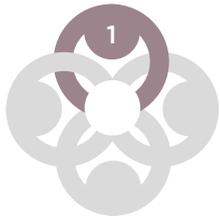


Benchmark 4

All educators have access to flexible education and training opportunities that support their work in delivering quality inclusive education.

Benchmark 3

All schools are supported through well organised support structures that embrace shared cultures and ethos of diversity.



7.1 Goals for Benchmark 1

All learners have access to a quality education with equitable opportunities for participation in educational systems and structures.

| Goal | Smart Targets | Time frame | Stakeholders |
|---|--|------------|---|
| Removal of attitudinal barriers whereby school communities respect and celebrate all forms of diversity including learners who might be at risk of exclusion/ high absenteeism from educational opportunities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school mission statement includes evidence of values of diversity and inclusion placing high importance on equity and improved outcomes for all learners. | 2021- 2022 | DES NSSS HCN |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools organise activities that recognise and celebrate diversity at least once a term. These can include topics related to, but are not limited to racial or ethnic origin, religious belief, disability, or sexual orientation. | 2021-2023 | SLT HoD (Inclusion) NGOs Educational psychosocial Team |
| Physical infrastructure and school climate of educational institutions are modified to be accessible and properly equipped to enhance opportunities for all learners. New educational settings to be built and designed on the principles of Universal Design. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical barriers in schools are removed as much as possible in order to provide full access to quality education. | 2021 -2025 | DES NSSS |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools are supported to promote a culture and climate for sustained school attendance. | 2021-2025 | FTS SSD |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools are to ensure that all learners have ready access to fresh drinking water. | 2021-2023 | HCN SLT HoD (Inclusion) |
| Specialised centres, ideally within mainstream schools to serve as support particularly for learners with more challenges and at risk of exclusion including but not limited to support given by educators in specialised centres to educators in mainstream schools. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The setting up and continuous support of existing specialised centres and other specialised units within mainstream schools. | 2021- 2027 | DES NSSS SSD |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The setting up of communication channels between mainstream and Resource Centres/Learning Support Centres for further collaboration and upskilling of educators. | 2021-2022 | FTS HCN DCLE SLT |

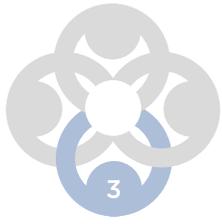


7.2 Goals for Benchmark 2

All educators employ effective teaching approaches that are more representative of and responsive to diversity and that foster a Universal Design for learning environment.

| Goal | SMART Targets | Timeframe | Stakeholders |
|---|---|-----------|---|
| Teaching and learning activities that are meaningful and appropriately challenging for all the diverse learners through active, independent and cooperative learning opportunities. Where necessary Individualised Educational Planning unites learners, parents, educators and professionals in the design of a curriculum programme according to the level of performance of the learner. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that yearly IEPs are well-written and well-designed. | 2021-2022 | DES |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> College/school-based educational resources are inclusive of diversity rich situations to expose learners to concepts of social inclusion. | 2021-2023 | NSSS DCLE HCN |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole-school approach to social and emotional learning and mental health and well-being is implemented. | 2021-2027 | SLT HPDPD NSSS EO PE EO HE EO Curriculum EO Inclusion HoD (Inclusion) Education psychosocial team |
| Co-operative teaching and learning whereby a team approach is adopted. Teachers work with learners and together with other educators, parents and multidisciplinary professionals. Learners support each other through peer tutoring. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptations and differentiation practices done collaboratively between teacher and LSE are showcased. | 2021-2022 | DES NSSS |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A mentoring programme for learning support educators is developed. | 2021-2023 | DCLE SLT |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support is given to newly appointed LSEs through the development of a toolkit. | 2021-2023 | HoD (Inclusion) Teacher mentors. |

| Goal | SMART Targets | Timeframe | Stakeholders |
|---|--|-----------|--|
| Identification of barriers to learning (be it short-term or more substantial, educational and/or social barriers) and the implementation of appropriate support to mitigate difficulties including but not limited to support from Social Workers, Psychosocial team, HoD (Inclusion), HoD (Prefect of discipline), School Psychologists and other professionals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-school support services are made available through the appropriate referral procedures. | 2021-2022 | DES HCN |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating or reviewing memorandum of understanding with other services and agencies outside NSSS and involvement in inter-ministerial committees. | 2021-2022 | SLT HoD (Inclusion) HoD (PoD) Education Psychosocial Service |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upskilling of educators through the support of HoD (Inclusion) and Psychosocial Team. | 2021-2022 | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All stakeholders are involved as early as possible during interventions through collaborative practices. | 2021-2022 | NGOs |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A key worker system is established. | 2021-2022 | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer to Statementing Moderating Panel/Services should be in accordance to the Criteria for Additional Support. | 2021-2022 | |



7.3 Goals for Benchmark 3

All schools are supported through well-organised support structures that embrace shared cultures and ethos of diversity.

| Goal | SMART Targets | Timeframe | Stakeholders |
|--|--|-----------|--|
| <p>The setting of coordinated support structures within the education sectors as well as between different sectors (mainly education, health and social services) in order to promote inter-sectoral approach to facilitate linkage between them. The role of support services is aimed to provide support to parents/guardians, educators and schools rather than to provide support for learners with individual needs. Screening and needs assessment processes are implemented as intervention and prevention rather than a compensatory approach.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SLT and other educators attend training with regards to support services available. | 2021-2022 | DES IfE |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents are aware of support services available and training is organised. | 2021-2022 | SLT HoD (Inclusion) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is promotion of healthy eating and physical activity. | 2021-2025 | Psychosocial Team |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support services are coordinated and work collaboratively. This entails a clear designation of the person at school who is responsible for the interdisciplinary work. | 2021-2023 | Resource Workers (EI) Parents Education psychosocial Services |
| <p>Coordinated support structures to prepare learners for transitions especially in Preschool, Primary, Middle School, Secondary and Post-secondary, tertiary and employment.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners' transitions are prioritised and plans are devised between schools. | 2021-2022 | DES NSSS HCN |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners and parents are aware of the different academic, vocational or applied pathways available. | 2021-2022 | SLT Resource Worker (EI) HoD inclusion Transition coordinator HoD (Inclusion) Guidance Teachers |



7.4 Goals for Benchmark 4

All educators have access to flexible education and training opportunities that support their work in delivering quality inclusive education.

| Goals | SMART Targets | Timeframe | Stakeholders |
|---|---|-----------|---------------------------|
| Educators' training courses should include training on inclusive education to deal with diversity in the classroom including but not limiting to training in areas like multiculturalism, profound and multiple difficulties etc. in order to maintain and develop specialist human resources to support educators. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SLT and educators engage in professional development and training in different areas of inclusive education every scholastic year. | 2021-2022 | IfE HCN DES NSSS |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools and services shall provide potential networking opportunities. | 2021-2022 | SLT |
| Designing and delivering practical and relevant CPD to educators to promote quality inclusion. Such training opportunities should also be given to support teachers and LSEs presented in teamwork for full possible inclusion. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners and Specialised Educators are provided with opportunities of continuous professional development that upskills their knowledge and understanding. | 2021-2023 | IfE NSSS |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training is organised to college/school-based educators on how to address LGBTIQ issues in colleges/schools. | 2021-2025 | DES DCLE |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home Economics teachers facilitate food and nutrition education. | 2021-2026 | |

