

FIVE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE FOR THE PROMOTION OF A BETTER NUTRITIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN SCHOOLS

The programme '*Je mange bien à l'école*' (*I eat well at school*)
an innovative project developed in the French-speaking Community of Belgium

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PROGRAMME ORIGINS, TARGET PUBLIC AND TIMETABLE.

The programme '*Je mange bien à l'école*' has been developed for nearly 5 years in the French-speaking Community of Belgium. It has already been implemented in 75 schools at nursery, primary and secondary level, and involves pupils from 3 to 18 years of age. It has been the subject of 4 short and medium-term assessment procedures.

During a pilot phase in 1990 and 1991, the schools were supervised by advisers belonging to university departments attached to the Public Health School of the University of Liège (C.E.R.E.S and A.P.E.S.) and departments specialised in nutritional education (I.C.A.N. and S.E.S. of Huy). Afterwards the programme became more widespread and school health officials now support its implementation in schools.

The origin of this programme can be traced back to a private, non-profit-making association anxious to encourage the well-being of children through studies, pilot actions and actions to increase professional and public awareness. The conception of the programme and the accomplishment of the pilot phase were financed by the French-speaking Community of Belgium (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs). The programme dissemination phase and the training of advisers are jointly financed by that same Ministry and the European Commission.

PROGRAMME AIMS

The aim of the programme is to create a broad movement for improving the nutritional environment in school through the development of projects adapted to their specific situation in and by schools. Those projects should lead to:

- Actual improvement in schoolchildren's eating habits;
- Changes in the school nutritional environment, its dietetic, material, organisational and educational components;

- The involvement of the various participants of the teaching community (teachers of various matters, direction, parents, cook, educator, supervisors, bursar, maintenance agents, etc.) in the long-term maintenance of the quality of the nutritional environment.

METHODOLOGY

The programme '*Je mange bien à l'école*' encourages schools to develop projects which combine educational activities (formal curriculum) with changes in the living environment affecting its dietetic, material, organisational and psycho-social components (hidden curriculum). The basis of the projects is neither educational equipment nor a 'syllabus', but rather an analysis of the needs of children's living environment in the food sphere. Teaching activities are one of the dimensions of that environment among 6 others. The objective of the projects must always be a lasting change in one or more parameters of the living environment.

LINES OF ACTION	
1. Snacks 1.1 place and time 1.2 drinks 1.3 snacks 1.4 pupil participation 1.5 educational aspect	2. Sandwich meals 2.1 place and time 2.2 hygiene 2.3 supervision 2.4 supplementary foods on offer 2.5 pupil participation
3 Hot meals 3.1 place and time 3.2 hygiene 3.3 supervision 3.4 drinks 3.5 types of food 3.6 pupil participation 3.7 organisation of the work	4. Education activities 4.1 frequency 4.2 objectives 4.3 references
5. Before and after school childcare facilities 5.1 place and time 5.2 drinks 5.3 types of food	6. Food on offer in vicinity of the school 6.1 regulatory environment 6.2 competitiveness 6.3 information
7. Adult information training 7.1 information on school food 7.2 dietary information in general 7.3 participation	

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

In order to support schools in the development of the following approach, the programme '*Je mange bien à l'école*' makes available to them:

- Tools (basic documents): *self-assessment questionnaire, suggested action plans, suggested assessment plans*. Questionnaire and suggested action plans

are structured around seven fields of action. The field of action represent the 'key times' and 'key places' of school life concerned by food or nutritional education: snack time, sandwich lunch, hot meal, teaching activities, meals and snacks served before school and afternoon childcare facilities, food supplies in the vicinity of the school, adult information and education.

- *A methodological support by specially trained 'Advisers'*: These advisers belong to school health departments, child guidance centres and various departments which have health education among their assignments. Advisers integrate the development of the programme '*Je mange bien à l'école*' into their daily professional practice.

The self-assessment questionnaire and suggested action plans were designed to encourage schools to set up overall nutritional environment improvement projects. They are used in a complementary way.

The questionnaire helps partners to draw up an inventory of the nutritional environment of their school. The comparison of answers to the questionnaire with the suggested action plans enables them to be aware of and specify the priority problems. Suggested action plans define target 'standards' which aim at the achievement of a satisfactory nutritional environment.

After having analysed their situation with the help of the questionnaire, schools identify three action priorities to meet their requirements. The choice of those 'objectives' is based on the list of suggested action plans proposed by the programme. Both these tools (self-assessment questionnaire and suggested action plans) provide a framework, within which each school develops a 'customer-made' project which corresponds to its priorities, its constraints and its specific public. It is a programme *à la carte*.

As part of the programme, schools are encouraged to use the equipment and animation's proposed by other bodies, insofar as that corresponds to the action priorities they have defined.

The advisers' role is to help educational communities to develop their project but not to coordinate it inside the school. They encourage the setting up of a team motivated to implement the programme, they help in defining action priorities in keeping with the specific situation of the school, they provide trails to choose, plan and prepare activities, they give information about available material and human resources, they encourage resorting to assessment practices as regulating mechanisms. They also provide information of a dietetic nature about the pupils' nutritional needs and products eaten at school.

