



Healthy toilets are possible: A New School Sanitation Management Handbook for South African Schools



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WIN-SA aims to capture the innovative work of people tackling real service delivery challenges. It also aims to stimulate learning and sharing around these challenges to support creative solutions. Most importantly, WIN-SA strengthens peer-to-peer learning within the water sector.

The toilets at many South African schools are dangerous, dirty and degrading. In fact, because toilets are often monitored less than any other area of the school – if they are monitored at all – they could well be the place where they face the greatest threat to learner's safety, health and dignity. A newly published handbook emanating from a Water Research Commission (WRC) study promises to ensure that learners' needs are met in a sustainable way.

According to the WRC the situation in many parts of the country is dire. The Limpopo case where a child fell and died in a pit toilet, left the country shocked by how poorly managed school sanitation could lead to devastating results.

The WRC identified an urgent need to understand the issues contributing to the failure of school sanitation facilities, specifically in rural areas, in South African schools and to find techniques and ways to improve the current and future situation.



Learners at Onverwacht Primary School, Cullinan - City of Tshwane

Adequate and safe school sanitation is not only a prerequisite to the health, safety and dignity of school learners, but plays a crucial role in advancing education in South Africa. One of learners' most fundamental needs which must be met at school, is the need to safe and adequate sanitation facilities. Toilets that are not maintained pose a health risk to learners which can lead to compromises in cognitive development and absence from schools. For girls, having appropriate san-

itation is important. Girls often find it too difficult to manage their menstrual periods due to lack of adequate and clean school facilities. In such periods girls may routinely stay home when they are menstruating compromising their education.

The sanitation challenge

As indicated earlier, some toilets pose a serious threat to the very lives of learners, who could fall into the pit and drown. In 2015 the death of a 4-year old boy, Samuel Matshusa, while playing with his friends near the school pit toilet, in Mugwazeni village, Letsitele in Limpopo left the whole nation in deep shock. This was not the only case. A three-year-old Hlumisa Makhasi also drowned in a pit toilet, in France township on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, in December 2014. In the same year, another case of a 6-year-old Michael Komape who drowned in a pit toilet at the Mahlodumela Primary School in Chebeng village outside Polokwane, Limpopo was reported.

The WRC handbook confirms that unpleasant toilets that are not monitored can create a space where the worst of learner behaviour can flourish, placing learners at risk of bullying, abuse and humiliation. All of this negatively affects teaching and learning.

The WRC study confirmed that learners who feel afraid and uncomfortable in the toilets will not be able to thrive in the classroom. Learners who get diseases from the toilets, or develop health problems from avoiding going to the toilets miss learning time. Education is also compromised when learners who stay home because it is too unpleasant to deal with their periods in the school toilets or learners who leave school to find a better toilet.

Finding a solution for schools

The study involved a review of international literature addressing school sanitation, and survey of 130 schools in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. Principals and learners were interviewed and focus groups and surveys were conducted with learners regarding practices, perceptions and attitudes around school sanitation. In addition, visual assessments of school sanitation facilities were conducted by the research teams.

“Children must be provided with sanitation infrastructure that is soundly constructed and maintained, with particular attention to the risk of a slab or pedestal collapsing into the pit”, he says. Pillay further emphasises the importance of the role that teachers have in the provision of proper sanitation for kids, “Educators must maintain a safe environment that supports education, including well-cared for toilet facilities”, says Dr Sudhir Pillay, WRC Research Manager.

What should schools be doing?

The Department of Education, the School Principal and the School Governing Body share responsibility to ensure that school toilets are managed effectively. The School Sanitation Management Handbook provides practical guidelines that are useable towards achieving acceptable levels of sanitation for schools. This is an inclusive process that involves outlining the roles for different stakeholders at schools.

In a recent workshop held at the Joe Gqabi District Municipality in the Eastern Cape, Mr Jean Olivier, Basic Education Deputy Director for Infrastructure for Eastern Cape Province said, “The problem with school sanitation is that it doesn’t get prioritised by management. Nobody at the school wants to take care of ensuring clean toilets. In some cases, the school would prefer to add classrooms over toilets”.

For the Department of Basic Education, the following guides are given;

- Train educators in learner rights and the importance of sanitation in meeting these rights.
- Provide administrative tools to Health and Safety Officers and Managers.
- Monitor school management of toilets and infrastructure conditions.
- Provide clear communication channels between schools and the department.
- Respond to infrastructure needs; respond immediately to

safety threats.

- Enforce standards and discipline staff in the case of negligence.

For the Principal the following guidelines are provided;

- Draft a budget for school toilet management (see BUDGET MODEL).
- Promote health and hygiene and via assembly and by visiting toilets often.
- Promote the status of the Health and Safety Officer by giving them a platform in assembly.
- Meet monthly with Health and Safety Manager and Health and Safety Officer to review programme.
- Addresses threatening or destructive behaviour in the toilets.
- Discipline staff who take materials for learners’ toilets for themselves or make learners clean toilets.
- Report routinely to SGB and Department on needs and efforts.
- Ensure learners are restricted from using infrastructure which poses a safety or health threat.

For the School Governing Body, the following are given;

- Takes care of minor repairs.
- Holds principal and Health and Safety Officer accountable.
- Reports to and liaises with the Department re: infrastructure needs and major repairs.
- Liaises with local government and private sector for resources and services

While the aforementioned stakeholders have the primary duty of providing the proper sanitation for schools, “The toilets at schools exist for the learners who also form an integral part of the team and should be included in the consultative process if new facilities are being designed and to solve issues that arise at a school”, says Pillay.