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APPENDIX 1: OVERVIEW OF ANNEXES

| | |
|--|--|
| Annex I: Attendance | <p>Poor school attendance lowers the literacy and numeracy rates of any country (Thompson, 2008). Absenteeism places learners at risk with the result that they are unable to achieve their educational, social, and psychological potential and are disadvantaged in the quality of choices they can make in later life situations. To this effect, research points towards a complex web of interrelated, interacting and multidirectional forces, which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student factors such as psychosocial variables, physical factors and/or behavioural factors;• Family factors such as structure, functioning and socioeconomic status;• School factors such as school organisation, curriculum and class, school culture and climate;• Community and society variables such as culture, demographic factors, and poverty. <p>Research (Sanchez, 2012) shows that socio-economic and socio-cultural factors had a negative effect on students' attendance, In turn chronic absence affected lower student academic achievement.</p> |
| Annex II: Managing Behaviour and Addressing Bullying Behaviours | <p>Advocating for a whole school approach philosophy and viewing positive behaviour management to be an opportunity for values-based learning as well as a means of maximising the success of academic education programmes. This supports the inclusion of all learners, including learners who present with Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) based on the principles of respect, safety and responsibility. It also aims at addressing bullying behaviour in schools by advocating these fundamental rights to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be in a safe and supportive educational environment free from violence and aggression both on an emotional and physical level.• Be safeguarded from physical injury and emotional distress, considering a person's self-worth, dignity, and wellbeing.• Healthy mental, physical, spiritual, moral, sexual and social development.• Be treated fairly, free from discriminatory comments, labelling and stereotyping.• Freedom of expression and involvement.• Privacy. |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Annex III:</p> <p>Trans, Gender Variant, and Intersex Students</p> | <p>For the issues of trans, gender variant and intersex learners to be addressed effectively, responsibility for creating a safe and inclusive school is to be shared by all stakeholders involved, including all educators and SLT members and support services, parents and students. Addressing gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics issues in schools is a continuous endeavour that involves a proactive approach to new forms of inclusivity. This process includes not only understanding and supporting the learner, but also identifying areas of change and adjusting accordingly.</p> |
| <p>Annex IV:</p> <p>Healthy lifestyle</p> | <p>Studies have shown that proper nutrition has a direct effect on learner performance and behaviour in school (Ross, 2010). A well-nourished child is a child that is healthier and better capacitated to learn and develop. Many studies have also shown that there is a relationship between health and income, with the poorest sections of the population being the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged in terms of the incidence of chronic diseases. They also show lower rates of acceptance of health-promoting behaviours compared with other sectors of society (WHO/FAO, 2003). The WHO stresses the fact that policies need to favour those that are most at risk and have the least power to effect change (WHO, 2015).</p> |

Annex I: Attendance Policy

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Poor school attendance lowers the literacy and numeracy rates of any country (Thompson, 2008). Absenteeism places students at risk with the result that they are unable to achieve their educational, social, and psychological potential and are disadvantaged in the quality of choices they are able to make in later life situations. To this effect, research points towards a complex web of interrelated, interacting and multidirectional forces, which include:

1. **Learner** factors such as psychosocial variables, physical factors and/or behavioural factors;
2. **Family** factors such as structure, functioning and socioeconomic status;
3. **School** factors such as school organisation, curriculum and class, school culture and climate;
4. **Community and Society** variables such as culture, demographic factors, and poverty.

Research (Sanchez, 2012) shows that socio-economic and socio-cultural factors had a negative effect on learners' attendance. In turn chronic absence affected lower student academic achievement.

Table 1 below indicates the range of problems of learners with chronic absenteeism as identified from the caseload of the educational social workers employed in Colleges

| Learner | Family |
|---|---|
| Physical Health Problems | Physical Health Problems |
| Mental Health Problems | Mental Health Problems |
| Learning Difficulties and Disabilities | Financial difficulties |
| School Phobia / school refusal | Unemployment |
| Separation anxiety | Inadequate parental interest, support and recognition of the value of education |
| Addictions | breakdown of parents relationship |
| Learners with social, emotional and behavioral difficulties | Addictions |
| (SEBD) | Domestic violence |
| Peer Pressure | Child protection issues |
| Failure to learn | Bereavement |
| | Parentified students |
| | Over protectiveness |
| School | Community |
| Bullying | Bullying |
| Culture and Cultural expectation | Anti-School Culture |
| Boredom and lack of motivation for learning | |

Table 1: Range of problems of students with chronic absenteeism

The European Union (EU) has set education area targets to be reached by 2030 supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4. One of these targets is to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Malta is also committed to reduce the rate of early school leaving (ESL) to less than 10% (MEDE, 2014). To this effect sustained school attendance plays a fundamental role.

AIMS OF THE POLICY

The policy adopts a whole school approach philosophy. This approach is defined as a unified collective and collaborative action in and by educators, administrators, parents and learners that has been constituted to improve learner learning behaviour and well-being and the conditions that support these. The main aim is to create a culture of service interagency and inclusion in both Colleges and Schools as proposed in Figure 1 below:

The policy’s aims emanate from Targets 1 and 2 of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (MEDE, 2012), are in line with EU and world benchmark and also are in accordance to the National Inclusive Education Framework (MEDE, 2019).

Promoting a Culture of Service Interagency and Inclusion in Colleges and Schools

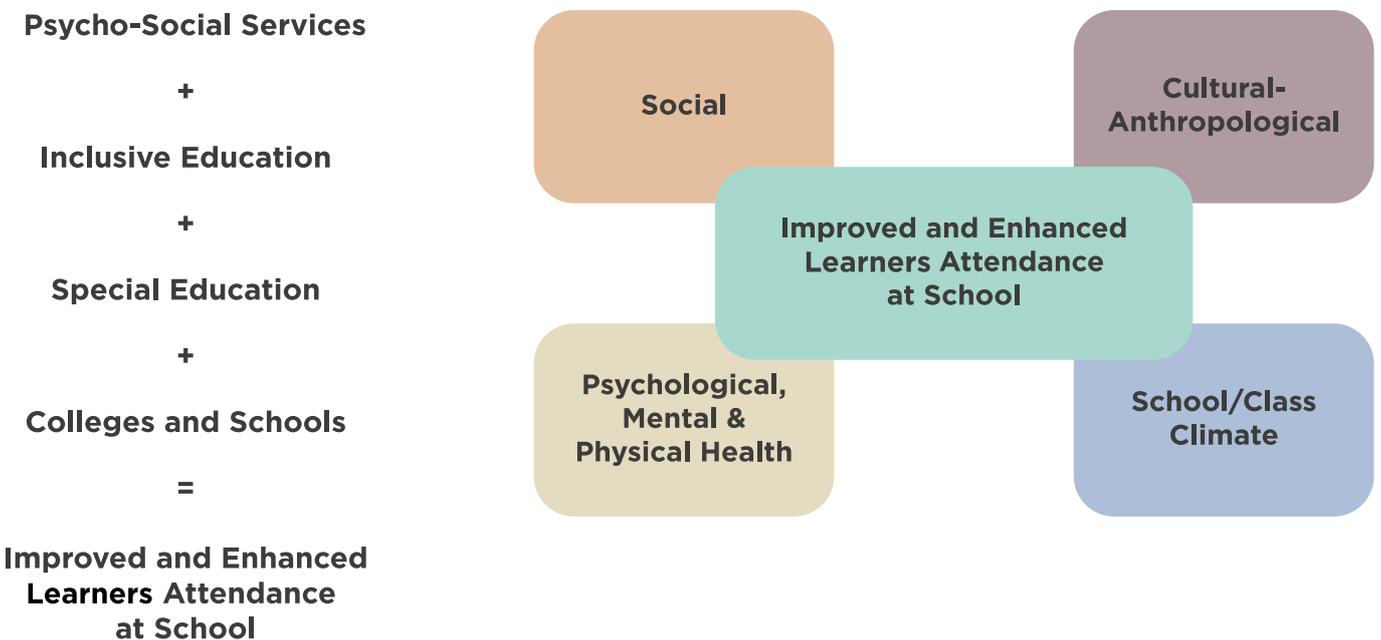


Figure 1: Culture of service interagency and inclusion in both Colleges and Schools

