

Integrating School Health Curriculum in Allied Health Science Programs: A Step Towards Social Accountability

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Abstract

Implementing a School Health Curriculum within Allied Health Science Programs represents a proactive and strategic approach to nurturing the health and well-being of our school-aged children. In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) is a statutory body formed by the Government of Pakistan, and the main functions of this council are to provide funds, oversee, and regulate and accredit the higher education institutions in the country. We propose a policy to the Higher Education Commission Pakistan (HEC) to ensure that allied health professionals are equipped with the tools they need to champion school health promotion and preventive healthcare. The HEC can address this by integrating the school health curriculum into the national allied health sciences curriculum. In this way, we may advance child health outcomes and also fulfill our social accountability aspirations with unwavering commitment and resolve.

Introduction

The health and well-being of our children and adolescents aren't just incidental concerns; they are pivotal to their overall development and future success. We cannot overlook the fact that nearly a quarter of our population in Pakistan, aged between 5 and 15 years, forms the backbone of our nation's future. To even dream of achieving our Sustainable Development Goals, we must prioritize health interventions for these school-going children in our legislature ("Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100," 2023).

Despite the critical importance of health and nutrition in education, a mere 1% of global education spending is allocated to these essential aspects, as per a report by UNESCO (Broom, 2023). This statistic alone should jolt us into action, reminding us of the urgent need to rectify this glaring imbalance.

In Pakistan, the situation is dire. Shockingly, malnutrition plagues a significant portion of our school children, with 25.1% being underweight and 11.4% battling obesity. Yet, what's even

more alarming is the absence of comprehensive health and nutrition education programs in the majority of our schools, as reported by (Khan *et al.* 2022). This void not only perpetuates ignorance among children, teachers, and parents but also leaves them vulnerable to a myriad of preventable diseases, both communicable and non-communicable.

Furthermore, our educational curricula lack clear objectives for nutrition education and physical education, as reported by (Hardman *et al.*) in a joint UNESCO-NWCPEA survey. Despite the existence of policies on paper (“Policies by Country | Global Database on the Implementation of Nutrition Action (GINA),” n.d.), their translation into practical implementation is sorely lacking. This gap between policy and practice is a chasm that we urgently need to bridge.

In low and middle-income countries like ours, there exists a viable, cost-effective solution: leveraging existing allied health professionals to spearhead School Health and Nutrition (SHN) programs. Nurses, physiotherapists, and medical technologists can each be instrumental in promoting and supporting the health of our school-aged children, as is proposed in existing literature (Boldt *et al.* 2021).

HEC is looking towards the regulations, policies, procedures, and accreditation standards of all higher educational institutions in Pakistan. It is important for HEC to envision a future where dedicated school nurses, supported by a team of health educators, work tirelessly to instill healthy habits, provide crucial screenings, and connect families with vital community resources. But at present, many of these professionals graduate without the necessary training to address the unique health needs of school communities. Our current allied health sciences curricula fail to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to be effective advocates for school health. By explicitly incorporating the school health curriculum into the national allied health curriculum, the HEC can signal the importance of this issue and establish clear expectations for all Allied health schools.

The policy we propose isn't just about allocating resources; it's about investing in our future. It's about ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, has access to the resources and education they need to thrive. It's about bridging the gap between policy and practice, turning rhetoric into action.

With the support of the international body of literature on social accountability, alongside our fellow deans of medical schools around the world (in the Social Accountability Fellowship through which this proposal was developed), we urge the council to consider the immense potential for positive change. Let's not just talk about improving the health and well-being of our children; let's make it happen. Our future depends on it!

Existing National Policy

Numerous initiatives, both local and international, have been initiated to bolster school health and nutrition services in Pakistan. From WHO's "Global School Health Initiative" in 1995 to Pakistan's alignment with the Alma-Ata Declaration and the Punjab Health Sector Reform Program (PHSRP), a myriad of funded programs has been set in motion (“School Health Program” n.d.). However, despite these efforts, a comprehensive approach has remained elusive, leaving the school health education program in its infancy.

In a noteworthy collaboration, the Ministry of Education in Pakistan joined forces with UNESCO in February 2010 to craft a strategic approach aimed at uplifting health and education nationwide (“School Health Programme: A Strategic Approach for Improving Health and Education in Pakistan United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)” 2010). Action plans were meticulously devised at the national, provincial, and district levels. Yet, despite the existence of national and provincial policies, the effective implementation of school health and nutrition programs encounters formidable challenges.

To overcome these challenges, we propose a bold step: *the integration of school health principles and practices into the curricula of allied health schools*. By equipping future allied health professionals with the requisite knowledge and skills, we empower them to champion the cause of school health with vigor and efficacy (Bundy *et al.*, 2018).

Policy Solution

We urge the council to implement a policy necessitating the incorporation of a vertical theme within the allied health sciences curriculum, meticulously designed to prepare allied health workers to contribute meaningfully to school health and nutrition programs.

Action Steps

We propose the following actionable steps to the council for the drafting and implementation of this policy at national as well as school level:

- 1. Engagement of Stakeholders:** Foster dialogue and collaboration among allied health educators, school administrators, and policymakers to garner widespread support for curriculum integration efforts. Early involvement of the various stakeholders will lead to a sense of responsibility and later commitment to the change process, increasing the likelihood of success.
- 2. Curriculum Development:** Leverage the expertise of professionals in both school health and allied health fields to assess the needs and identify areas of intervention. The same can then be used as the guiding beacon to craft and implement relevant coursework and clinical experiences, ensuring alignment with evolving needs and best practices.
- 3. Evaluation and Feedback:** Establish robust mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and feedback to gauge the effectiveness and relevance of the integrated curriculum, facilitating continuous improvement. The process can be made worthwhile by including formative and summative evaluation, as well as internal and external evaluators, followed by timely, constructive feedback.
- 4. Policy Advocacy:** Champion policy changes by incentivizing allied health schools to prioritize school health integration. This includes allocating necessary resources and offering unwavering support for implementation. On the other hand, the government

may also set deadlines for institutes to adopt, customize, and implement the policy based on their status.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is critical to meet the health needs of school communities by incorporating school health curricula into allied health sciences. The HEC can successfully update curriculum, rules, procedures, and accreditation requirements by adhering to a methodical process. This will enable the inclusion of school health curricula in allied health curriculum as a crucial step, fostering a culture of social responsibility towards health care professionals to provide meaningful contribution towards the school health and nutrition programs.

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