

Sports for Good - Investing in tomorrow's generations

National Commitment of the Republic of Croatia

SUMMARY

As one of the leading countries in the overall implementation of the SDGs (ranked 8th in the world), Croatia will continue implementing measures aimed at improving health, nutrition, and education of children and young adults, such as: ensuring every student receives a daily hour of physical activity; implementing programs for improved nutrition at schools and kindergartens; promoting quality education for every child; and learning for sustainability curriculum.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As one of the leading countries in the overall implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (ranked 8th out of 193 UN Member States), the Republic of Croatia will continue with its efforts aimed at improving health, nutrition, and education of children and young adults, with these specific measures, as part of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030:

- Ensuring every student receives a daily hour of physical activity: a core component of the whole-day school experimental project in elementary education
- Implementation of programs for improved nutrition at schools and kindergartens
- Ensuring free meals for all elementary school (primary and upper secondary) students
- Protection and promotion of breastfeeding
- Obesity prevention programs
- Education of educational staff on the mental health and energy drinks, nicotine pouches, e-cigarettes, and new tobacco products in primary and secondary schools
- National program of screening and early detection of familial hypercholesterolemia
- Promoting quality education for every child and girls' rights to education
- Developing 21st century skills through cross-curricular topics
- Learning for sustainability – implementation of Curriculum on Sustainable Development for primary and secondary schools
- Strengthening parental competencies in preserving mental health
- Drug prevention

1. Fostering primary health and physical activity for healthy children

- **Ensuring Every Student Receives a Daily Hour of Physical Activity: A Core Component of the Whole-Day School Experimental Project in Elementary Education**

As part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, an additional 1 billion euros have been secured to enhance infrastructure capacity to transition all primary schools to a single shift and facilitate whole-day school programs. These funds are designated for infrastructural interventions, including the construction of new facilities, across 1,030 school sites. This initiative not only covers the reconstruction and equipping of primary schools for single-shift and full-day programs but also allocates 430,877,596 euros specifically for the construction and equipping of school sports halls. This budget is intended for the construction and/or extension of approximately 375 school sports halls. The goal is to enable all elementary school students to attend classes in a single shift starting from the 2027/2028 school year, alongside the implementation of whole-day school. Each school will be equipped with sports halls and playgrounds.

In the 2023/2024 school year, the experimental Whole-Day School (WDS) project was introduced in 62 elementary schools in Croatia. As part of this initiative, the mandatory hours of physical and health education for students were increased. The WDS model comprises four education programs (A1, A2, B1, B2), with two (A programs) being compulsory for all students and two (B programs) being elective and offered to those students and parents who wish to participate.

The objectives of this initiative are to improve the health and physical well-being of students by increasing the mandatory hours of physical and health education in primary schools, enabling students to participate in sports activities for free, and integrating kinesiology teachers into the instruction of Physical Education in the lower grades of primary school. Physical activity and student well-being are prioritized by providing more instruction time for Physical Education and combining in-class teaching with physical activities across all subjects, led by kinesiology teachers.

To ensure that the extracurricular activities program (B1 Program) maintains a significant focus on students' physical health and well-being, a minimum of 20 percent of activities in the first four grades of elementary school, or 30 percent of activities from grades 5-8, must be dedicated to these areas. Specifically, this mandates providing a minimum of 1 school hour per day for all students to engage in physical and sports activities.

Wherever possible, the whole-day school emphasizes learning that integrates physical activity and movement. By combining increased Physical education hours, movement integration, health-focused extracurricular activities, strategic breaks, and infrastructure upgrades, the WDS aims to create a learning environment that fosters students' physical well-being alongside academic development.

2. Child nutrition in the first 1 000 days and healthy diets in schools

- **Improved nutrition**

Protection and promotion of breastfeeding

In order to protect and improve the health, growth and development of children and prevent disease, in 2024 the Government adopted the National Program for the Protection and Promotion of Breastfeeding for the period from 2024 to 2027. The program is a continuation of the previous two programs (2015-2016 and 2018-2020) which, through 9 goals and 21 sub-goals, continues with the implementation of measures and activities aimed at the protection, support and promotion of breastfeeding.

Nutrition in kindergartens

In accordance with the Law on Preschool Education (Article 18), Croatia has been implementing the Program since 2002, which establishes measures for health protection, hygiene and proper nutrition of preschool children in kindergartens. The plan is to revise the mentioned Program primarily in the part related to the prevention of infectious diseases and the proper nutrition of children in kindergartens.

Health protection measures for preschool children are also prescribed by the State Pedagogical Standard for Preschool Education, and they include prerequisites for ensuring the proper growth and development of preschool children in kindergarten. In order to implement the measures, each kindergarten is obliged to:

- a) ensure systematic monitoring of children's growth and development and nutritional status,
- b) take preventive measures to reduce infectious diseases and prevent injuries,
- c) carry out organizational forms of work in the physical and health education area (movement program), for which it is necessary to ensure 1/4 of the child's stay in kindergarten.