Hence, this policy presents the following broad aims:

- 1** Maximise school completion for all learners
- 2** Raise student achievement and close gaps in learner performance
- 3** Identify attendance patterns in order to design attendance improvement efforts
- 4** Verify that individual students are complying with education legislation relating to compulsory attendance
- 5** Ensure uniformity in attendance reporting and recording (Annex I - Procedures and SOP)

The above objectives promote the Sustained School Attendance Formula and the 3 Tier System as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3:

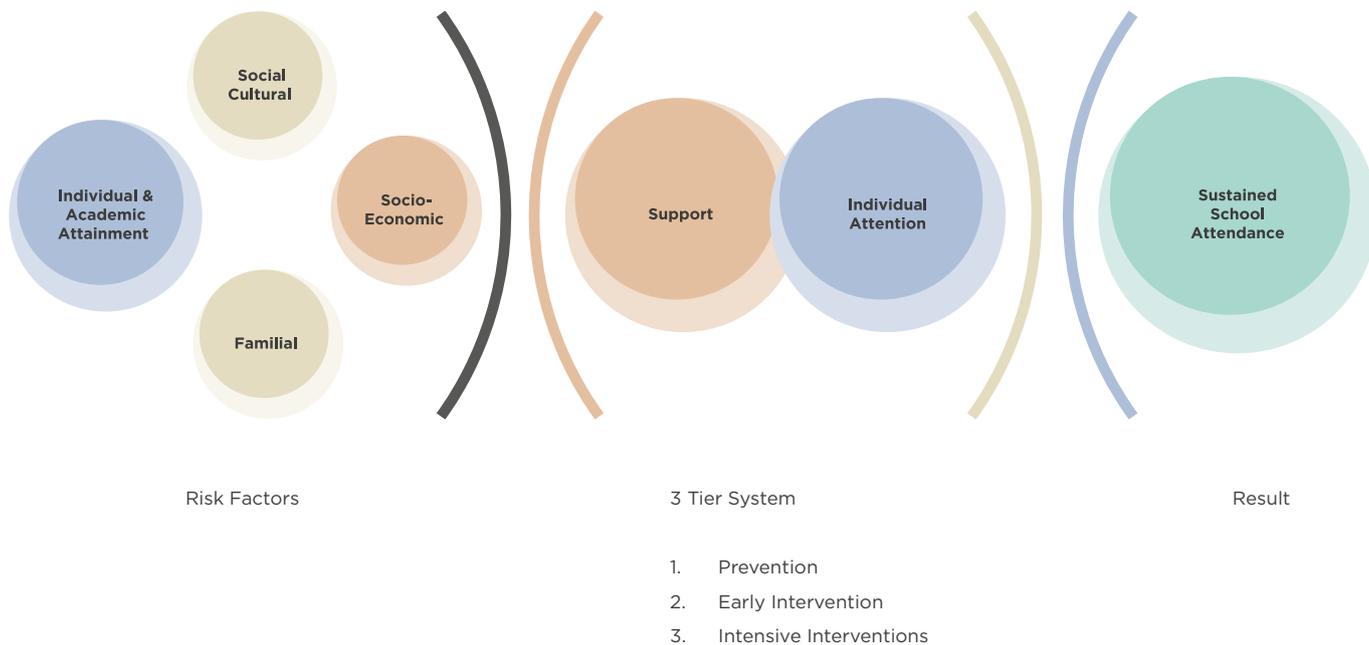


Figure 2: Sustained School Attendance Formula

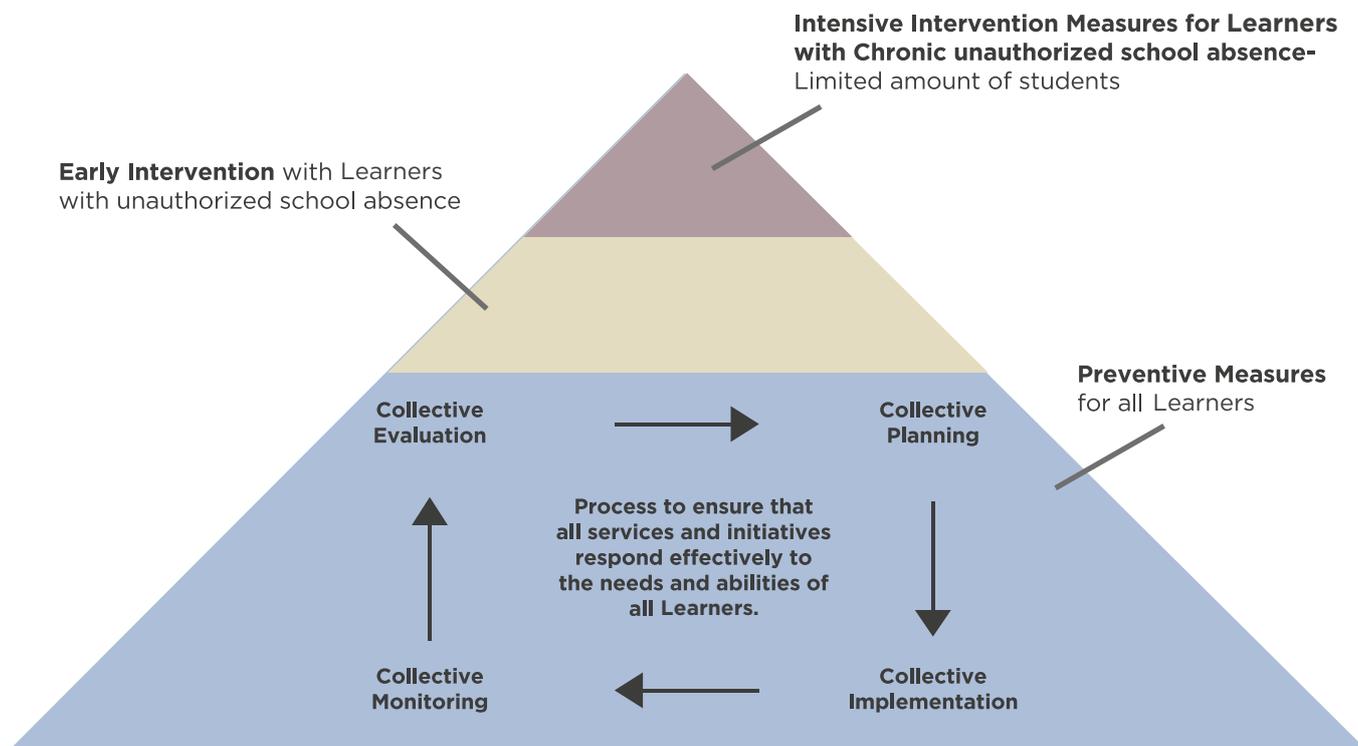


Figure 3: Three tier system

The Policy aims to address attendance in schools in Malta and Gozo and to help schools meet their responsibilities and duties under the Education Act, Chapter 605 (2021) of the Laws of Malta. According to Article 6 it is the duty of every parent of a child who is of compulsory school age to ensure that the child attends school every day unless the minor has a good and sufficient cause to be absent from school. If a parent fails to ensure regular school attendance s/he will be guilty of an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to the punishments established by law. The Education Act also provides that in the case of a second or subsequent conviction of any such offence by any parent the Court may also deprive the parent of his authority, whether de jure or de facto, over the minor and may appoint a tutor for that purpose (Article 59 (1) Education Act)

