



Keeping children
robust

Experts urge adoption of best practices to maximise impact of health initiatives in schools. > 4 & 5

This visual is human-created, AI-aided

Leg up for future engineers
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Striving for wellness

Integrating regional practices key to healthier schools

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AS educational paradigms evolve, integrating best practices from other countries plays a pivotal role in transforming health and wellness initiatives in Malaysian schools.

This, said SK Putrajaya Presint 11(1) English language teacher Mohd Saharudin Setapa, is a key takeaway from the recent AIA Healthiest Schools (AHS) Regional Awards ceremony in Nusa Dua, Bali.

Mohd Saharudin was in Indonesia on July 4 to represent the primary school in Putrajaya in the ceremony, where it was named the "healthiest" among more than 2,000 primary and secondary schools across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Australia and Vietnam, bagging the grand prize of US\$100,000 (RM466,475) for its innovative Helpe mobile application.

There are many challenges and opportunities as Malaysia continues to evolve its approach to health and wellness in schools, Mohd Saharudin, who led the Helpe project, told *StarEdu*.

He said it is crucial that educators leverage insights from neighbouring countries to develop effective strategies.

"Partnerships between schools, communities, government and health organisations will be essential in driving this transformation forward," he added.

Competing regionally, he said, offered insights, motivation and inspiration for his school to help shape the future of health and wellness initiatives in Malaysia.

"We learnt so many new things from our peers. Their projects opened our eyes to new approaches. I intend to adopt the many successful initiatives I've seen.

"For example, the primary school representative from Indonesia inspired me with their initiative to maintain the physical health of their students through weekly wellness routines, like eat-

ing a healthy breakfast, abstaining from sugary foods and exercising in school.

"This initiative is important given that most kids these days tend to neglect healthy eating habits," he said, adding that having holistic support by collaborating with other schools to leverage their expertise ensures a more comprehensive approach to health and wellness promotion.

Explaining his school's project, Mohd Saharudin said Helpe was created last year to promote mental health and well-being among school students and the community.

The project aimed to achieve this by adopting two of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 3, which focuses on good health and well-being, and SDG 4, which emphasises quality education.

He said the app was built using Andromo, a platform for app creation, along with basic programming languages like HyperText Markup Language and Cascading Style Sheets, which he and his students learnt via YouTube tutorials.

"Together, we developed an app, which was a great addition to their portfolios," he shared.

Despite the many hours spent on developing and prototyping the app, he said it was not too difficult once they had a clear idea of the design and understood the basics of coding.

"We took almost four months to complete the project before we were able to test it. Feedback from students, the school counsellor and nearby hospitals was collected to improve our prototype.

"It took almost half a year before we were able to launch Helpe," he said, adding that the team plans to share the app with other institutions across the region to tackle stress and improve mental well-being on a



Proud team: (Far left) Mohd Saharudin posing for a photo alongside his students from the app innovation team.

larger scale.

SMK Convent Butterworth, Penang, senior assistant of student affairs Suzana Khamis, who led the school's team in showcasing their Eco-Jump Rope and Dumbbell, said interacting with schools from across the Asia-Pacific opened their eyes to a wider range of strategies for promoting health and sustainability in schools.

"We came across innovative projects focusing on nutrition, mental well-being, and alternative methods for encouraging physical activity.

"Learning about these diverse approaches allowed us to identify potential areas to adapt into our own project," she said, adding that they were able to identify elements contributing to programme sustainability, effective student engagement strategies, and methods for overcoming obstacles commonly faced in school health initiatives.

Suzana said the impetus for her school's project was a concern about student inactivity, with facilities like limited access to conventional fitness equipment and a preference for screen-based activities contributing to the issue.

"Traditional fitness equipment can be expensive, which can limit student participation.

"By crafting jump ropes and dumbbells from recycled materials, the project removes any financial obstacles, allowing all students to engage in physical activities," she said.

Looking ahead, she said the project holds great promise for further development as they plan to expand the equipment options beyond jump ropes and dumbbells to cater to a wider range of student preferences and fitness levels.

"This may involve creating recycled exercise bands, balance trainers or even weight benches," she said.

Suzana added that SMK Convent Butterworth's participation in the event fostered connections with schools and educators beyond the country's borders.

"These connections can develop into a valuable network for future collaboration. Sharing resources and best practices can address health and sustainability challenges on a broader scale in Malaysia," she said.

Endorsed by the Education Ministry, the AHS programme, said AIA Group chief marketing officer Stuart A. Spencer, is designed to encourage healthy living habits among students aged



All smiles: (From left) AIA Malaysia corporate communications manager Tunku Faradana Tunku Zainal Abidin, Suzana Mohd Saharudin, SK Putrajaya Presint 11(1) headmistress Norzai Mohd Kassim, AIA Malaysia brand and communications director Aisha Nair and SMK Convent Butterworth principal Lim Lean Yolk at the awards ceremony.

five to 16 by promoting healthy eating to active lifestyles, mental well-being and sustainability in schools.

