

PRESS RELEASE

Luistro presents school health best practice in international forum

Education Secretary Br. Armin Luistro FSC has been invited by German donor agency GTZ to present an internationally-recognized Philippine school health program that teaches simple and cost-effective health interventions that promote cleanliness and prevent sickness among public school children.

Fit for School and its solution to bring water to schools for proper handwashing and hygiene were highlighted during the *World Water Week* celebration in Stockholm, Sweden over the weekend where Sec. Luistro presented the Essential Health Care Program (EHCP), a school-based health program of the DepEd in partnership with the local government units, private businesses, other government agencies and Fit for School, Inc, a health intervention program being supported by GTZ and the United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

"We are honored by this chance to present some of our best practices on school health intervention which hopefully other institutions may also adopt," said Luistro.

Hygiene-related diseases take a high toll on Filipino children who suffer from a high burden of intestinal worms, diarrhea, tooth decay and other preventable infections.

"Water is a source of life, and healthy school needs water to promote healthy habits" he said during his presentation, adding that "being healthy starts with proper hygiene. We all need to ensure that our children are healthy and fit for school".

The Essential Health Care Program, the national flagship program of DepEd, aims at reducing these diseases through daily handwashing with soap, daily toothbrushing with fluoride toothpaste and bi-annual deworming in partnership with the Department of Health. Participating schools build simple washing facilities, supported by parents and the community.

EHCP aims to enhance the hygiene and sanitation practices in schools. It seeks to reduce the incidence of diarrhea by 30-40%, bring down respiratory infections by 20-30%, and cut worm infections by 50%. This program is expected to increase school attendance by 20% and improve academic performance.

Studies have shown that most of the diseases that afflict schoolchildren are caused by hygiene problems. While many consider this normal or socially acceptable because they are not immediately life threatening, only little attention is given on its effect on the physical and mental development of children which directly affects their school attendance, school performance and ultimately quality of life.

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The *EHCP* currently reaches 2.02 million children in some 8,000 elementary schools throughout the Philippines. Private organizations and local government units are both active in supporting the program.

EHCP is taught in schools and daycare centers as venues for health promotion and behavior change as they are the most appropriate places to reach children in a structured and organized way.

EHCP has been recognized in 2008 as one of the world's best practices in primary health care among school children by the Global South-South Development Expo, a United Nations-wide annual event.

Recent studies conducted by DepEd, GTZ and UP revealed that diarrhea and respiratory tract infections are the leading causes of death among school children, while 67% of children are infected with intestinal worms. The same study showed that 97% of school children have tooth decay, with toothache as the main reason for absenteeism in school.

"We are committed to an ambitious but imperative vision: every child goes to a school that provides safe water, good sanitation and hygiene education – a school where they can learn, play and grow." said Luistro.

The World Water Week is organized by the Stockholm International Water Institute, a renowned institution advocating for access to safe water for all. The presentation was made during a session organized jointly by UNICEF and German Technical Cooperation GTZ, which supports the promotion of the Essential Health Care Program through Fit for School Inc.

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