Strategy

| Over-Arching Action | Ancillary Action Measures |
|--|---|
| Sustained decrease in unauthorised absence in Primary, Middle and Secondary Schools. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS sets up an annual National Awareness campaign supporting school attendance. b. NSSS sets National Attendance Targets for Primary, Middle, and Secondary Sectors every alternate year at the beginning of the scholastic year and provides ongoing support to schools to achieve their attendance targets. c. NSSS supports schools to set their attendance targets every 2 years. d. NSSS supports Heads of College Network to develop a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 attendance related-strategies within their four-year development plans. e. NSSS supports schools to develop attendance related strategies within their School Development Plans. |
| Enhance attendance recording and monitoring for sustained school attendance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS supports Senior Leadership Teams in schools in conducting monthly monitoring of attendance trends in schools (a total of 9 monitoring sessions). b. NSSS supports Senior Leadership Teams in schools to conduct a general evaluation with reference to the attendance at the end of the scholastic year. |
| Support to increase Academic Attainment through sustained school attendance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS provides support to schools to increase short, medium, and long-term strategies for sustained attendance in SDPs. b. NSSS encourages the implementation of teaching strategies that promote learner engagement and active participation during lessons |

| Over-Arching Action | Ancillary Action Measures |
|---|--|
| <p>Support to create a culture and climate for sustained school attendance.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS supports schools in developing productive networking partnerships in favour of sustained school attendance with other schools within or outside the College. b. NSSS supports schools in developing productive partnerships with organizations within the general community. c. NSSS supports schools in developing and implementing meaningful attendance incentives (attendance rewarding system) in favour of sustained school attendance per term. d. Social Workers forming part of the psycho-social team in each College to provide support to schools in setting up active Learners Councils by ensuring that learners with high absenteeism rates are included in School Councils. |
| <p>Develop productive and meaningful partnerships with parents</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS provides support to schools with the aim of increasing parent participation in activities organised by the school, such as meetings. b. NSSS provides support to schools to develop an effective and targeted parent outreach programme, especially to parents whose children register high absenteeism rates. c. Social Workers forming part of the psycho-social teams in each college support schools in the setting up of active Parents' Councils. d. NSSS supports schools to increase school-based initiatives to develop an enhanced school climate for sustained attendance through certificates, attendance records, charts, note to home recognizing improved attendance, and other rewards such as extra break time and time of homework. |
| <p>Service inter/intra agency culture</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. NSSS reviews existent MOU's and/or protocols/agreements, including Malta Police Force; Child Protection Service; and Home-Based Therapy Service. b. NSSS develops new MOU's or protocol/agreements with external support agencies and services to strengthen and re-culture current collaborative agreements or develop new ones. c. NSSS coordinates work of multidisciplinary teams in every college to facilitate the monitoring of attendance rates of referred learners with high absenteeism rates. d. NSSS coordinates work of multidisciplinary teams to facilitate the provision of support to schools in implementing the three-tier system leading to intensive interventions (Figure 2). |

For procedures go to the following link: <https://education.gov.mt/en/NSSS/Pages/Education-services/Social-Work-Service.aspx>

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Annex II: Managing Behaviour and Addressing Bullying Behaviours in Schools

OUR PHILOSOPHY

The Managing Behaviour and Addressing Bullying Behaviours in Schools Policy is grounded in the Framework for the Education Strategy 2014-2024 (MEDE 2012) and A National Inclusion Policy: Route to Quality Inclusion (MEDE, 2019). The philosophy adopts a whole school approach philosophy and views positive behaviour management to be an opportunity for values-based learning as well as a means of maximising the success of academic education programmes. This will support the inclusion of all learners, including learners who present with Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) based on the principles of respect, safety and responsibility. It also aims at addressing bullying behaviour in schools by advocating these fundamental rights to:

Right to:

- Be in a safe and supportive educational environment free from violence and aggression both on an emotional and physical level.
- Be safeguarded from physical injuries and emotional distress, considering a person's self-worth, dignity, and wellbeing.
- Healthy mental, physical, spiritual, moral, sexual, and social development.
- Be treated fairly, free from discriminatory comments, labelling and stereotyping.
- Freedom of expression and involvement.
- Privacy

The policy presents 5 targets with outcomes that are realistic, tangible, and measurable:

1

Know and understand your students and their influences

2

Teach learning behaviours alongside managing misbehaviours

3

Use classroom management strategies to support good classroom behaviour

4

Use simple approaches as part of a regular routine

5

Use targeted approaches to meet the needs of individuals in your school

1

Know and understand your students and their influences

The more teachers know their students better, chances are for positive behaviour in class and at school. In primary schools, teachers spend most of their time in direct contact with their students. Hence, there is more time for building relationships. However, this may not always be possible in middle and secondary schools since the time teachers spend with their students is often limited. A pastoral system might be a good place to proactively support students so that they can respond well to any internal or external influences that may affect their behaviour.

A key influence on the behaviour of a student at school is being the victim of bullying. Bullying could have a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of a student. This could also have repercussions on the student's academic attainment. An anti-bullying programme is already being used successfully both in primary, middle and secondary schools. The programme may include some of these elements depending on the setting. In order for schools to have a better understanding of any internal or external factors that may lead to misbehaviour the policy is proposing that:

- A whole school anti-bullying policy;
- School conferences to create student awareness on the effects of bullying;
- Information sessions for parents;
- Logging system which includes all reported bullying incidents that happen both during school hours and outside school hours, such as cyberbullying;
- Prompt intervention by respective professionals with both the victim and the perpetrator;
- Prompt intervention by respective professionals in case of any reported cyberbullying incident.

Effective teaching time can be enhanced through the proper management of challenging behaviour and low-level disruption in class.

| Action | Steps to be taken | Timescale | Monitor and Evaluation |
|---|---|--|---|
| Get to know your students | Regular contact between school and collage-based support services. Report any bullying incidents and refer students who might benefit from a specialised intervention. | October 2020 - June 2030 October 2020 - June 2030 | Educators, Guidance teachers and SLT |
| Lower the incidence of bullying at school | Proactive and preventive measures: campaign to raise awareness against bullying. Implement a zero-tolerance policy. | October 2021 - June 2030 Ongoing | Educators, Psychosocial Professionals and SLT |

2

Teach learning behaviours alongside managing misbehaviours

The general climate for learning can be improved through the explicit teaching of learning behaviours. A learning behaviour is any behaviour that supports learning. It can be thought of as a behaviour that is necessary so that a learner can learn effectively in the setting of the classroom.

Teaching and learning approaches need to engage the students and ensure that all the learners within the school community engage with others and actively participate in teaching and learning experiences and opportunities. To be able to do this all persons within the school community (students, parents and educators) need:

- To feel safe and secure within the school environment.
- To feel a sense of belonging within the school community.
- To feel a sense of positive self-esteem and self-actualisation.

| Action | Steps to be taken | Timescale | Monitor and Evaluation |
|--|---|--------------------------|---|
| Increasing engagement with self and ensuring participation with others | Whole-School Approach to Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health and Well-Being | October 2021 - June 2030 | Educators, NG/LSZ Educators*, Psychosocial Teams and SLTs |
| Improving access to the curriculum | Teaching and Learning activities are meaningful, appropriately challenging, flexible and give opportunity for all students to enhance their self-esteem and learning within a community of students | Ongoing | Educators and SLTs |

* In schools where there is no NG/LSZ, training to school is to be provided by NSSS.