He noted that a key best practice observed throughout the programme was the strong integration among students, teachers and the community, working together in a highly coordinated and collaborative manner across all participating countries.

A total of 2,376 primary and secondary schools from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Australia and Vietnam participated in the 2023/24 AHS programme.

"The diversity of the initiatives that we saw was great and we can really see the impact and the influence the programme has brought forth," Spencer said, adding that there was tremendous

enthusiasm from schools, with extensive participation, engagement, and many excellent ideas across all dimensions of wellness (see infographic).

He said the programme will be expanded to include the Philippines and Sri Lanka next.

"We are looking for schools with innovative ideas and initiatives that have the potential to go beyond."

"Our goal is to discover effective strategies in one school, share those successful ideas, and implement them in other schools that could be participating in the future.

that can inspire and stimulate change throughout Asia.

"Supporting kids' health through education at a young age is crucial for driving health habits in adulthood, helping them lead longer, healthier lives and ensuring future generations are in better shape," he said.

AIA director of group brand Stuart Woolford said the competition allowed schools to apply what they had learnt by participating in the competition.

The winning schools, he added, were then given funding to help bring their programmes and innovations to life or elevate them to the next level.

"One of the criteria for the judges in selecting the winner was

impact – not just the idea itself but how well it was executed and its potential for further impact," he said, adding that having the local winning schools across the Asia-Pacific interact and share their key learnings was an effort to spark

inspiration and adoption of best practices back in their respective countries.

"We held a workshop for all the local winning schools to interact and learn from each other."

"Our aim was to create a community of best practices that extends beyond just the schools that participated in the programme this year, allowing schools to share and adopt ideas from one market into another," he said.

'Reimagine power in classrooms'



SCHOOLS play an important role in nurturing young minds to become proactive agents of change, capable of addressing global challenges. By educating students about global challenges and solutions, schools make children and youths relevant and motivated stakeholders for the future.

The world is far behind in achieving the SDGs. We are supposed to be halfway through achieving the 17 SDGs by now, but instead we are only 15% through our targets by 2030.

This shortfall underscores the urgent need to create more empowering educational spaces that encourage action. My hope for schools everywhere is to reimagine the power that exists within our classrooms to create positive change.

We would not be able to grow into the best version of ourselves if this rapidly changing world needs for us to be without the foundational support of our teachers, school principals and educators all around the world. We urgently need our classrooms to become spaces where we can develop our skills to create positive change by making learning engaging, creative and relevant.

These AHS schools are setting a precedent for others worldwide, showcasing the tangible benefits of being solution-driven and proactive.

- AIA Voices environmental ambassador and Indonesian changemaker Melati Wijsen

'Health literacy must start young'

EDUCATING and sensitising children to take care of their health is crucial given the prevalence of lifestyle diseases across the Asia-Pacific, says AIA group chief marketing officer Stuart A. Spencer.

Unlike in the past when communicable diseases like smallpox and yellow fever were the primary causes of death, it is lifestyle diseases that are claiming lives today, he said.

Spencer underscored the critical backdrop of lifestyle diseases in Asia, which include cancer, diabetes, stroke, hypertension and chronic lung disease, primarily caused by poor lifestyle choices such as unhealthy diets, lack of exercise, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.

"Environmental factors like pollution and high stress levels also contribute significantly to this health crisis.

"In countries like Indonesia, the percentage of disease diagnoses related to lifestyle choices can be as high as 80% to 90%.

"The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, but it is clear that the primary health challenge in Asia is non-communicable, lifestyle-related diseases," he said, adding that the proliferation of lifestyle diseases is partly due to a lack of proper guidance, education and positive influences.

Without these, people continue to make unhealthy choices that lead to chronic illnesses.

"The AIA Healthiest Schools (AHS) programme aims to address this by educating and sensitising youths to the virtues of healthy behaviours so that they are better equipped to live healthier, longer and more fulfilling lives.

"The children participating in these initiatives represent

the future for cultivating change," he said.

AIA director of group brand Stuart Woolford said the AHS programme provides free downloadable educational resources created in collaboration with educators from across the region so teachers can effectively introduce health and well-being concepts into their classrooms.

"These resources are designed to be genuinely useful for teachers, particularly in the area of mental health," he said, citing the 2024 AHS Thought Leadership Report findings that many teachers felt they needed more support to help their students cope with mental health challenges (see infographic).

