

Welcoming Address by Minister Nonnemacher at the 22nd EUSUHM Congress, October 3, 2024

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Congress Participants,

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to warmly welcome all of you today to the opening of this Congress of the *European Union for School and University Health and Medicine*. The health of our children, adolescents, and students is a precious asset and forms the foundation for their personal development. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that they can flourish physically, mentally, and emotionally in their everyday lives and receive the support they need.

Schools and universities are not just places of learning, but central environments where young people spend much of their time. Here, they are supported in developing their skills, shaping their identities, and building social relationships. They are thus key spaces for health promotion, reaching children, adolescents, and young adults regardless of their social, cultural, or socioeconomic background.

I am particularly pleased that this Congress is taking place here at the Oberlin Special Needs School in Potsdam—a school that is dedicated with great commitment to the education and inclusion of children and adolescents with various disabilities and special educational needs. This school shows us that health encompasses far more than physical well-being—it also includes mental and social well-being, participation, and the possibility of learning, growing, and finding new individual paths together, despite all challenges.

To achieve all this requires actors who view health not in a one-dimensional way but in all its complexity. Regional public health services play a central role in this, especially the *Public Child and Adolescent Health Service* in Germany. They are close to the needs and challenges of young people and can implement preventive measures on the ground. The public health service is an indispensable partner in supporting health development, providing health advice, and networking with local partners.

Creating good conditions for a healthy growing up of children and adolescents is a central concern of the Brandenburg state government. Children and young people undergo major developmental leaps in a short period, and at the same time, the foundations for health later in life are laid in childhood. Therefore, our primary and shared goal must be to promote a healthy growing up of children and adolescents and to detect and treat illnesses early. Well-being in early childhood plays a decisive role in later

physical and mental development and ultimately influences educational and developmental opportunities. Achieving equal opportunities starts in childhood.

I would now like to give you a brief insight into the activities of the state of Brandenburg. It is important to note: without data, we cannot know where we stand, and without facts, we cannot make good decisions.

To gain a good overview of the health situation of children and adolescents in the state, we consider a sound data basis essential. The Brandenburg Public Health Reporting System provides this starting point.. It allows risks and problems to be identified, and actions to be initiated based on this data.

As a legally required part of the admission process for children entering primary school, the data collected during school entry examinations provide a good overview. Age-appropriate health development is a key prerequisite for successful school attendance. This includes not only physical and mental development, but also social behavior. Therefore, school enrollment is accompanied by a pediatric examination by the regional *Public Health Service*. If health problems or developmental disorders are detected in children, a diagnosis and care tracking process is initiated. The goal is for these children to receive the necessary diagnostic and therapeutic measures, and for recommended support to be implemented early.

The data from the school entry examinations are compiled and analyzed at the state level by the State Office for Occupational Safety, Consumer Protection, and Health. In the 2022/23 school year, 24,917 children were examined and included in the state evaluation. The most common findings at school entry age include:

- Speech and language disorders (19.4%),
- Fine or visuomotor impairments (16.5%),
- Deficiencies in school readiness skills (12.7%),
- Visual defects (9.8%)
- Overweight (9.5%).

It is evident that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more frequently affected. Thus, for these children, the school entry examination is an important factor in identifying functional impairments and initiating further diagnostics and treatment. This highlights the importance of the examinations, as these children might otherwise fall through the cracks without the public health service's interventions. It is crucial to examine the children and ensure they have an equitable start in school life. In addition to school entry examinations, further examinations of toddlers and school-leavers are conducted by the *Public Health Service*.

Other important data sources on the health of students come from surveys conducted within schools. This includes the *Health Behavior in School-aged Children* (HBSC) study, which, due to its international implementation in over 50 countries, is likely familiar to many of you. In Germany, since 2009, students aged approximately 11, 13, and 15 at public schools in all 16 federal states are surveyed every four years as part of the HBSC study. The state government, as one of two federal states, commissioned a special survey for 2022 after the 2018 survey to obtain representative data for Brandenburg. The survey focuses on topics such as physical activity, nutrition, mental health, health behaviors related to COVID-19, and the consumption of substances and social media.

Another important study format for health reporting is the *Brandenburg Youth Substance Use Survey* (BJS), established in 2005. In this study, 10th-grade students are surveyed every four years on topics such as substance use, gambling, media consumption, and cyberbullying. The long survey period allows trends in consumption to be identified and priorities for action to be set. A contribution from the *Brandenburg State Office for Occupational Safety, Consumer Protection, and Health*, focusing on alcohol and tobacco consumption among adolescents, will also be presented at this Congress.

From the detailed data, many challenges can be derived. These will be addressed in forums such as the *Healthy Growing Up Alliance* or the state's Prevention Conference. The data confirm the importance of continuing established school-based prevention measures, such as the long-established dental group prophylaxis program. Teams from the regional dental service care for children and adolescents in daycare centers, kindergarten, and schools, from their first baby tooth to the end of their school years. To detect dental, oral, and jaw diseases early, the children and adolescents are examined. In case of dental abnormalities, individual care monitoring is also conducted. The goal is to ensure necessary treatments are carried out. Annual dental check-ups are conducted up to the 6th grade, alongside other preventive measures in dental group prophylaxis.

Our responsibility is to address the challenges identified in health reporting, and to find solutions together that ensure every child has the best possible chance for a healthy and fulfilling life. In this regard, it is of the utmost importance to bring the health of children, adolescents, and students into focus today. This Congress provides an excellent opportunity to identify similar or different challenges in various countries, to discuss innovative ideas and measures, and to explore new ways to effectively promote the health of students.

I wish you all an inspiring and successful event.
Thank you!