3

Use classroom management strategies to support good classroom behaviour

Effective classroom management can lead to an improved classroom climate, higher attainment and attendance levels and reduce challenging behaviour, bullying and student disengagement. Experience shows that there is a correlation between school attendance and student disengagement. Whilst the policy acknowledges that situations of challenging behaviour could be traced beyond the remit of the classroom/school, the policy firmly believes that the role of the school in providing a secure environment is crucial in addressing challenging behaviour.

In order to further enhance the skill and competence level of educators the policy is embarking on an exercise to:

- Identify teachers who would benefit the most from assistance in the form of direct help and or training (see table)
- Continuously support in training programmes directed at enhancing classroom management practices
- Improve and possibly extend further existing mentoring programmes
- Create opportunities for the sharing of good practices amongst staff
- Provide slots in both primary and secondary level time tables for teachers to individually or in groups to: Reflect on their approach; Try a new approach; Review progress over time
- Put in place clear reward systems as part of a broad whole-class and whole-school approaches to behaviour management. Examples of reward systems that could be implemented can include star charts and a house points system

| Action | Steps to be taken | Timescale | Monitor and Evaluation |
|--|---|--|---|
| Continuous investment in human resources, support for educators in enhancing classroom management practices and creating opportunities for sharing of good practices | Support for NQTs and newly appointed LSEs Mentoring Programmes Training Initiatives for educators on behaviour management such as COPE Sessions | Ongoing September 2020 - September 2029 September 2021 - June 2030 | SLTs, HODs Prefect of Discipline and HODs Inclusion |
| Put in place clear reward systems as part of a broad Whole School Approach and Whole Class Approach | Whole School Reward Systems Whole Class Reward Systems | September 2021 - June 2025 September 2021 - June 2025 | Educators and SLTs and HODs Prefect of Discipline |

4

Use simple approaches as part of a regular routine

Teaching and learning involves the building of a positive relationship between the educator and the student. Through positive approaches to behaviour, challenging behaviours are reduced. This policy states the need for schools to adopt positivity within the school environment to ensure positive and proactive approaches towards behaviour.

In order to further support positive approaches in students this policy suggests that schools:

- Greet stakeholders in a positive manner
- Support self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation in all stakeholders
- Support approaches to Mental Health and Well-Being in schools
- Ensure structure and routines in schools
- Ensure that learning environment is conducive to learning
- Give specific behaviour-related praise and constructive feedback throughout the lesson
- Support student-centered approaches in teaching and learning

| Action | Steps to be taken | Timescale | Monitor and Evaluation |
|--|---|--|---|
| Give strategies to educators on positive approaches towards addressing behaviours in schools | Training to Educators during COPE sessions | September 2021 - June 2030 | Educators and SLTs |
| Create positive learning friendly environments in schools which are conducive to learning | Changes in the physical environment in schools Encourage removal of environmental barriers as outlined in A National Inclusive Education Framework | September 2021 - June 2024 September 2021 - June 2024 | SLTs & HODs Prefect of Discipline to support in monitoring and evaluation |

5

Use targeted approaches to meet the needs of individuals in your school

Universal systems are unlikely to meet the needs of all students, thus for those students who require more intensive support with their behaviour, a personalised approach is being recommended in this policy. This may involve targeted interventions implemented by trained professional staff to address the needs of the students and to support teachers to help them reflect more on helpful classroom management techniques. However, a tailored approach to support an individual's behaviour should also complement the school's behaviour policy to ensure consistency and coherence in the school.

This policy recommends the following range of interventions that may improve aspects of school behaviour and also to meet the individual needs of students.

- To focus more on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) on different school levels
- To strengthen communication between schools, parents/guardians and other agencies to move towards a more collaborative approach.
- To offer training on positive handling strategies focusing on de-escalation techniques.
- To provide access to Individualised Support Programmes¹.

| Action | Steps to be taken | Timescale | Monitor and Evaluation |
|---|---|--|--|
| Strengthen communication between school, parents and other agencies and provide access to individual support programmes | Involve all stakeholders as early as possible during all interventions Formulate more systemic intervention Establish a key worker system | Introduced across colleges by September 2022 | SLT, NG/LSZ Educators, LSC, Psychosocial Team, HOD Prefect of Discipline |
| Offer training on positive handling strategies focusing on de-escalation techniques | Training programmes aimed directly to offer positive handling strategies to render of safer environment in schools | September 2021 - June 2030 | NSSS, Heads of College Network, Institute for Education |

¹ Such as Individual Learning Programmes implemented by NG & LSZ Educators and Behaviour Modification Programmes for Individual Learners

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Ministry for Education and Employment. (2019b). A National Inclusive Education Framework. Malta: Ministry for Education and Employment

Such as Individual Learning Programmes implemented by NG & LSZ Educators and Behaviour Modification Programmes for Individual Learners.

Annex III: Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in School Policy

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

LGBT students face teasing, name calling and public ridicule, rumours, intimidation, pushing and hitting, stealing or damaging belongings, obscene notes and graffiti, social isolation, cyber bullying, physical and sexual assault, and even death threats. This occurs in classes, playgrounds, toilets and changing rooms, on the way to and from school, as well as online. Implicit violence also takes place through discriminatory education policies, regulations, curricula, teaching materials and teaching practices. Trans students face additional obstacles with gendered uniforms, official documents/records that don't reflect their gender identity, and single sex facilities such as toilets and changing rooms in educational institutions.

UN Independent Expert on SOGI Mr. Victor Madrigal-Borloz, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Ms. Koumbou Boly Barry (2019)

Trans, gender variant and intersex students face a range of issues and psychological demands and needs that warrant being addressed (Istar Lev, 2009; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Richards, 2015; Luengsurawat, 2009; OHRC 2014)¹. For the issues of trans, gender variant and intersex students to be addressed effectively, responsibility for creating a safe and inclusive school is to be shared by all stakeholders involved, including all teaching and SLT and support services, parents and students. Addressing gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics issues in schools is a continuous endeavour that involves a proactive approach to new forms of inclusivity. This process includes not only understanding and supporting the student, but also identifying areas of change and adjusting accordingly. This process includes not only understanding and supporting the student, but also identifying areas of change and adjusting accordingly.

Transition: There are a growing number of students who are choosing to transition (or affirm their gender) while in school. This may mean that they will be adopting names, pronouns, clothing, hairstyles and mannerisms that match their identity. Some may even be undergoing hormone therapies or puberty blockers. One of the advantages of a co-ed school is the possibility for students to undergo transition in the same school. The transition process may take a few months or several years and requires support at every stage. Educators, family, friends and schoolmates also go through the transitioning process as they learn to relate to the individual in their affirmed gender.

Intersex is a form of bodily diversity, rather than a sexual orientation or gender identity. Intersex people typically discover their intersex variation when told by their parents or doctor. This is a different experience to the 'coming out' of LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) persons. Most intersex people identify as either a woman or man, while some may identify as neither exclusively a woman nor exclusively a man. This means that gender identity and gender expression issues that students face in schools still apply to intersex students. However, advocacy and support for intersex students may take a different form from other work on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression since. Intersex students may or may not identify as male or female; identify as both, all, between, or neither gender/s; connect with the LGBTIQ community; be post-diagnosis or have experienced medical intervention; be self-accepting.

1 Issues faced by Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students: Sex and gender stereotypes; Culture and cultural expectation; Lack of well-being due to discrimination, bullying and other unfair treatment; Exclusion from sports and other gendered activities; Unease with gendered uniforms, toilets and other gendered spaces; Decreased attention during school time and failure to learn due to lack of safety in school and lack of support services; Minority stress and social isolation; Absenteeism due to lack of safety in schools.