The report also indicated that there were more than 560 million school-aged children across the Asia-Pacific region with 5.4 million children enrolled throughout schools in Malaysia.

Individuals with higher mental health literacy, the report read, were more likely to seek professional treatment.

"Teachers also expressed similar sentiments about the other wellness pillars, but they mainly emphasised mental health the most, especially after the pandemic.

"It can be difficult for schools to access quality resources, or for teachers to have adequate subject knowledge in the relevant areas, particularly with regard to mental health."

"These materials are readily accessible through our portal and adaptable in the classroom across each of our markets so that's one way we want to support schools that push health and wellness in students," he said.

Schools interested in registering for the AHS programme can find more information at <https://ahs.aia.com/my/en>, where teaching resources are also available.

Entries for the second edition of the AHS competition can be submitted from August this year.

10 Best Practices by schools across the region

Source: AHS programme

INDONESIA

3 Urban farming
The Semarang Junior High School (SMPN 22 Semarang) developed an urban farming programme for a greener and healthier school and surrounding community. The programme was designed to engage students, teachers and parents in the practice of farming, offering lessons on growing plants, raising animals and farming technology.

THAILAND

5 Policy
Theesaban 2 Wat Don Munchai Primary School created the "Change for Good" project to promote nutritious eating, regular exercise, and stress management among students and staff. The project introduced new policies, including better food services, regular inspections of water and food hygiene, waste reduction, and health screenings for students.

VIETNAM

7 Promoting happiness
Focusing on creating an empathetic learning environment, Victory Experimental Secondary School created activities on cyberspace safety, happiness and connectivity, and self and social-awareness, together with teachers, parents and students as part of its "Going to school is happiness" initiative.

INDONESIA

4 Exercise/nutrition
Having observed how street vendors selling snacks were popular among students who travel to school by car or motorcycle, Pasir pogor Elementary School introduced the "Paspor Serasi" programme (Pasipogor Keeps Me Healthy All Day Long) to improve students' mental and emotional well-being, reduce stress, anxiety and increase energy by raising physical activities and encouraging healthier food choices.

THAILAND

6 5Bs
Theesaban 1 Kittikachorn Secondary School embarked on the "We Are Getting Better" project focusing on the 5Bs (better food, health, minds, surroundings and model) to enhance existing habits in and out of the classroom.

VIETNAM

8 Natural materials
To motivate students to attend school, Na Sang Semi-Boarding Primary School for Ethnic Minorities No 1 renovated their schoolhouse with help from local villagers and parents. The "Happy Schools" project used free natural materials to enhance the students' well-being. Bamboo, wooden planks, and tyres were used to build a new playground.

AUSTRALIA

9 Rebuilding a community
St Rita's Catholic School in Queensland designed a project to rebuild a 'community of support' following the devastation left behind by cyclones and floods. The project aimed to better involve the families affected by the natural disasters in the school's activities.

HONG KONG

10 Greener future
Ying We primary school initiated a 5-year programme focused on life-skills learning, cultivating positive values and educating students about conservation and the local environment.

Wellness pillars

- Healthy eating (eat well)
- Active lifestyles (move well)
- Mental wellbeing (think well)
- Health and sustainability (live well)

Trends

Lifestyle issues
Poor nutrition

Average childhood obesity rose to **61%**

Physical inactivity
Sedentary time among children and young people are rising.

Mental health
Teachers cite emotional wellbeing among students as their greatest concern.

Students face high academic pressure in schools.

Hygiene
Lack of basic hygiene behaviour (e.g. washing hands with soap) among school children.

Limited access to hygiene infrastructure in schools.

Health-related absenteeism
Teachers from across Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam report health-related absenteeism as an issue impacting young peoples' education.

Large number of schoolgirls miss lessons during their periods.

Health issues

1 India
More than **50%** of children use screens for longer than the recommended amount of time.

2 Thailand
More than **7 in 10** children and young people report feeling greater levels of stress, worry and anxiety in the wake of the pandemic.

3 Malaysia
63% of children had good practice of hand hygiene.

4 Singapore
1 in 3 adolescents report struggling with mental health.

5 Vietnam
Only **13%** of children washed their hands with soap before eating or after going to the toilet.

6 Hong Kong
Some **21%** of children are overweight or obese.

An average primary-aged child spent **7 hours** a day on electronics.

Secondary school students spent **9 hours** a day on electronics.

Over a third of secondary school students show symptoms of depression.

7 Australia
1 in 4 children of school-going age and adolescents are overweight or obese.

Only **8.5%** of children eat the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables.

43% of young people feel stressed most or all of the time.

Up to **1.19 million** children face a poor health leaving them absent from school.

8 New Zealand
40% of children are overweight or obese.

Source: 2024 AHS Thought Leadership Report