

# School sanitation

## Rural school sanitation – On the path to hope and dignity

*With its latest report and guideline on rural school sanitation the Water Research Commission (WRC) hopes to put this essential service on the path to sustainability.*

*Article by Sue Matthews.*



According to its presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education on 3 May, the Department of Basic Education aims to provide 265 schools with sanitation facilities during the 2016/17 budget cycle, via its Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI). This adds to the more than 400 schools provided with sanitation facilities between the launch of ASIDI in 2011 and the middle of 2015.

The effort is commendable, but it's not going to make a significant difference, given that the Department reported last

year that 6 783 of its 23 589 education sites had only the most basic of pit latrines, which are not considered an adequate form of sanitation. And even where new toilets are provided, they may deteriorate to an unsafe and disgusting state in a matter of weeks or months if not managed effectively.

This is a key finding of a recent Water Research Commission (WRC)-funded project on rural school sanitation conducted by Partners in Development, a Pietermaritzburg-based firm established by David Still. Researchers visited 130

schools in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, where they interviewed staff, conducted focus groups and surveys with learners, and inspected the sometimes shocking toilet facilities. The project has culminated in the publication of a guideline document, co-authored by Bobbie Louton and David Still, entitled *Building and managing school toilets that protect learners' rights*.

In the opening paragraph, they explain how poor sanitation violates the right of learners to safety, health and dignity.



*Dignified school sanitation plays an important role in ensuring learner health.*

"Toilets that are not maintained in a safe condition pose a threat to the lives of learners. Filthy conditions undermine health, spreading infections which compromise cognitive development and result in absence from school. Degrading and frightening experiences in the toilet undermine learners' psychological wellbeing, compromising learning and their ability to thrive academically and socially. Learners who avoid using the toilets because of the conditions there may find themselves unable to concentrate in class, or may leave school to find a more acceptable toilet elsewhere. Girls who find it too difficult to manage their periods in the school toilets may routinely stay home when they are menstruating, compromising their education."

Yet the researchers' interviews with 113 school principals revealed that many lacked a clear understanding of the role sanitation plays in education and of their own responsibilities in this regard. To address this, the guidelines include a 'Bill of Children's Rights for Sanitation', which spells out how the rights of children apply in the context of school toilets under the following themes:

1. Safety: Children have a right to toilet facilities that are structurally safe and free from threats.
2. Health: Children have the right to

toilet facilities which minimise the spread of disease.

3. Dignity: Children have the right to toilet facilities which support their privacy, security and comfort.
4. Special care for special needs: Children with special needs, such as small children, menstruating girls, and children with physical or other challenges, have a right to assistance from staff and accommodation from the school.

Of course, many principals fail to recognise how dire the situation is because they themselves grew up without decent toilet facilities at school. They may feel helpless to rectify the often overwhelming problems because they lack the necessary funds or organisational skills, and those that do try quickly become disheartened by destructive learner behaviour negating their efforts. Support or intervention is needed from the departmental level, but staff there experience similar obstacles and can more easily adopt an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach. The guidelines make for uncomfortable reading on this issue.

"For those of us who grew up using desperately horrible school toilets ourselves, we may find ourselves accepting, on some level, that the state of much of rural school sanitation is an unfortunate but unchangeable reality. Confronted with vandalism, theft and misuse of the toilets by learners for illicit activities and sometimes acts by which learners degrade their learning environment themselves – such as writing on the walls with faeces – it can almost seem that terrible toilets are a fit punishment for those who are co-creators of the disaster."

"We can forget that not every learner has treated the toilets badly, and that the majority should not be punished collectively for the misdemeanour of a few. We can forget that users of toilets are not just the big, unmanageable children who attract attention but are also small, weak and vulnerable children who need to be protected. We can forget that even the vandalisers, drug users and bullies are still children to whom we have a sacred duty to protect and nurture, and who have the same rights to safe, healthy toilets that uphold their dignity and meet their needs as any other child."