Needs faced by Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students: Privacy and confidentiality; Persons to advocate for their well-being and rights; parents, teachers, psychologist, social worker, counsellor etc.; Adequate facilities; Inclusive curricula, policies and regulations; Support from school and wider community; Possibility of amendments of gendered characteristics in documentation of child's file; Counselling when identity affirmation is proving difficult; Access to information

The Trans Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy is developed within the context of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014 – 2024² (MEDE, 2012) and A National Inclusive Education Framework³ (MEDE, 2019). This policy also adheres to relevant legislation and other related instruments namely:

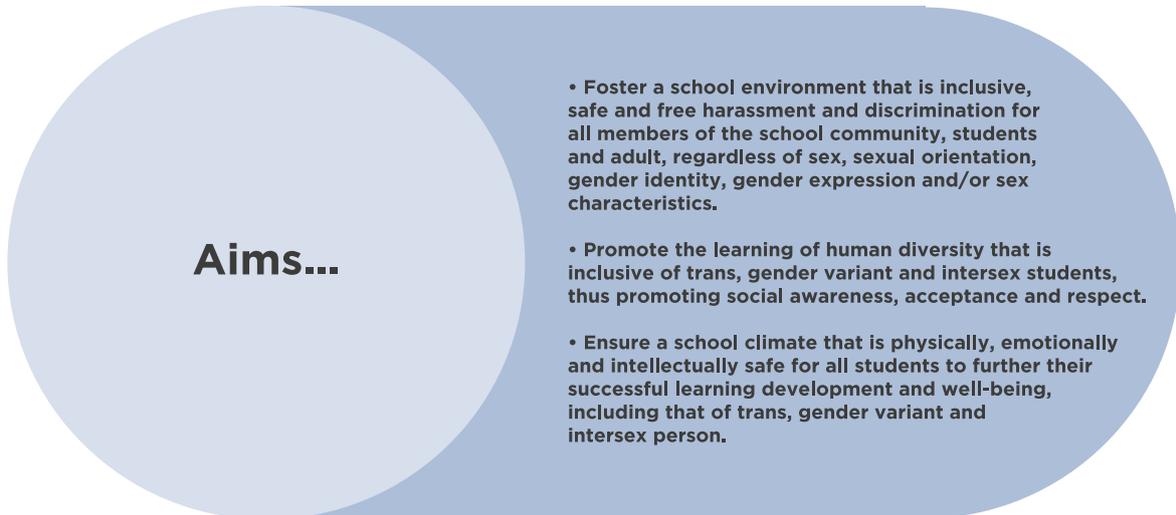
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 13.
- European Convention on Human Rights' First Protocol. Article 2.
- Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2010) on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 1952 (2013) on children's right to physical integrity.
- EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 14.
- Constitution of Malta, Article 32
- The Education Act.
- The Equality Act.
- Criminal Code of Malta, Article 82A
- The Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act (2015)
- The Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act (2016)
- Teachers' Code of Ethics and Practice (2012)

² Target 1: Reduce the gaps in educational outcomes between boys and girls and between students attending different schools, decrease the number of low achievers and raise the bar in literacy, numeracy, and science and technology competence, and increase student achievement.

³ Links with Theme³, Theme 6, Theme 7, Theme 8 & Theme 9 of *A National inclusive Education Framework* (MEDE, 2019)

GUIDING PHILOSOPHY AND AIMS

This policy adopts a whole school approach philosophy and aims to:



Also, this policy promotes the values of:



As a general rule, schools should evaluate all gender based facilities, activities, rules, policies and practices (including classroom activities, school ceremonies, school photos, extra-curricular activities and out of school hours care such as breakfast clubs) and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose. Students shall be permitted to participate in any such activities or conform to any such rule, policy or practice consistent with their gender identity. To facilitate the implementation of the policy among the various stakeholders, the procedures in Appendix 2 were established.

Strategy: Overarching Measure 1

| Overarching Measure | SMART Targets | Stakeholder | Timeline |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Foster a school environment that is inclusive, safe and free from harassment and discrimination for all members of the school community, students and adults, regardless of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To evaluate college/school gender-based facilities, activities, rules, policies and practices and maintain only those that have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose- anything that is done at school needs to have a clear and sound pedagogical purpose. In this regard that is why we used the terminology ‘responsive’, which in educational terms means that any process and practice needs to take in consideration diversity issues. b. College/School to encourage all students to participate in activities or conform to any rules, policy, or practice consistent with their gender identity. c. Percentage of organized gender-neutral and responsive activities and facilities. d. Percentage of anti-bullying college/school-based measures related to gender identity or expression. e. To campaign against sexist, homophobic and transphobic comments or behaviour. f. Percentage of anti-sexist, homophobic and transphobic campaigns among learners and parents. | <p>Head College Network and SLT members</p> | <p>Cyclical targets till September 2030</p> |

Strategy: Overarching Measure 2

| Overarching Measure | SMART Targets | Stakeholder | Timeline |
|---|--|---|---|
| <p>Promote the learning of human diversity that is inclusive of trans, gender variant, and intersex students to promote social awareness, acceptance and respect.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To organize specific training to college/school-based teachers on how to address LGBTIQ issues in the curriculum; b. Percentage of organized CPD training on LGBTIQ issues in colleges and schools; c. To invest in resources with representations of trans, gender variant and intersex persons; d. Percentage of capital invested in resources; e. To encourage the use of resources and discourse that are inclusive of gender variance f. To organise integrated lessons about gender variance | <p>Head College Network and SLT members</p> <p>Head College Network and SLT members</p> | <p>Cyclical targets till September 2030</p> |

Strategy: Overarching Measure 3

| Overarching Measure | SMART Targets | Stakeholder | Timeline |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p>Ensure a school climate that is physically, emotionally and intellectually safe for all students to further their successful learning development and well-being, including that of trans, gender variant, and intersex persons.</p> | <p>a. Ensure that college/school-based resources in libraries are inclusive of diversity rich situations to expose learners to concepts of social inclusion</p> | <p>Head College Network and SLT members</p> | <p>Cyclical targets till September 2030</p> |

For procedures go to the following link:
<https://education.gov.mt/en/NSSS/Pages/Education-services/Social-Work-Service.aspx>

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Annex IV: A Whole School Approach to Healthy Living: Healthy Eating & Physical Activity Policy

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Children and adolescents are a global priority (WHO/UNICEF, 2018). They need to engage in healthful behaviours starting from an early age to grow and develop into healthy adults. Being physically active combined with healthy eating is essential to provide adequate energy and balance to maintain a healthy weight.

Studies have shown that proper nutrition has a direct effect on student performance and behaviour in school (Ross, 2010). A well-nourished child is a child that is healthier and better capacitated to learn and develop. Many studies have also shown that there is a relationship between health and income, with the poorest sections of the population being the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged in terms of the incidence of chronic diseases. They also show lower rates of acceptance of health-promoting behaviours compared with other sectors of society (WHO/FAO, 2003). The WHO stresses the fact that policies need to favour those that are most at risk and have the least power to effect change (WHO, 2015).

In promoting coherence of national and international policies across multiple sectors to improve the health status at the national level, this policy is thus aligned with several strategies and initiatives including the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (MEDE, 2014), the National Inclusive Education Framework (MEDE, 2019) and the EU Public Procurement of Food for Health: Technical Report on the School Setting (Joint Presidency of the Malta Presidency and the EU, 2017).

Considering the amount of time that children spend at school, schools are an ideal environment for supporting healthy behaviours. Hence, schools need to ensure that children are supported via the provision of healthy food and opportunities for physical activity. The healthful behaviours adopted in childhood are more likely to remain in adulthood.

Indeed, the EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020 and other initiatives highlight schools as a key environment for health promotion, including physical activity and diet. Moreover, the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity especially in children is a major public health issue in most developed countries, including Malta.

