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UNICEF EDUCATION

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Case Study

CHINA

Supporting the socio-emotional learning and psychological wellbeing of children through a whole-school approach

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According to a [recent national study of mental health](#), almost 25 per cent of adolescents reported feeling mild or severe depression. It is estimated that at least 30 million children and adolescents under 17 years of age in China struggle with emotional or behavioural problems. The COVID-19 epidemic has also led to adolescents and young adults feeling more isolated, anxious, and concerned about their schooling and career prospects.

UNICEF is working with health services, the education sector, families and adolescents to ensure adolescents' mental health and wellbeing are promoted and protected. Prevention of mental health problems is more cost-effective and leads to better health and wellbeing outcomes than treatment alone. In the education sector, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to develop and implement the [Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\)](#) Project. The project focuses on improving school culture and environment, enabling student-centred teaching and learning, strengthening school leadership and management, and facilitating school-family collaboration. Up to date, the project has been implemented in 625 schools in 11 provinces, promoting children's holistic development through a whole-school approach, moving beyond SEL as a stand-alone subject to reinforcing it across subjects and integrating SEL into daily activities such as group exercises, extracurriculars, and school assemblies. A national SEL framework and an accompanying [SEL resource package](#), including SEL curriculum, training manuals for trainers, pedagogical guidance and tips for fostering school-community collaboration, was developed.

UNICEF provided training for local-level facilitators, education administrators, school principals and teachers while local education authorities supported school-level implementation.

To support the continuation of SEL at home during COVID-19 induced school closures, UNICEF collaborated with MoE to develop and disseminate digital lessons on SEL and created a [resource hub](#) for parents and caregivers with mental health tips and information. These resources were disseminated through UNICEF and Government social media with more than 7.2 million views in 30 weeks.

RESULTS

- Through 2020, the SEL project has directly benefited 129,223 students and 7,187 teachers in 250 primary schools across five western provinces.
- The SEL promotion project has reached 162,027 students and 10,984 teachers in 275 primary schools in 11 provinces.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **A whole-school approach to SEL is key to promoting a positive school environment.** Stand-alone SEL classes are insufficient in improving a school's environment and in promoting children's social and emotional competencies. For this reason, it should be complemented by programmes that engage the whole-school community.

- **Programme design should consider cultural context and the needs of vulnerable children.** Recognizing that Chinese culture cherishes collectivism and shared values, these values were incorporated into the SEL Framework, in addition to the emphasis on increased, tailored support for children from vulnerable communities.
- **Adults in schools as role models.** Setting up a clear standard for 'SEL training' and providing uniform guidance for principals and teachers allowed them to be role models for children in promoting SEL in school, illustrating how capacity building of school leaders can be used as an entry point for promoting children's holistic development.
- **Caregiver engagement is vital to bolstering children's holistic development.** Unsupportive home environments can negatively impact children's psychological wellbeing and undermine their performance in schools. Schools should actively engage caregivers and community members in building positive environments for children and reinforcing SEL outside of schools.

NEXT STEPS

For the 2021–2025 programme cycle, UNICEF has started scaling up the SEL pilot to preschool and junior secondary schools. This entails adapting the SEL curriculum and teacher training to the specific needs of adolescents and integrating additional SEL skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. UNICEF will also help develop a gender-responsive adolescent mental health resource package to support government agencies as they deliver mental health services.

Cost effectiveness: With a strategic investment of US\$2,602,121 (funding from Gucci, Starwood, Mont Blanc, Haier and UNICEF), UNICEF successfully supported the implementation of the Social and Emotional Learning Project between 2013 and 2021, benefiting (directly and indirectly) 291,250 students and 18,171 teachers in 525 primary schools.