Nutrition in primary schools

Since 2012, Croatia has also had Norms for the nutrition of students in primary schools, which, for the purpose of proper nutrition of students while they are in primary school, prescribe recommended types of food and meals, optimal energy intake and nutrients and the type of meal and the distribution of the recommended energy intake per meal, taking into account established health conditions in children that require dietary adjustments.

For the purpose of applying the aforementioned Norms, in 2013, the National Guidelines for the nutrition of students in primary schools were adopted, which contain practical instructions on planning meals and creating menus in primary schools. Given that there is a plan to revise the aforementioned Norms, the creation of new national guidelines for the nutrition of students in primary schools will also be started.

According to the provisions of the *Law on Education in Primary and Secondary Schools*, the sale of products that are not in accordance with the goals of education is prohibited in school institutions (Article 59).

According to the provisions of the National Pedagogical Standard of the *Elementary School Education System*, and in order to preserve the health of students, fast food and carbonated drinks cannot be offered at school (Article 38).

- **Free meals for all elementary school (primary and upper secondary) students**

Building on the commitment to equal access to education, Croatia has implemented a program offering free meals to all elementary school students. This initiative, established in the second semester of the 2022/2023 school year ensures at least one healthy and balanced meal per day for all students. Funded by the government and distributed through school founders, the program tackles socioeconomic disparities by providing nutritious food regardless of background. This translates to nearly 6 million free meals served monthly, with an annual cost exceeding €70 million. To guarantee proper nutrition, meals aligned to the National Guidelines for Student Nutrition in Primary Schools.

As part of the aforementioned program, and with the goal of healthy nutrition, space is open for cooperation with domestic producers who can offer schools their own products and foodstuffs.

The government is currently working on the implementation of the project of switching all primary schools to work in one shift, and the infrastructure measures include investment in school kitchens and dining halls. Investments in school kitchens and dining halls will enable cooked meals to be provided for all elementary school students and intensify cooperation with local producers of healthy food even more strongly.

- **Obesity prevention**

On March 20, 2024, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted the Action Plan for the Prevention of Obesity 2024-2027.

The measures of the Action Plan are designed through the promotion of physical activity, the promotion of healthy food, the promotion of the creation of non-obese environments, education, nutrition monitoring and support in the treatment of obesity.

The action plan brings a multidisciplinary, integrated and scientifically based approach that will ensure the implementation of public policy in the field of obesity and the achievement of results during the next three years of implementation.

- **Education of Educational Staff on the Mental Health and Energy Drinks, Nicotine Pouches, E-cigarettes, and New Tobacco Products in Primary and Secondary Schools.**

Croatian Institute of Public Health and the Agency for Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Science and Education held an inter-county professional conference titled "Education of Educational Staff on the Prevention of Addiction Due to the

Use of Energy Drinks, Nicotine Pouches, E-cigarettes, and New Tobacco Products in Primary and Secondary Schools." The conference took place at Središće Elementary School in Zagreb on December 14, 2023, marking the completion of the Month Against Addiction. It was interdisciplinary, gathering 211 teachers, professors, and educational professionals.

New legislative regulations were announced to prohibit the use of energy drinks and nicotine pouches among minors, alongside a new healthcare reform emphasizing prevention and health literacy. Educational materials from the Croatian Institute of Public Health were presented, which educational staff can use in teaching, emphasizing the importance of raising awareness among parents about the harmful effects of energy drinks and new tobacco and nicotine products.

- **National program of screening and early detection of familial hypercholesterolemia**

The Republic of Croatia started implementing the program of screening and early detection of familial hypercholesterolemia in the 2023/2024 school year as a special program, and it continued in the 2024/2025 school year as the National program for screening and early detection of familial hypercholesterolemia. The National program is implemented upon enrolment in the first grade of elementary school in all children who undergo a systematic examination in accordance with the Rulebook on the procedure for determining the psychophysical condition of children and students and the composition of expert committees, under the supervision of school and adolescent medicine specialists, but also paediatricians - both those in primary care who have been additionally educated on the issue in question, as well as those at the secondary and tertiary level.

If a child's total cholesterol is found to be elevated, the school doctor refers the child to a paediatrician. In the case of children with established familial hypercholesterolemia, the selected doctor refers their parents and siblings to screening, in accordance with the paediatrician's recommendation. In other words, the program should enable children who have a genetic predisposition for hypercholesterolemia to be detected in time and treat them, but also to detect their relatives who have not been screened, since this type of screening has not been systematically carried out before.

The program includes a series of preventive and educational measures to raise awareness of healthy lifestyle habits and avoidance of risk factors and risky behaviours. All educational and promotional activities relate to children and their families, with an emphasis on preventive programs through adopting healthy lifestyle habits from an early age, but also to the entire public through media campaigns.

Counselling on dyslipidemias, healthy nutrition (dietary nutrition for people with elevated cholesterol) and physical activity is provided. Such counselling is offered free of charge to all persons included in the program.

