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Progress Report on compliance with the Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education (PTCIE) 2022- 2025

Dialogue and Exchange of Experiences on Public Policies and Programs within the framework of the Hemispheric Program on Healthy Food and Physical Activity Policies in School Environments

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**Dialogue and Exchange of Experiences on Public Policies and Programs within the framework of the Hemispheric Program on Healthy Food and Physical Activity Policies   
in School Environments**

The creation of the Hemispheric Program on healthy food and physical activity policies in school environments takes place in a context in which the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity continues to increase. Some of the factors identified in this regard are exposure to high availability and advertising of ultra-processed products and sugary beverages, diets deficient in fruits and vegetables, and lack of physical activity in school environments. Obesity can affect the immediate health of children and adolescents; impact their educational development and quality of life and the probability of continuing with this condition in adulthood, running the risk of suffering from non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and several types of cancer.

Hence the need to develop, implement, and evaluate effective strategies, programs, and policies in education systems to improve school environments for food and physical activity where physical activity and active play is encouraged, sedentary behavior is reduced, and healthy eating is promoted among children and adolescents by regulating food and beverage outlets in schools to comply with standards or regulations that foster the consumption of healthy foods and natural water, and restrict the availability and promotion of ultra-processed products and sugar-sweetened beverages.

In this regard and as part of the mandate of General Assembly AG/RES. 2919 (XLVIII-O/18) on strengthening multisectoral responses to the crisis of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in the Americas, proposals were put forward for measures geared to school environments within the framework of the Inter-American Education Agenda (IEA). In this regard, the 2019-2022 Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE) included, as one of its projects, coordination with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) for the promotion, monitoring, and evaluation of school environments conducive to healthy eating and physical activity.

Since its approval and through a series of public policy dialogues held in 2020 and 2021, PAHO and the OAS worked together for an open debate and exchange of experiences related to actions undertaken in schools within the framework of the Inter-American Education Agenda.  Designated officials from the ministries of education and health discussed activities related to implementation of the Action Plan for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents.

This report details the activities carried out as part of the Hemispheric Program on healthy food and physical activity policies in school environment, incorporated into the 2022-2025 Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education, between October 2022 and October 2024.

1. Launching of the Inter-American Health-Education Collaboration Proposal

As part of the cooperation between the OAS and PAHO, an event was held to launch the 2022-2025 Inter-American Program on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policies in the School Environment on October 12, 2022, with the participation of officials from the ministries of education and health, as well as officials from the OAS and PAHO. The objectives of the program are: a) to create a forum in which countries can exchange successful initiatives to help advance the framework for action and public policies; b) to support various countries through South-South cooperation, technical assistance, and capacity building; and c) to develop lessons learned and regional guidance on school environments for healthy eating, nutrition, and physical activity.

The goal set for this program is that by the end of 2025 at least three countries will have implemented actions geared to providing better school environments for healthy eating and physical activity.

To achieve this, the program proposes three themes and areas of action: healthy school food environments, promoting physical activity through schools, and a context conducive to the development and implementation of public policies for food procurement and services for a healthy diet. The actions carried out under this hemispheric program can be listed under three main headings:

* + - Research/Publications
    - Professional Development and Educational Resources
    - Sharing of experiences and technical assistance

1. Launching of the Hemispheric Program on healthy eating and physical activity policies in school environments within the framework of the 2022-2025 Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education

As part of the exchange of experiences between ministries of education and ministries of health, 14 countries participated in the virtual event held on May 9, 2023, in which PAHO and CIE officials presented the methodology and dynamics of the program, while a model template was shared so that countries could apply promising initiatives to receive targeted technical assistance. Countries were invited to submit project proposals in one of the three priority themes or areas of action. One of the fundamental requirements was that the proposals were the product of joint work between the ministries of health and ministries of education.

1. Call for project proposals for targeted technical assistance projects between Ministries of Education and Ministries of Health

Following the May 9, 2023 meeting, the CIE Technical Secretariat issued a call for project proposals. The nomination period was open from May to June and a total of eleven (11) contributions were received from the following countries: Bahamas, Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. After an evaluation process, five (5) shortlisted proposals presented their projects in the virtual event organized on September 19, 2023.

1. Event: Presentation of 5 shortlisted proposals

The five shortlisted countries were: Bahamas, Belize, Colombia, Mexico and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which presented their proposals during the virtual event on September 19 to the other officials from the ministries of health and education participating in the event. This process resulted in the selection of three projects to receive targeted technical assistance: Bahamas, Belize, and Colombia.

Between December 2023 and July 2024, coordination meetings were held with those responsible for the projects at the country level, follow-up sessions were conducted, and, finally, on August 29, 2024, a meeting was held to assess progress made with implementation and to share experiences and lessons learned.

Dialogues and exchange of experiences

* + - * **First Dialogue and Virtual Roundtable - December 14, 2023**

The Dialogue and Exchange of Experiences in connection with the Hemispheric Program on healthy food and physical activity policies in school environments, jointly organized by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Organization of American States (OAS), took place on December 14, 2023 and lasted approximately three hours. The event was attended by representatives of the ministries of education and ministries of health of 17 participating countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Belize, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States, and Uruguay.

The activity began with welcoming remarks by the CIE Technical Secretariat briefly describing the process of building the CIE Work Plan and its four hemispheric programs, their components, and expected results. Each of these programs pursues a clear path to 2025. In addition, it was noted that the Hemispheric Program on healthy food and physical activity policies in school environments is expected to result in "Regional Guidelines on healthy food and physical activity policies in school environments (PASAFE)".

