

Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools

Meeting summary

On 6–8 July 2021, over 30 health and education experts and decision-makers from Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation and Ukraine gathered for a subregional workshop on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools.



The event took place in a virtual format and was jointly hosted by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health and the Republican Scientific and Practical Centre of Hygiene of the Ministry of Health of Belarus. Financial support was provided by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

The purpose of the workshop was to provide an up-to-date overview of health and education considerations for ensuring adequate WASH in schools.

The workshop also provided a forum to discuss regional priorities for action and guide practical implementation of WASH improvements at the national and local levels, as well as the safe reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The event was expected to raise awareness on the importance of improving and sustaining adequate WASH provision in schools for better health, well-being and learning; increase understanding about the range of possible WASH-related interventions; and stimulate action at the national level, including through the Protocol on Water and Health.

The workshop facilitated networking and fruitful exchanges among the participants. Experts from Hungary, Serbia and the United Kingdom, as well as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network shared insights and experiences.

Thanks to the pupils from Belarus who joined the workshop, the participants also had a chance to learn from those with first-hand experiences of using WASH facilities in schools.

This document presents the highlights of the discussions at the meeting.

Protocol on Water and Health and WASH in schools

Jointly supported by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Protocol on Water and Health is an important multilateral policy instrument to advance the WASH-related agenda in the WHO European Region, including the implementation of the commitments of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Declaration of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health.

Strengthening action on WASH in schools is one of the Protocol's focus areas, which has led to the provision of evidence-based recommendations and the development of practical tools to support the management and surveillance of WASH in schools. The Protocol framework also supports strengthening preparedness for and response to infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics, in accordance with World Health Assembly resolution 73.1 on the COVID-19 response.

High political relevance, yet insufficient progress

Although WASH in schools has high-level political commitment at an international level and its relevance for good health and learning is clear, the progress achieved thus far is insufficient to guarantee universal access to safe WASH services for all pupils in the WHO European Region.

The workshop re-emphasized the need for accelerated action as formulated in several global and regional policy processes, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 2017 Ostrava Declaration on Environment and Health and the Protocol on Water and Health.

A core set of indicators has been developed by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme to facilitate international policy dialogue and comparison.

“National policies and standards should be revised to include users’ perceptions.”

Ramon Nahkur, Estonia

Policies and standards should reflect pupil needs

A strong legal framework on WASH in schools can support improvement efforts and their sustainability.

Stressing the importance of having comprehensive national policies and standards, representatives from several participating countries identified possible areas for improvement, such as including menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and taking into account pupils' perceptions on the provision of WASH services. These are often neglected, but are critical aspects contributing to good health, well-being and quality education.

Taking stock of a case study from Serbia on evidence-based improvement of national actions on WASH, the workshop participants recalled the need for decision-making that is informed by routine surveillance findings, scientific data and users' perceptions.

A representative of the SHE Network highlighted the critical role that WASH plays in making every school a health-promoting school and the need for a whole-school approach to health promotion.

It was jointly concluded that advancing WASH in schools requires strong cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation between the education, environmental health and finance sectors, as well as between national and local authorities and schools. The active involvement of multiple stakeholders and the entire school community (e.g. managers, teachers, health staff, pupils, parents, janitors, cleaners) is essential.



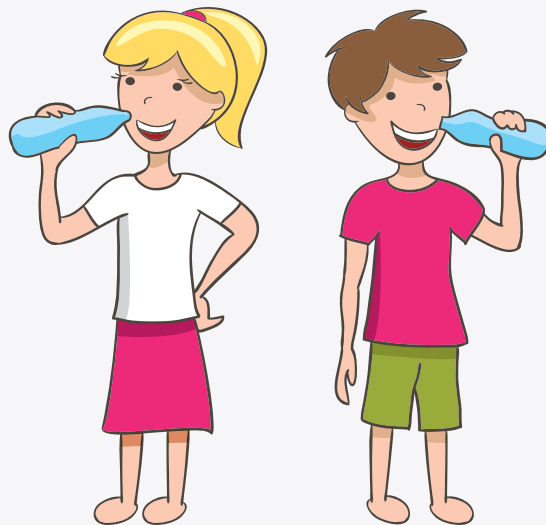
Ensuring good hydration practices in schools remains a challenge

Although regular hydration with water is essential to ensure quality education, promote healthy development, and support addressing childhood obesity and dental caries by replacing sugar-sweetened beverages, children and adolescents in schools are often observed to drink too little water.

