



The Healthy Elementary School of the Future

What is The Healthy Elementary School of the Future?

The Healthy Elementary School of the Future is a novel Dutch school-based approach. The aim of this approach is to improve mental and physical health, lifestyle behaviours and academic achievement of children starting at a young age. In school year 2015/2016, the school environments of 4 Dutch elementary schools will be altered. Two schools will become a so-called 'Healthy Elementary School of the future'. This school environment encompasses a new day-rhythm with plenty of time for health education, physical activity and healthy nutrition. Two other so-called 'Physical Activity schools' will stimulate exercise, sport and play, and demotivate sedentary behaviour by making several changes in school rhythm and school environment. A guideline based on proven effective school-based interventions is used as a framework to design the different school environments. The school-specific interventions and implementation of 'The Healthy Elementary School of the future' are determined in close collaboration with the stakeholders, e.g. parents, children and teachers.

Evaluation

We will thoroughly investigate whether these novel school environments effectively contribute to a wide range of outcome parameters among which academic achievement, health, lifestyle behaviours, and cost-effectiveness. Also the legal impact of these new school environments is investigated. All involved parties (children, parents and teachers) at the four intervention schools are invited to join a scientific evaluation. Results of the scientific evaluation will be compared with four regular schools (e.g. control schools) in the region. Outcome parameters will be measured during four years (2015-2019) and include:

- General health measures (BMI, waist circumference, disease prevalence, medication use, school absenteeism and sick leave, quality of life, behavioural problems, self-efficacy),
- Academic achievements (test achievements, executive functions, school advice/choice high school, repeating classes)
- Physical activity (physical activity levels and sedentary time as measured by accelerometers, physical fitness, sport membership, leisure time preferences, active transport forms to school),
- Dietary behaviour (food intake, dietary habits, food preferences),

- Parental variables (labour participation, wellbeing, parental BMI, parental practices regarding nutrition and physical activity, leave/absence due to illness child)
- Satisfaction with the school environment

Sustainability

There is funding available to change the school environment in all involved schools for a minimum of four years. All involved schools have the intention to change their school environment until after the intervention period of four years. Sustainability is a major pillar of the project and a broad network with both local, regional and national governments, local and national companies are involved in the long-term sustainability strategies. The long-term goal is to implement the effective components of this approach into other schools.

Who are involved?

The initiative for a new school environment is initiated by MOVARE. MOVARE is a school board of 54 elementary schools in the most Southern part of the Netherlands, region Parkstad. Together with Maastricht University and the regional Youth health Department they are the main involved parties. Maastricht University is responsible for the scientific evaluation and the scientific framework for the intervention components. The regional Youth health Department is involved in the guidance of the schools towards a healthy school environment. Several regional child-care centres, cultural and sport partners and local private companies are actively involved in the organisation of the activities during lunch break and before-and after-school programme. A major private partner is involved in the supply and logistics of the lunch. The local government, Province Limburg, is the main subsidizing party of the project.

If this approach appears to be successful, this integrated program can be adapted and implemented in primary schools in the Netherlands that are willing to comply to the necessary conditions. This unique topic is of great societal and scientific importance. It may affect cultural aspects of our society i.e., norms and values about parenting, education and labour input of parents/caregivers. Moreover, the innovative day-schools concept will be a great example for other schools worldwide.