

Caribbean Workshop on School Health Promotion Policy Toronto, Canada, March 25-27, 2009

Background

Investing in school health is a prerequisite for effective learning in a productive society. By recognizing the relevance of the school setting for preventing disease and promoting health at early age in life, policy makers and health and education specialists depend upon existing information to design effective programs. Since 2003, an increasing number of countries in the Americas are collecting periodic data through the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS).

The purpose of the GSHS is to monitor the prevalence of important health risk behaviors and protective factors among students 13 to 15 years of age to:

- Help countries establish priorities, develop programs, and advocate resources
- Allow to make comparisons across countries
- Establish trends in the prevalence of health behavior and protective factors by country
- Evaluate school health policies and programs.

The 10 GSHS core questionnaire modules address the leading causes of morbidity and mortality among children and adults worldwide:

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| ✓ Alcohol and other drugs use | ✓ Respondents demographics |
| ✓ Dietary behaviors | ✓ Sexual behaviors that contribute to HIV infection, other STI, and unintended pregnancy |
| ✓ Hygiene | ✓ Tobacco use |
| ✓ Mental health | ✓ Violence and unintentional injury |
| ✓ Physical activity | |
| ✓ Protective factors | |

There is a critical mass of English-speaking Caribbean countries already implementing the GSHS. As of October 2008, seven¹ countries have already implemented the GSHS and eight² additional countries and overseas territories in the process of implementing the GSHS in 2009.

As standardized data from the GSHS becomes available additional opportunities can be created to build upon the momentum created as result of the CARICOM Regional Summit of Heads of Government on Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) held in Trinidad and Tobago in September of 2007. As part of the Port of Spain (PoS) declaration, the Heads of Governments of the CARICOM agreed on a comprehensive approach and partnerships as critical to success, and

¹ Cayman Islands, Grenada, Guyana, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago,

² Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Dominica, British Virgin Islands, Jamaica, Suriname, St. Kitts and Nevis.

mandated, *inter-alia*, to “re-introduce physical education in schools where necessary, provide incentives and resources to effect this policy and ensure that our education sector promote programs aimed at providing healthy school meals and promoting healthy eating”, and “to ban the sale, advertising and promotion of tobacco products to children. Subsequently, policy priorities established by the CARICOM were taken to other forums in the Region”, e.g.: Agriculture Ministers, private sector (Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce), and civil society organizations.

Also under the CARICOM initiative, the Caribbean Education Sector Coordinator (*EduCan*) Network was created in 2006. *EduCan* coordinators from 14 countries provide a coordinated and sustained response to HIV/AIDS and health by Caribbean education sectors. WHO/PAHO’s collaborating center EDC serves as ongoing secretariat for *EduCan*. Working as partners, PAHO and EDC are aiming at strengthening collaboration between Health and Education sectors at the Caribbean by bringing together GSHS national coordinators working at the Ministries of Health and *EduCan* coordinators from the Ministries of Education. Several other initiatives are also underway in the Caribbean targeted at youth and school aged populations, such as CARICOM/HFLE, and programs by CIDA, CDB, World Bank, Commonwealth Secretariat, reflecting the high level of interest in this critical age group

On May 2008, PAHO and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) gathered in Montreal for the annual meeting of the CARMEN Observatory on Chronic NCDs. The purpose of the meeting - entitled *Mobilizing for Action*- was to articulate and define next steps for specific projects within *PAHO’s Regional Strategy and Plan of Action on an Integrated Approach to the Prevention and Control of Chronic Diseases including Diet, Physical Activity and Health*. As part of the conclusions, school health was selected as one of the priority areas along with fruits and vegetables, physical activity, salt, and health services.

Purpose

The purpose of this workshop is to facilitate policy dialogue to on the implementation of the policy directions in the POS Declaration on prevention and control of chronic diseases especially as it relates to schools, e.g., improve the quality of school meals, increase levels of physical activity, and strengthen curriculum on subjects of good diet and physical education in the Caribbean. In order to advance the CARICOM’s agenda on school health, a 2 ½ day sub-regional meeting is proposed to bring strategic partners together to promote concerted action. The output will also go to the Health and Education Ministers special meeting of the CARICOM Council on Human and Social Development (COHSOD) in April 2009. In particular, existing data from GSHS countries at the Caribbean will be used to facilitate policy dialogue and identify good practices for school health programming supported by health and education sectors, international cooperating organization, and donors. Strengthening the strategic alliance between health-education and community development will be a desired outcome

Specific objectives of the meeting

- Analyze existing GSHS data related to dietary behaviors, physical activity and other health related risk and protective factors among school children across the Caribbean;
- Facilitate dialogue among strategic partners for concerted action to make further progress towards commitments related to school health established in the CARICOM Declarations of Port-of Spain and Georgetown
- Draft a plan proposal with strategic recommendations to advance and better monitor progress in school health and nutrition indicators in the Caribbean and other risks for NCDs. If appropriate, prepare a draft policy brief for the special COHSOD of health and education ministers
- Strengthen the strategic alliance between Health-Education and Community Development and other relevant stakeholders.