3. Future generations as key actors to achieve the SDGs through a more inclusive and equitable quality education for all

- **Promoting quality education for every child and girls' rights to education**

Education plays a vital role in fostering mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue, and solidarity while promoting equality through awareness, skills development, and the cultivation of human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law. Gender equality is fundamental across all levels of education in Croatia, preparing students for equal participation in all aspects of life.

The Constitution of Croatia and the Primary and Secondary School Education Act ensure equal access to education for all based on individual capabilities. The Vocational Education Act mandates gender balance among students, affirming every child's right to comprehensive educational development regardless of ethnicity, sex, gender, or social status.

The National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education emphasizes children's right to an education that respects and supports their diverse identities, rejecting stereotypes and ensuring personalized attention.

In 2019, Curriculum for cross-curricular topic Citizenship education was introduced across primary and secondary schools, aiming to instil values like gender equality in a democratic school environment. Gender equality is integrated into this curriculum alongside six other cross-curricular topics, including Health. The Health curriculum covers physical health, mental and social health, and help and self-help, with a focus on reproductive and sexual health.

The Ordinance on textbook standards mandates gender equality in educational materials, promoting balanced representation and gender-specific language use in professional contexts.

The Office for Gender Equality has adopted the National plan for gender equality, encouraging students to pursue educational and career paths free from gender stereotypes. This initiative integrates activities into the annual CPD plan of the Education and Teacher Training Agency, including state-level interdisciplinary conferences aimed at addressing gender stereotypes. These efforts empower educators to eliminate stereotypes, promote equality, and advocate for equal opportunities in education.

- **Developing 21st century skills through cross-curricular topics**

Guided by the principles of cooperation, collaboration and solidarity, Croatia reformed the curricula and in 2019 introduced cross-curricular topics as an integral part of teaching in primary and secondary schools that aim to empower future generations: Personal and social development; Health; Using communication and information technology; Citizenship education; Sustainable development; Entrepreneurship; Learning how to learn are topics of general human values and competences for life in the 21st century.

Citizenship education enables students to find a better way of living in a pluralistic society, to have confidence in their own strengths and to find their own answers and solutions to current social problems and challenges.

- **Learning for sustainability**

In January 2019, Croatia adopted a comprehensive Curriculum for the cross-curricular topic Sustainable Development for primary and secondary schools. This cross-curricular theme is integrated throughout all school levels and subjects. Learning about sustainability aims to: raise awareness and understanding of sustainability issues, equip students to critically analyse solutions and actions promoting sustainability, cultivate skills for responsible decision-making concerning sustainability and encourage behaviours that harmonize with sustainability principles at school and in daily life.

Croatia's "Skills Mapping for Green and Digital Transition" project (2021-2024) created a catalogue of these crucial skills for the workforce. This resource assists institutions in developing occupational standards and in defining relevant skills, enabling individuals seeking professional development to find relevant programs.

- **Strengthening Parental Competencies in Preserving Mental Health**

In effort to strengthen parental competencies in preserving mental health, a series of workshops are being held on this topic. This initiative has already started with the first workshop held in Zagreb on October 11, 2023. These workshops, organized by the Croatian Institute of Public Health, aim to equip parents with the necessary skills and knowledge to support the mental health and well-being of children and youth.

The program will continue with workshops scheduled to be held in all counties across Croatia, ensuring widespread access to this important training. The series of workshops will ensure that parents and guardians in every Croatian county have access to valuable information and practical tools, contributing to the broader national effort to promote mental health awareness and preventative care.

- **Drug prevention**

The principle of protecting the health of children and young people also includes protection against the development of risky behaviours and appearance of various forms of addiction. Therefore, within the health, social and educational system, addiction prevention interventions and programs are carried out. National minimum addiction prevention standards for children and youth in the educational system have been in place since 2017 to ensure implementation of high-quality and effective prevention programs in educational institutions. New Addiction Prevention National Standards are under preparation and will include not only educational system but also other systems that provide health, social and other services for children and young people.

Since 2016, on an annual basis, in order to provide support to experts who work with children and young people, educations in the field on European Standards for Quality Prevention of Drug Abuse (EDPQS) and education on Universal Prevention Curriculum (EUPC) have been held.

In order to promote healthy lifestyle of children and young people, the science-based prevention program *I have an attitude* ("Unplugged") program has been implemented in selected schools since 2019. It is a universal alcohol, cigarettes and drugs use prevention program in school environment. In addition, activities aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles, protecting mental health and preventing addiction among children and young people are also available through more than 300 addiction prevention programs that are carried out annually in Croatia by various stakeholders.

One of specific goals of the last National strategy on Addiction Policies for the period until 2030 and the accompanying Action Plan for the period until 2026, is reducing the demand for addictive substances and the occurrence of behavioural addictions through prevention of addiction among children and young people.

With aim of strengthening cooperation in treatment and care, which also includes young people with addiction problems, a Protocol of cooperation between health, social and criminal justice systems was adopted, which, among other things, includes the actions of competent authorities when providing care and treatment to minors experimenting with addictive substances.