A look at the current prevalence rates of overweight, obesity and underweight among children and youths in Malta shows an urgent need for improvement. This has been confirmed through the Malta National Childhood Body Mass Index Survey (2017). The results showed that 56.7% of all Maltese students fell within the parameters of normal weight established in the study.

Given that children spend close to a third of their daily life within the school environment, it is laudable to capitalise on the school setting to promote health and educate children in nutrition and physical activity matters. Schools are a key environment to teach large groups of children and promote long-term positive health behaviours. School food policies, regulations and guidelines are thus essential to have in place. Their implementation can have a number of both short- and long-term benefits such as improved student health and performance at school, increased societal awareness about the links between food and health as well as reduced healthcare costs.

VISION AND AIMS

The vision of the Ministry for Education and Employment and the Ministry for Health foresees a future in which children, their families and the whole community are physically active, eat healthy food and live in environments that support healthy behaviours to reduce obesity, chronic disease and enhance well-being. The Whole School Approach to Healthy Living: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policy aims to:

- Give high priority to healthy eating and physical activity through the integration and implementation of health education in all aspects of school life.
- Provide learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as experiences needed for health and well-being from an early age to make informed choices about their health and well-being throughout the lifecourse.
- Actively involve the school community to develop, implement and evaluate healthy eating and physical activity actions.
- Strengthen the necessary framework and support, thus enabling a school environment to help the school community adopt healthier patterns of living by encouraging physical activity and promoting healthy foods in line with the School Food and Beverage Standards.
- Make provision for a flexible curriculum which highlights health, physical activity, nutrition, food safety, hygiene and hands-on opportunities for food preparation.
- Ensure that clear and consistent messages about the components of healthy living that are in line with those promoted by the Health Authorities are reinforced at school.

LEGISLATION

In terms of Article 5 of the Education Act, Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta, the responsibility to promote the physical health of students, through health information and promotion and health living programmes, falls under the Ministry for Education and Employment, particularly the Directorate for Educational Services. The Ministry for Education and Employment therefore has the lead responsibility for monitoring the implementation of this policy.

Article 6 of the Healthy Lifestyle Promotion and Care of Non-Communicable Diseases Act (CAP. 550) regulates the Procurement of Food for Schools Regulations, 2018 (L.N. 266 of 2018). These Regulations set out the requirements for foods and beverages sold or offered in schools known as School Food and Beverage Standards. It is stipulated that schools shall implement a programme for the promotion of healthy eating. Also, it further states that schools should not permit any advertising of or accept sponsorships of food products which are not in line with the established criteria. Furthermore, schools must also ensure that water intended for human consumption is made available.

The School Food and Beverage Standards include nutrient-based and food-based definitions of the foods and drinks that must be provided as well as those that are restricted. They apply to all food and drink provided to pupils and students on and off school premises during the school day including school trips, breakfast clubs, tuck shops and vending.

HEALTH-PROMOTING BEHAVIOURS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Eating patterns have a significant effect on health and well-being. The provision of a healthy diet reduces the risk of diet-related health conditions such as obesity and oral health issues.

Table 1 below indicates the multiple factors that influence the eating behaviours of children and adolescents.

| Individual/Intrapersonal | Social Environment/Interpersonal |
|--|--|
| Psychosocial Biological | Family Peers |
| Physical Environment/Community Settings | Microsystem/Societal |
| Schools Fast Food Outlets Mobile Vendors Convenience Stores Accessibility to Safe Recreational Space | Mass Media Marketing and advertising Social and Cultural norms |

Food habits in most European countries, including Malta, are characterised by a high consumption of animal products, processed foods high in fat, especially industrial fats, sugar and salt as well as a low consumption of whole foods, especially those from plants. A review of scientific evidence has shown that a number of health behaviours can help curb the current increasing health problems affecting our population.

Healthy snacking

One of the health behaviours that addresses energy balance is snacking. Hence, the provision of affordable, simple and tasty healthy snack options within the school and home environment will target children with obesity and oral health problems particularly those from vulnerable groups.

Vegetables and fruit consumption

There are various economic, institutional, behavioural and sociocultural barriers that preclude many people worldwide from consuming the daily minimum amount of 400g of fruit and vegetables recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO/FAO, 2004). Data from the HBSC (2017 - 2018) study showed that 54% of girls and 56% of boys between the ages of 11 to 15 years, do not consume a daily portion of vegetables or fruit.

Water intake and oral health

Access to safe drinking water is a fundamental human right and contributes to good health. All students should have access to drinking water, at all times, at a number of points around the school as reiterated by LN266 of 2018. Dehydration leads to negative effects on the students' performance throughout the day and hence students should be allowed to drink water frequently. Water consumption needs to increase significantly during hot and humid days and during physical activity.

Drinking water instead of sugar sweetened beverages would reduce calorie intake and minimize oral health problems among children and adolescents to address the current problems of dental decay and cavities and excess weight.

National oral health survey

Oral diseases and tooth loss have a significant and negative impact on the quality of life and wellbeing of people and affects them functionally, psychologically and socially. Poor oral health also impacts on poor school attendance and performance in children (Jackson et al., 2011).

Oral health is more than just good teeth. It is an integral part of general health as the condition of the mouth mirrors the condition of the body as a whole. Dental caries is still very common among school children. The results from the national survey carried out in 2014 co-jointly by the Dental Public Health Unit and the Faculty of Dental Surgery, University of Malta showed that 31% of three-year olds are already at risk of developing decay (early enamel caries) whereas 10% of 3-year old children already have caries into dentine and require dental treatment – some children needing as much as 9 fillings (out of 20 teeth) (Data still unpublished).

The most important dietary cause of dental caries is the frequency and amount of sugars often hidden in food products consumed. Dental erosion is associated with consumption of acidic soft drinks and juices (Moynihan & Petersen, 2004). Schools need to enforce healthy snacks with restrictions on sugar products so as to promote children's oral health (Legal Notice, 2018).

Physical activity

The WHO (2018) defines physical activity as any bodily movement that involves energy expenditure provided by skeletal muscles. These include tasks that are carried out while working, playing, doing household chores, travelling and engaging in leisure activities.

Variations in patterns of physical activity and the adoption of sedentary lifestyles are also significant factors behind obesity (WHO Observatory, 2014). Physical activity also contributes to children's physical development, wellbeing, bone strength and mobility (Janssen & Leblanc, 2010). Play and recreation are essential in learning motor and social skills and in the development of creativity (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Physical activity is one of the most basic human functions and needs which has benefits across the lifespan. There is strong evidence that being physically active can benefit both body and mind, as well as reducing the risk of many diseases (EUFIC, 2020). Children's level of physical activity or sport is positively associated with cognitive functioning or academic success (Trudaeo & Shepard, 2008).

Different types and amounts of physical activity are required for different health outcomes.

- The WHO (2018) recommends that children and adolescents aged 5-17 years should do at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity daily and include activities that strengthen muscle and bone, at least 3 times per week. Physical activity of amounts greater than 60 minutes daily will provide additional health benefits.

A recent research has shown that lower levels of adiposity are paralleled by comparatively higher levels of vigorous physical activity in children from a higher socioeconomic status (Luzak et al., 2020). Schools, through effective organisation and delivery, are well placed to maximise participation, enjoyment and skill development for all students including those with diverse needs, abilities, interests and socioeconomic background. Every effort should be made to encourage schools to provide daily physical activities in all grades, inside or outside the curriculum and in cooperation with partners from the local community, as well as to promote interest in life-time physical activities in all pupils.