Training opportunities are organised for the advisers. Such training courses are organised locally for small groups of around ten people, from different institutions or organisations. Each training cycle is spread over two school years. It includes

three induction days and monthly monitoring sessions. People enrolling for such a training commit themselves to be responsible for implementing the programme in one to three schools. During the monitoring sessions, participants report any difficulties they have encountered with practical programme application and carrying. Such problems provide an opportunities to further refine the strategies of the programme.

This local level training is aimed at creating a multiplier effect and enabling programme options and strategies to be progressively integrated into the professional practices of those responsible for promoting health at school.

The following boxes try to illustrate how the aims and strategies of the programme 'Je mange bien à l'école' are linked with the principles of the Ottawa charter:

OTTAWA CHARTER FOR HEALTH PROMOTION	AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME: 'JE MANGE BIEN À L'ÉCOLE'
1. Creating supportive environment	Improving nutritional environment in schools
2. Developing personal skills	Giving children the opportunity to make wise choices, to experiment with healthy eating patterns
3. Strengthening community action	Involving the various partners from the educational community (pupils too) in planning, implementing assessing the project and activities
4. Reorienting health services	Training the workers of school health departments so that they integrate the role of adviser into their daily professional practice and

Some examples for giving children the opportunity to make wise choices, to experiment with healthy eating patterns:

Developing educational activities which foster healthy eating habits in schools, for example by:

- making pupils responsible for choosing, promoting and selling healthy snacks, as well as managing profits from sales;
- letting pupils help decide which menus are served in the school restaurant as well as allowing them to participate in the preparation of certain extras served in the refectory (soup, sandwiches, etc.);
- providing pupils with a daily chart to enable them to vary the snacks they eat throughout the week;
- involving pupils in the way the school restaurant is organised and maintained (decoration, arrangement of the tables, service, etc.) in order to make it a more pleasant place.

Developing educational activities which tackle the issue of diet from various aspects, for example by:

- introducing pupils to less familiar tastes and foods;
- developing pupils' ability to be discerning about the products which are available (analysing food composition, packaging, origins, etc.);
- making them aware of the cultural differences between eating patterns (from a geographical and historical perspective), as well as of the factors which underpin such differences.

Some easy examples for involving the various partners from the educational community:

- informing parents of the criteria for choosing a healthy snack selected with the children's' assistance
- involving educators and school financial managers in the pupils' evaluation of the school restaurant (composition of menus, atmosphere, etc.)
- inviting parents as well as other members of the local community (dietician, doctors, grocers, grandparents to sample a nutritionally balanced breakfast or lunch.

ASSESSMENT

Short-term assessment has emphasised the results produced by schools between the beginning and the end of the phase of adviser involvement (1 year). Those measurements concern changes in the nutritional environment and the extent of mobilisation of educational teams.

The largest progress across the board has been made in the following :

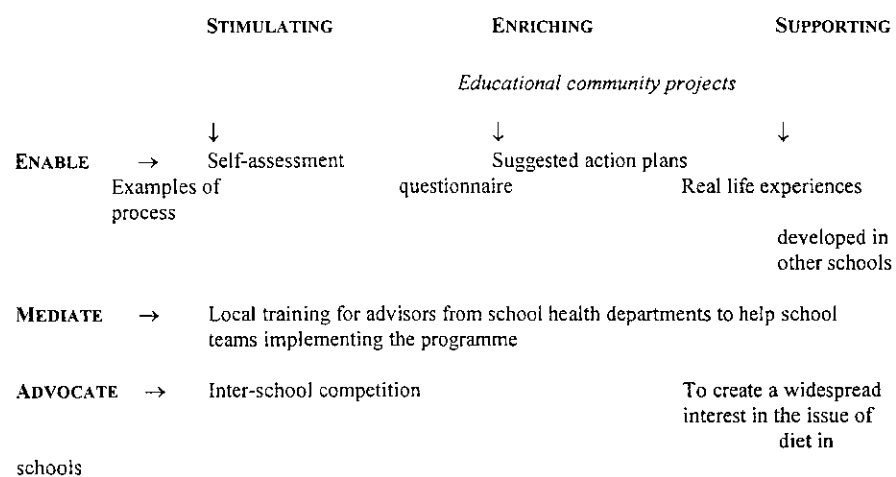
- improved nutritional quality of products, especially of food distributed during snack times, and purchased by children in the locality;
- pupil participation at all project levels;
- improved hand-washing and cleanliness of refectory tables and floors, and in the general atmosphere, as well as a reduction in noise levels;
- informed parents involved in project activities;
- distribution of drinks in before-and after-school child care facilities.

Medium-term assessment has analysed the progress of the actions of schools during the two years which followed the phase of adviser involvement. It gave rise to some result measurements (relating to the extent of mobilisation of educational communities) and provided information about procedures (brakes, spurs,...) which allow the implementation, maintenance and development of various types of actions in schools inside or outside the programme framework.

The following indicators were used to measure the mobilisation of educational communities:

- the variety of priorities identified and followed up by the schools;
- the capacity of the educational community to achieve these objectives which were fixed at the beginning of the programme;
- their capacity to maintain, strengthen and multiply activities not only during the project but also in the following years, without requiring a specific new support;
- the modification of opinions and attitudes of members of the educational community in relation to nutrition and the nutritional environment.

Furthermore, a set of assessment criteria have been drawn up to be used as a basis for a *qualitative assessment* of the projects carried out by schools, either in an internal or external mode.



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