

**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. A new guideline into building and managing school sanitation promises to ensure learners' needs are met in a sustainable way.**

## Background

A prerequisite to learning is that learners' basic needs are met and that their right to health, safety and dignity are protected. 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 in a safe condition pose a threat to the lives and health of learners. Filthy conditions undermine health, spreading infections which compromise cognitive development and result in absence from schools.

For girls having appropriate sanitation is especially important. Girls who find it too difficult to manage their periods due to lack of adequate school facilities may routinely stay home when they are menstruating, compromising their education.

An urgent need has been identified to understand the issues contributing to the failure of sanitation in some South African schools and to find a model that will ensure success.



## Understanding the key issues

In 2014/15 the WRC conducted a study to better understand the needs of learners with regard to school sanitation, and the key issues that contribute to the failure of sanitation at schools. The study involved a review of international literature addressing school sanitation, and visits to 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.

Key issues identified in this study were:

- **Toilets which place learners over a deep pit, such as the ventilated improved pit (VIP) toilet, create a risk of especially younger learners falling into the pit.** The issue must be addressed from a design point of view: alternative designs should be sought; where VIPs are to be installed the design should be modified to reduce risk. This must also be addressed from a management point of view: toilets must be maintained in safe condition and children (particularly small children) who have to use toilets over a pit should be accompanied and assisted.
- **School infrastructure that is delivered without an effective management programme in place will fail.** Conditions of safety, health and dignity cannot be maintained without vigilant management, which includes clear standards for managing toilets, providing the administration tools to implement these standards and providing support, monitoring and enforcement to ensure that standards are upheld.
- **While all learners have a right to support and assistance in the toilets if needed, certain groups are in need of special assistance.** Schools must ensure that small children, menstruating girls, children with physical or other special needs or children who are the target of bullying or other abusive behaviour can meet their needs safely and with dignity in the toilets.

Consequently, the WRC with independent researchers, Partners in Development, developed guidelines informed by the insights gained from these school assessments as well as best practices identified in literature.

## Guidance for successful school toilets

This guideline addresses the need for successful sanitation as follows:

1. **Equipping ourselves to tackle the design and management challenges of sanitation.** The study found that principals lacked a theoretical framework for understanding the

role which sanitation plays in education and their role in ensuring that sanitation succeeds. The guideline provides a paradigm for addressing sanitation based on the legal rights of children – in particular the rights to safety, health, dignity and special care for special needs.

2. **Guidance on design choices for sanitation facilities,** including design principles, location and layout of facilities, and selection and design of components, technologies, collection chambers, beneficial use of urine and faeces, treatment and disposal of sludge.
3. The guideline also provides a **model for managing school sanitation effectively.** The guideline identifies obstacles and keys to successful management, addressing the values, knowledge and vision of managers, which together drive effective management. A team model in which the Department of Water and Sanitation, school governing bodies, and dedicated staff work together to achieve successful sanitation is discussed. A Standard for the Management of School Sanitation is provided, along with a detailed implementation plan.

The project also developed a **Handbook for Managing School Toilets,** which is provided as an annexure to the guideline. The handbook provides ideas for activities around launching a new management programme in order to help everyone at the school make a fresh start with the toilets and to cultivate a sense of ownership.

These include:

- Staff and learners working together to clean and renovate the toilets.
- Beautifying the toilets.
- Involving the learners in equipping the toilets with supplies.
- Having learners and staff take a pledge to care for the toilets.

## Further reading:

The final report on *Building and managing school toilets that protect learners' rights – Guidelines for school sanitation* will be available later this year. contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: [orders@wrc.org.za](mailto:orders@wrc.org.za) or Visit: [www.wrc.org.za](http://www.wrc.org.za).