In a recent study by Steene-Johannessen et al. (2020), it has been revealed that two thirds of European children and adolescents are not

sufficiently active. A positive trend shown in the HBSC (2017-2018) study is that local boys and girls aged thirteen years carried out more moderate to physical activity daily in 2018 than in 2014 (Table 2). Another slight increase in physical activity was recorded amongst the eleven-year-old boys in 2018. A decrease was however reported amongst the 15-year-olds cohort and the eleven-year old girls.

Sedentary behaviour

According to the 2013-2014 HBSC study (Table 3), the proportion of Maltese adolescents who watch television for more than two hours per weekday was found to be similar or even less than the HBSC international average for 2014. This is a promising result however measures still need to be taken to address the sedentary lifestyle amongst schoolchildren.

| Maltese adolescents participating in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily | Age | | | | | |
|--|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| | 11 | | 13 | | 15 | |
| | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl |
| 2014 | 28% | 21% | 20% | 11% | 16% | 9% |
| 2015 | 29% | 19% | 22% | 14% | 15% | 5% |

Table 2: Percentage of Maltese children (aged 11-15 years) participating in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily (HBSC survey 2020).

| Maltese adolescents who watch television for two or more hours per weekday | Age | | | | | |
|--|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| | 11 | | 13 | | 15 | |
| | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl |
| 2014 | 53% | 41% | 58% | 54% | 65% | 54% |
| HBSC international average | 53% | 47% | 62% | 61% | 65% | 62% |

Table 3: Percentage of Maltese children (aged 11-15 years) who watch television for more than 2 hours per weekday (HBSC survey 2016)

KEY ACTION / MEASURE

| Key Action/Measure | Smart Target | Stakeholder | Timeframe |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Key Action 1 A whole school approach actively involving the school community to develop, implement and evaluate healthy eating and physical activity actions</p> | <p>Dissemination of policy to all school community.</p> <p>School staff knowledgeable about LN 266 of 2018.</p> <p>Development of an integrated action plan with co-ordinated school measures and schemes of action addressing healthy eating and physical activity.</p> <p>A key member of staff identified to actively work within an appointed team on a school action plan to address the key policy issues.</p> <p>Dissemination of action plan to school community.</p> <p>Ongoing consultation with the school community to include NGO, Local Councils and other relevant stakeholders.</p> | <p>HCN</p> <p>SLT</p> <p>HPDPD</p> <p>SSS</p> <p>EO HE</p> <p>EO PE</p> | <p>Term 1 till September 2030</p> <p>Cyclical actions till September 2030</p> |
| <p>Key Action 2 Enhance the school ethos and environments to support healthy eating and physical activity considering the health-promoting behaviours</p> | <p>School community informed about the short-term and long-term benefits of regular physical activity.</p> <p>School community informed about the benefits of healthier food and beverage options including fresh produce to make an informed choice.</p> <p>Schools to provide opportunities for outdoor learning and hands-on gardening experiences.</p> <p>Implementation of nutrient- and food-based standards for foods, beverages and meals brought to and offered at schools.</p> <p>Schools to promote the consumption of vegetables and fruit and increase their availability through participation in the respective scheme.</p> <p>Primary Schools to participate in milk schemes to provide for low fat milk consumption and allocate funds for the provision of daily milk, dairy/alternative.</p> <p>Improve availability, accessibility and affordability to healthy food options.</p> <p>Schools to upgrade dining spaces and facilities.</p> | <p>HCN</p> <p>SLT</p> <p>HPDPD</p> <p>SSS</p> <p>EO HE</p> <p>EO PE</p> <p>Other relevant stakeholders</p> | <p>September 2011 – 2030</p> |

| Key Action/Measure | Smart Target | Stakeholder | Timeframe |
|---|---|---|--|
| <p>Key Action 2 <i>Enhance the school ethos and environments to support healthy eating and physical activity considering the health-promoting behaviours</i></p> | <p>Identify space and set up a food preparation area/ food lab in each school.</p> <p>Schools promote the importance of and the maintenance of oral hygiene.</p> <p>Schools to develop grounds and playing facilities to support physical activity.</p> <p>Schools to ensure that all learners have easy access to fresh drinking water throughout the day.</p> <p>Collaboration with parents and the wider school community to develop programmes which encourage healthy eating and physical activity.</p> | <p>HCN</p> <p>SLT</p> <p>HPDPD</p> <p>SSS</p> <p>EO HE</p> <p>EO PE</p> <p>Other relevant stakeholders</p> | <p>September 2011 – 2030</p> |
| <p>Key Action 3 Provide nutritious and safe foods in line with the food and beverage standards</p> | <p>Food and Beverage Standards regulating the sale and availability of food and beverages in all schools are updated and communicated to all schools and school communities.</p> <p>Development of a health-sensitive, environmentally friendly and sustainable as well as socially responsible procurement of food</p> <p>Primary Schools to offer universal school breakfast programme in Primary Schools.</p> <p>Primary School to participate in milk schemes to provide for low fat milk consumption and allocate funds for the provision of daily milk.</p> <p>Increased availability and accessibility to fresh and healthier food and beverage options at school.</p> <p>Provision of free school lunches to ensure learners from low-income families have access to nutritionally balanced food options.</p> <p>Age-appropriate amounts of healthy food options offered across time periods and menu cycles.</p> <p>Tuck shops and vending machines prepare, serve and/or sell food that is reasonably priced and meets national school food standards.</p> <p>Advertising and marketing of food and beverages in schools reflect Standards and policy guidelines.</p> | <p>DES</p> <p>SSD</p> <p>HCN</p> <p>SLT</p> <p>HPDPD</p> <p>EHD</p> <p>SSS</p> <p>Other relevant stakeholders</p> | <p>Ongoing actions till September 2030</p> |

| Key Action/Measure | Smart Target | Stakeholder | Timeframe |
|---|--|---|---|
| <p>Key Action 4 Integrate and implement health education throughout the whole school system to provide learners with knowledge, attitudes, skills, and experiences needed for healthy eating and physical activity standards</p> | <p>Further incorporate and elaborate upon the theme of healthy living specifically, food and nutrition, physical activity and oral health education for life within the curriculum in a formal, structured way.</p> <p>Schools device a structured, cross-curricular and event based-programme for Primary Schools targeting the basic skills associated with healthy eating, together with practical intervention sessions.</p> <p>Align curriculum content with health education guidelines ensuring consistent messages.</p> <p>Uptake of health behaviours including the increase in physical activity levels.</p> <p>Learners equipped with planning, budgeting, and practical skills as part of preparation of healthy meals.</p> <p>Development of specific programmes focusing on practical skills and the preparation of low-cost meals targeting vulnerable learners.</p> <p>School community is informed of what constitutes a healthy portion size according to age as a guide.</p> <p>Learners equipped with lifelong personal fitness skills and education on limitation of screen time and sedentary behaviour.</p> <p>Engagement with parents and provide them with nutrition and physical activity information.</p> <p>Collaboration with community organisations to set up initiatives under the guidance of specialised personnel to increase awareness and skills.</p> | <p>DES</p> <p>DCLE</p> <p>HCN</p> <p>SLT</p> <p>HPDPD</p> <p>SSS</p> <p>EO HE</p> <p>EO PE</p> <p>Other relevant stakeholders</p> | <p>September 2020 till - September 2030</p> |
| <p>Key action 5 Ensure the provision of professional development for educators</p> | <p>Provision of qualified educators to teach physical education classes and run Food and Nutrition programmes.</p> <p>Development of capacity-building initiatives to train and update educators on issues related to school food and physical activity.</p> | <p>DQSE</p> <p>DCLE</p> <p>EO HE</p> <p>EO PE</p> | <p>Ongoing actions till September 2030</p> |

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