The authors note that in many cases routine inspections are not conducted by departmental officials, and principals are not held to account for the safety and health status of their toilets. This means there are neither carrots nor sticks to motivate circuit managers or principals in ensuring that sanitation is kept to an adequate standard.

Without proper monitoring and maintenance of infrastructure, some forms of sanitation can fail with deadly consequences – as the tragic case of six-year-old Michael Komape, who drowned in excrement in a pit latrine at his school in Limpopo in January 2014, so starkly illustrated. Even with so-called 'VIP' latrines, which government departments consider adequate for school sanitation, an unstable cement slab, broken pedestal or loose seat could result in a learner tumbling into the foul pit below. Because far from being designed for very important people as the name suggests, the acronym stands for 'ventilated improved pit', which simply means there is a ventilation pipe fitted with a screen to help remove odours and trap flies.

The project team found in their research that 54% of VIP users indicated they had felt afraid of falling into their school toilet. The guidelines therefore suggest ways in which VIP toilets could be modified to make them safer, such as adding parallel bars below the pedestal, putting handles on either side of the toilet seat, and offsetting the pit behind the pedestal. Since smaller children are particularly at risk, lower toilets with smaller holes and seats should be provided for them.

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Partners in Development

*Poor rural sanitation facilities threaten not only the health but also the safety and dignity of learners.*

Alternatives to VIP toilets, such as low-flush and pour-flush designs, are also reviewed, but as the authors note: "Each technology comes with its pros and cons and associated requirements. To date there is no silver bullet and no one-size-fits-all technology."

Guidance is given on many other aspects of school sanitation too, including design principles, location and layout of ablution blocks, handwashing facilities, choice of components, beneficial use of urine and faeces, and options for sludge treatment and disposal.

The final chapter of the guidelines provides a model for managing school sanitation effectively. The authors start by re-emphasising the primary obstacles to effective management:

- a lack of 'will' (the knowledge and values that create vision which in turn produces drive and commitment)
- a lack of 'skill' (the knowledge and expertise to be able to assess, plan, develop tools, implement, monitor and evaluate independently)
- a lack of funds to pay the 'bills' incurred in running toilets well.

"To overcome these obstacles, managers at both school and department levels need to be trained and developed to put in place the 'will' that provides the drive for good management. While the capacity of schools needs to be developed to

manage well, this transfer of 'skill' needs to be done over a longer period with significant partnership and support from the department. Training in administrative skills needs to be accompanied by the provision of administrative tools – standards, criteria, protocols, procedures as well as monitoring checklists, reporting forms and training materials. Schools with adequate capacity can adapt these and improve upon them, but schools without must at least have a minimum framework provided to work within. The department needs to support the school with adequate funds and financial tools to pay the 'bill' for good management."

The guidelines outline the respective roles of education officials (with sanitation-specific support structures advocated at national, provincial, district and circuit levels), the principal and the school governing body. They also suggest creating positions at the circuit level – possibly funded jointly by the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Health and the Department of Water and Sanitation – for Health and Safety Officers, responsible for training, supervision, monitoring and reporting for a cluster of schools.

In addition, a staff member at the school should be appointed as Health and Safety Manager, tasked with training and supervising the Health and Safety Officer, who would implement the programme on a day to day basis. The Health and Safety Officer would be responsible,

for example, for cleaning the sanitation facilities and restocking toilet paper and soap, monitoring learners' behaviour and teaching them good hygiene practices, assisting those in need and reporting any issues that need attention.

The role of the learners themselves is also discussed, but the authors stress that they should not be given any sanitation-related duties that could compromise their health or their time in the classroom. They should not be required to clean contaminated areas of the toilets – even as punishment – but they could be involved with cleaning windows and walls, or periodic painting work.

Partners in Development has now been allocated further funding by the WRC for a two-year follow-up project to pilot the sanitation management model with 10 schools in KwaZulu-Natal, in collaboration with the provincial Department of Education. Based on lessons learned and feedback received from stakeholders, the model will be refined if necessary and then more widely promoted, along with a management handbook, in the hope that it will be adopted by education departments and schools across South Africa.

The final report and guide will be available later in the year.