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**SINGAPORE ACHIEVES BREAKTHROUGH
IN REDUCING PREVALENCE OF MYOPIA BY ALMOST 5%
Due to a holistic and multi-pronged
National Myopia Prevention Programme**

With a little far-sighted vision, the National Myopia Prevention Programme (NMPP) by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) has helped to alleviate the problem of short-sightedness among school children in Singapore.

2 The latest HPB study conducted in schools over six years shows an almost five per cent reduction in the prevalence of myopia among children in primary schools.

3 While 38 per cent of pupils were myopic in 2004, only 33 per cent were so in 2009. This adds up to about 12,500 fewer children with myopia in all primary schools.

Nothing less than a breakthrough

4 About 65 per cent of children aged 12 in Singapore are myopic. In contrast, about 12 per cent and 29 per cent of 12-year-olds in Australia and the UK respectively are myopic.

5 While the causes of myopia, or short-sightedness, are still unclear, continuous near-work activities such as reading, writing and playing computer games may worsen the condition, making the rising prevalence of myopia unsurprising as countries develop. Severe myopia may also lead to complications such as reduced vision and blindness.

6 With the prevalence of myopia on the rise continuously for many years, Singapore has one of the highest rates of myopia in the world. This is a worrying trend that has caused a lot of concern, and which led to the introduction of NMPP in 2001.

7 “We are heartened that the NMPP has helped to alleviate the problem of myopia in Singapore, reducing myopia prevalence in school children by about five per cent. In fact, Singapore may be one of the first countries to do so,” said Mr Ang Hak Seng, Chief Executive Officer, HPB.

Breakthrough due to a holistic, multi-pronged NMPP

8 Mr Ang added that the success of NMPP is the result of working closely over the past decade with childcare centres, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools as well as the Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC).

9 Driven by HPB in partnership with the Ministry of Education and SNEC, NMPP is a holistic, multi-pronged programme that includes:

(a) Adopting an Early Intervention strategy

This means going ‘upstream’, moving in to kindergartens and childcare centres to conduct vision screening and provide preventive health education on eye care.

“In other words, we try to delay its onset and detect the problem earlier to reduce the progression of myopia,” explained Mr Ang. “Once a child has become myopic, the condition deteriorates as the child grows, stabilising only in his or her teen years. So we want to catch the condition when a child is young, thereby minimising the chances of deterioration.”

HPB’s school health services have been conducting vision screening for all school children since the 1980s. With the enhanced goals of delaying the onset of myopia and reducing its progression across the population in Singapore, NMPP introduced vision screening for K1 and K2 students.

Under NMPP, children aged seven and below are also referred to HPB’s refraction clinics for assessment by trained optometrists.

(b) Establishing the Spectacles Voucher Fund

To make eye care affordable and accessible, HPB gives needy students who are myopic fully-subsidised lenses, plus \$30 vouchers to pay for their spectacle frames at an optical shop near them.

In partnership with more than 600 participating optical shops, Essilor and Nation Optical, HPB's Spectacles Voucher Fund has helped more than 12,000 needy students to-date.

(c) Promoting and teaching good eye care habits via schools

These include collaborating with schools and teachers to introduce curriculum changes such as increasing the amount of time for outdoor play and reducing the hours spent on near-work activities.

At Rulang Primary School, for instance, teachers encourage students to play outdoors during recess and limit computer work to half an hour. Good eye care tips are spelt out in the students' handbook, and the school's Parent Support Group conducts talks on good eye care habits during HPB's annual Eye Care Week. Upcoming projects at the school include plans to optimise lighting in classrooms so as to reduce glare and reduce eye strain.

"It is important that children take regular breaks between studying and spend more time on outdoor activities," said Mrs Cheryl Lim, Principal, Rulang Primary School. "Not only will a child concentrate better during lessons, his or her overall health will also improve."

(d) Raising awareness and educating about myopia via mass media platforms

Children, parents, caregivers and teachers are the target audiences of media campaigns that help them learn more about preventive health measures to reduce the progression of myopia and delay its onset.

An eye on the future

10 As outdoor activity has been known to have a protective effect against myopia, HPB will step up current school outreach efforts and encourage schools to promote outdoor activities for students, thereby cultivating good eye care habits in a fun and engaging way.

11 In keeping with the strategy to go 'upstream', HPB plans to engage teachers from childcare centres and kindergartens, and introduce lesson plans on holistic eye care for young children.

12 HPB is also aiming to engage young parents through holistic forums and workshops that will focus on raising a healthy child in every aspect, including eye health.

13 “In our fight against myopia, HPB wants to move beyond schools into homes,” said Mr Ang. “A lot of bad eye habits start at home, where children spend a lot of time in front of computers or read in rooms with dim lighting. This is why we need to reach out to parents through platforms such as Parent Support Groups, and encourage them to foster healthy eye habits in their children. Working together with schools and parents, HPB aims to promote healthier eyes both at home and in school, with the goal of driving the prevalence of myopia down even further.”