The purpose of this event was to disseminate the results of the analysis and to ascertain the similarities, differences, and possible areas of interest of the participating countries. The event comprised a plenary session with the presentation of a panel on policies and programs, composed of Jamaica, which presented its "National School Nutrition Policy", and Paraguay, which shared its "Public Policy on School Food".

Then, simultaneous working group sessions were held on: Policies and Programs, Teacher Training and Hemispheric Course, Lines of Research, and Publications. Enriching discussions were held in each group, which allowed the representatives or spokespersons of each room to present a synthesis of common aspects, novelties, and conclusions reached in their groups when they returned to the plenary session.

With respect to the group on **Policies and Programs**, some of the aspects prioritized were the prohibition of advertising in educational environments, the strengthening of healthy eating and school dropout laws, sustainable school programs, the strengthening of knowledge of family practices, front-of-package and nutritional labeling laws, as well as those focusing on habits and behavior from childhood, and, finally, the adaptation of menus in school environments for the indigenous population.

The **Teacher Training and Hemispheric Course** group highlighted topics such as comprehensive teacher training, courses on healthy environments and nutrition, the inclusion of self-care in healthy decision making, familiarity with food system concepts, the intersectoral strategy for healthy eating, toolboxes for healthy lifestyles, and the use of artificial intelligence for establishing healthy diets.

The **Lines of Research and Publications** group addressed four lines of research, of which two were considered priorities. The first was regarding school food contexts, cultural variables related to food in family environments and their consumption patterns, and conflict of interest tensions between companies and schools in healthy school environments. The second analyzed relations/coordination between sectors and other actors in the nutritional supplement policy and physical activity programs in school environments, and the coherence between national and subnational programs of the school nutrition policy.

The fourth roundtable, made up of officials from English-speaking countries, highlighted the importance of school breakfasts for food security, school meals to reduce malnutrition in all its forms, the mandatory practice of at least one sport, national school nutrition policy and standards, changes in beverages to reduce the amount of sugar in schools, and the importance of working jointly with the Ministry of Agriculture to incorporate local farmers and school gardens in the initiatives.

Finally, at the close of the event, a consensus was reached on the steps to be taken and conclusions to be drawn. With the support of the Technical Secretariat, the strategies, actions, and programs implemented to guarantee educational continuity in contexts of change would be systematized and new spaces for dialogue would be established to facilitate the strengthening of public policies in the region.

* + - * **Second dialogue and virtual roundtable - August 29, 2024**

Approximately 140 specialists from the ministries of education and health took part in the second dialogue and virtual roundtable held on August 29, 2024.

The purpose of this virtual event was to provide an opportunity for dialogue and reflection so that the participating countries could discuss progress, common and innovative aspects, differentiating elements, and conclusions of the three areas of action in order to establish regional recommendations that contribute to the promotion of healthy school environments in the Americas.

The meeting consisted of a plenary session followed by a working session divided into four groups. The CIE Technical Secretariat participated in the plenary session, shaping the conversation with a report on the first virtual dialogue and roundtables, which took place on December 14, 2023.

Two countries then described the progress made in the projects that received targeted technical assistance.

* Belize: Healthy School Environments in Belize
* Colombia: Promotion in schools of physical activity, recreation, and sports for a healthy and happy life

This was followed by simultaneous roundtable sessions. The first working group focused on **healthy school food environments**. Some of the issues emphasized were the establishment of laws and regulations related to healthy eating and front-of-package labeling; the development of guidelines and standards in educational centers; the monitoring, oversight, and evaluation of the implementation of regulations; skill-building for personnel; support from the central authority for local governments and institutions; and the allocation of resources with the participation of local governments for the implementation of territorial initiatives.

For its part, working group 2 on the **promotion of physical activity through schools**, highlighted the importance of intersectoriality and multilevel management in the implementation of initiatives, as well as the existing barriers and the benefits that could be generated by applying a pedagogical approach to the inclusion of physical activity in schools. The group also discussed the challenge of physical and mental health, the curriculum for an active and healthy life, the generation of partnerships with more actors within the school and families, and communication and information technology strategies.

During this session, Colombia notified the CIE that Honduras had expressed bilateral interest in sharing experiences.

As regards group 3 on the **framework of action for the development and implementation of public policies for food procurement and services for a healthy diet**, priority was attached to issues such as the focus on human rights, gender, and equity, while emphasis was placed on consideration of the indigenous population and on respect for its native foods and gastronomic culture. The group also addressed the regulatory framework, front-of-package labeling and the usefulness of adopting nutrient profiling and dietary guidelines, as well as the synergy between food services and food education. It also highlighted the need for the participation and collective work of different ministries.

This group also discussed the educational materials and resources that each country could contribute to the development of a regional course for teachers and school administrators. In this regard, there was talk of sharing guides and training components for various population groups, food guides, and activities with teachers. The topic of guidelines and regulations was also discussed and it was pointed out that some documents are not available for confidentiality reasons.

Finally, research was mentioned that could lead to a regional or hemispheric publication regarding healthy school environments. For instance, participants were told that Costa Rica had conducted an extensive study on the end user (students) regarding their perception of the food products they were accessing. The experience of Peru, which conducted an assessment in three regions of the country to map the situation of school kiosks and canteens, was also highlighted.

The fourth group was made up of officials from the English-speaking countries, who soon realized that the activities carried out by the Caribbean countries are very similar to each other. In addition, it was emphasized that these activities are, for the most part, supported by school food and nutrition policies, as well as guidelines on healthy diets.

On the other hand, the countries found that they also have common challenges, such as the lack of human resources specializing in nutrition and community participation. Finally, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines reported that it has developed a curriculum on healthy eating and physical activity.

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