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## DepEd's Health Initiative for Schoolchildren bags International Award

The Essential Health Care Program (EHCP) being implemented by the Department of Education has been recognized as one of the world's best practices in primary health care among school children.

The award was bestowed by the Global South-South Development Expo, a United Nations-wide annual event. It was handed out in ceremonies at Washington DC, USA last December 17, 2009.

The Fit For School Inc., a partner of Deped in implementing EHCP has been selected as one of the three winning Southern solutions to be exhibited and awarded at the Global South-South Development Expo 2009 for its innovation.

The EHCP combines high impact and evidence-based interventions in a simple and cost effective package to improve health and development of primary school children.

The EHCP, implemented in public day care and elementary schools nationwide, provides a health kit to every pupil consisting of soap for hand-washing, a toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste, and a deworming tablet given twice a year.

EHCP 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.

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.

"The eyes of the international public health and education community is on our work in the Philippines. Winning this award is an honor and great recognition for all those involved in the program," said Education Secretary Jesli Lapus.

Lapus stressed that quality of health of the pupils determines their academic performance.

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.

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Schools are considered the ideal venue for health promotion and behavior change as they are the most appropriate places to reach children in a structured and organized way.

"Sustainable improvement of health of school children worldwide is possible and *Fit For School Inc.* in the Philippines has shown what combined effort, realistic interventions and strong commitment can achieve", added Dr. Bella Monse, Fit for School CEO.

Lapus added that most of the diseases that afflict schoolchildren are caused by hygiene problems, which are considered normal, even socially acceptable. However, only little attention is put to the impact it creates on the physical and mental development of children like school attendance, school performance and ultimately quality of life.

"We at DepEd, and our partner agencies, believe that these alarming issues can be addressed by one comprehensive solution, EHCP," Lapus said.

The GSSD Expo is a global and UN-wide annual event held in conjunction with the celebrations of the United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation. It creates the opportunity for interested governments, UN organizations, the private sector to showcase their solutions and build innovative partnerships around the most promising transferable and scalable experiences to a broader audience.

GSSD Expo is an event organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank and other international organizations.

The GSSD Expo has served as a platform for the international community to celebrate achievements; share development successes; explore new avenues for collaboration towards achieving internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals.

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