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“America’s School Restrooms”

By

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I United States Elementary and Secondary Schools -
Statistics and Standards

The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, reported its latest data for the school year 2001-2002 in a series of publications, tables, and statistics. Our country had 14,559 regular public school districts with 94,112 schools.

Assuming 94,000 elementary, middle, junior, and senior high schools with an estimated 10 restrooms in each school, that makes 940,000 restrooms. I now estimate at least a third (33%) need improvement due to age, poor upkeep, student disrespect, and a host of other factors. In all, an estimated 310,000 unacceptable restrooms exist in our schools, a figure larger by over seventy percent since my last calculation in 2002.

The number of schools in our fifty states ranges from over 7,000 in California to fewer than 200 in Delaware. For the past nine years, I have worked in, critiqued, or visited nearly 110 schools in 16 states. In addition, I have written about, spoken on, or been quoted on the subject probably more than any other educator in the country.

In the 2001-02 school year, 47,687,871 students attended our public schools, in over 14,000 school districts, which had an estimated 94,000 schools and 940,000 restrooms. We had 25 school districts each with over 100,000 students, while we had just over a thousand districts with between 1,500 and 2,000 pupils and another 4,245 each with between 150 and 500 students.

Nearly 40 per cent of our students are defined as “minority,” which is an elusive word representing an expanding number of children. Nearly 62 percent of these minority students were in cities, 35 percent in the urban fringe, and 20 percent in small towns or rural settings.

Of the over 47 million students, nearly half (48 percent) were in middle or high schools, while 36 percent of the schools were used for those instructional levels. If the only national survey of sixth-to 12th-graders taken in April 1993 is still representative of the conditions in 2001-02, then 43% of those secondary students avoided school restrooms.

That means that of the nearly 23 million upper grade students, nearly 10 million did not use school restrooms. What was the health cost of that one statistic?

What if you have a high school of 1,000 students in grades 9-12 and 430 did not show up for classes? Well, approximately 430 students in that same school would not have used their school restrooms, and by avoiding voiding, they would have been less able to concentrate, more likely to fidget, and probably would have scored poorly on tests. Whatever the number of avoiders, that figure is compounded by the 7 percent of Americans who have paruresis, which is the inability or phobia of urinating in public places. Taken together this means that the average middle and high schools are losing on a regular basis the productivity, and more importantly the health, of half its students, our future leaders, and our citizens.

Beyond the human statistics and costs are the physical aspects of restroom maintenance. No accurate data exists in United States school districts on the costs of vandalized restroom accessories like soap, towel, and tissue dispensers. And though I have estimated the cost per letter of graffiti removal, no statistics are kept about this pervasive problem, let alone what it would cost to help offending students move from graffiti to good writing.

Standards for public school restrooms are sadly lacking also. It is true we have consensus codes used by architects and engineers who design restrooms, yet even these are too often followed in the breach and altered by circumstances or decisions too soon after initial approval by state education agencies. Construction often follows an axiom to build for those who vandalize accessories – that is with cheap products, which can be replaced. Too often maintenance and custodial care seems caught up in the blame game, with staff overwhelmed or doing work begrudgingly. School principals, whipsawed between building, security, and instructional demands, rarely see the connection between learning and eliminating. It is so rare to have student standards and effective oversight, yet a few examples can now be cited.

The two states of Pennsylvania and Florida, which apply food service standards as a means of inspecting regular student restrooms, have now been joined by California, which has restroom standards, per se, in legislation. The largest state in the union also has a complaint form and mechanism for enforcement, though it is cumbersome to say the least. Hawaii has a state board policy, and the District of Columbia has a systemwide policy. Both these jurisdictions are difficult to make comparisons with, yet perhaps these policies will be effective.

More district and state standards are needed along with building practices, which include user standards of expected student behavior and an evaluation or oversight mechanism. DeKalb County School system, a district in suburban Atlanta, does have an appropriate expectation for students written in its Student Code of Conduct.

II US School Restrooms – Problems and Projects

Educators in our nation, and I may assume other countries know the issues and have stated the problems many times. Typical problems include lack of supplies, uncleanness, graffiti, intimidation, and even violent assaults. One compiler, the former editor of a national newsletter on school safety, summed up the problems with the title “School Restrooms Evidence `Dissing:’ Disrespect, Disrepair, and Disuse.”

I have learned from extensive experience however, that the issues are really about student respect for themselves, others, and property and about adults caring more about restrooms. It is not about race, gender, or class. If a child urinates on the floor, vandalizes a soap dispenser, or writes words that rhyme with “dit, duck, ditch, and digger,” it is not because of how he or she looks or how much allowance anyone has. Though there are cultural aspects to restroom issues, which hopefully we will discuss during the conference, restroom improvement comes down to respect, caring, and will.

I am committed to finding suggestions and solutions, not listing problems. As I said to a producer of an investigative television program, “I am not about exposure, I am about improvement.” We all know the problems, and though I will use photos to bring attention if necessary to an ongoing problem, I am about solutions, or at least suggestions.

To this end of finding out what works to ensure clean, safe, hygienic restrooms, Project CLEAN has evolved a five-step process, an effort, and a way of proceeding. These steps are written in the published booklet. Let me cite them: first, get to know the building principal; second, inspect and critique the restrooms; third, assist students and staff find solutions to restroom problems; fourth, write a two-page restroom improvement plan; and fifth, make Project CLEAN resources available to whomever implements the plan.

Have schools restrooms improved when schools implemented Project CLEAN? A high school in Delaware went from having two-thirds of its restrooms locked to having all twelve open and orientation talks to the entire student body on restrooms as part of the school culture. A middle school in Georgia hosted first day assemblies using the theme: “Restrooms: A Ticket to Life.” A New Mexico high school built upon initial efforts and actually restored two restrooms with a sizeable financial commitment from the district and active involvement from the students. A committed business supported projects and reprinted the Phi Delta Kappa publication.

III Other Countries School Restrooms – Invitation and Request

Has Project CLEAN been successful? Is a process to improve school restrooms worth your time, resources, and effort? It depends. When a school or district invites an intervention, it often can work, and in some schools I have coordinated a successful effort. Yet ultimately, in the United States, what works depends on the principal, the building leader, who can be helped by district staff, even by board support. We are decentralized to the point of distraction, because sometimes it feels like nothing can get done. They are too many players.

So can a project in a federal republic that is so decentralized, state-controlled, and individualistic help in other countries, which have a centralized, hierarchical approach, often controlled by ministry of education dicta? I cannot say. However I can request that you discuss issues with me, pose questions for me, and perhaps even invite me to see for myself. I do know in the bottom of my heart, that safe, clean, hygienic restrooms, not the type I saw in schools in Naples or Addis Ababa or Santiago, would help students be healthier, learn more, and be better citizens. Participants at the World Toilet Summit should expect no less.