The workshop called attention to the fact that pupils easily become dehydrated while at school due to restrictive school policies on drinking water in classrooms and/or the presence of drinking water outside of the school building only or inside the toilet areas only.

An expert from Hungary underlined key aspects of making a school water friendly, including:

- dedicated school policies to drive attention to the importance of drinking water at school, and promote regular hydration and toilet visits, while restricting sugar-sweetened beverages;
- a supportive physical environment, such as “appetizing” water fountains outside of toilet spaces;
- operation and maintenance procedures;
- regular surveillance of drinking-water quality;
- collaboration and good governance of drinking water in schools.



“There is an issue with schools attended by children with limited mobility or vision. For them, school toilets are often not accessible.”

Svetlana Sokolova, Russian Federation



Poor acceptability and maintenance of school toilets

Safe sanitation in schools is essential for quality education, good health and well-being. Yet, ensuring adequate sanitation in schools remains a challenge, and poor acceptability is a common problem: a high number of pupils report avoiding going to the toilet at school.

Use of school toilets is all too often hindered by insufficient maintenance and cleanliness, lack of toilet paper, lack of privacy, cold temperatures, unpleasant odours and poor illumination. Special attention should be paid towards children with disabilities and ways to ensure that they can access sanitation facilities.

The workshop participants reconfirmed the need for proactive engagement and consultation with pupils to ensure that services are sustainable, appropriate and meet users’ needs at all times.

The workshop also drew attention to the importance of education on how to use the toilet to sustain a healthy bowel and bladder, as well as school policies that should promote the use of toilets whenever needed, without asking for permission. This also encourages regular water intake and good hydration practices.



Hygiene in schools: critical to improving school safety during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

Handwashing with soap is the most effective way to reduce respiratory and gastrointestinal infections in the school setting. Hand hygiene interventions in schools have shown a beneficial effect on reducing absenteeism due to infections.

Despite demonstrated beneficial effects, a “culture of hand hygiene” is not yet a reality in the European Region. However, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered renewed attention, highlighting the need to ensure adequate hygiene conditions in schools.

The Hand Hygiene for All Global Initiative by WHO and UNICEF calls for countries to lay out comprehensive roadmaps that bridge national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans with mid- and long-term national development plans to ensure hand hygiene is a mainstay beyond the pandemic, as part of infection prevention and control and WASH efforts.

Workshop participants had the chance to reflect on their country experiences of school reopening and hygiene response measures to control the spread of COVID-19, focusing on the importance of an enabling environment to support good hygiene

behaviours, such as putting in place functional handwashing stations and hygiene promotion.

A representative from the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office underlined several measures that have been critical during the COVID-19 response, for instance, providing regular supplies of consumables such as soap and paper towels.

A WHO representative introduced the recommendations from the European Technical Advisory Group (TAG) on schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, including guidance issued to schools on WASH measures. This included educating children on good hygiene practices by age-appropriate means (e.g. coughing “etiquette”, proper hand hygiene), and providing hand disinfection stations at the school entrance.



Spotlight on menstrual hygiene management

Education and health sector policies, standards and guidelines should reflect the needs of adolescent girls by addressing MHM.

Across the countries of the Region, provisions for MHM frequently fail to meet girls' and women's needs. Challenges include:

- lack of privacy
- inadequate toilet cubicle doors
- shared toilets for girls and boys
- lack of sanitary bins for safe disposal of used menstrual hygiene products.

The workshop drew attention to menstrual poverty, that is a lack of access to affordable menstrual hygiene products, an emerging issue in the Region with negative consequences for school attendance.

During the workshop, two good practice approaches to tackle this challenge were presented. First, a representative of the Scottish government outlined their commitment to and experience in providing free access to menstrual hygiene products to pupils in schools. This supports equality, dignity and rights for those who menstruate and ensures that lack of access to products does not impact on an individual's ability to fully participate in education at all levels.



Second, a representative from the UNICEF country office in Ukraine described an MHM social and behaviour change programme, called “Health Without Shame”. This programme is an example of good practice in cross-sectoral work through raising awareness about the issue, engaging celebrities, reaching out to youth through social media and building the capacities of teachers.

Tiles on menstrual hygiene management.
[Download tiles](#)

Participants agreed that there are many inexpensive solutions to improving MHM conditions in schools, such as providing sanitary bins in toilet cubicles.

The workshop concluded that accurate and timely education about healthy and dignified menstrual hygiene and puberty is critical for both boys and girls.

“Using social media is the easiest way to reach adolescents with messages on MHM.”

Victoriia Lupan, UNICEF Ukraine

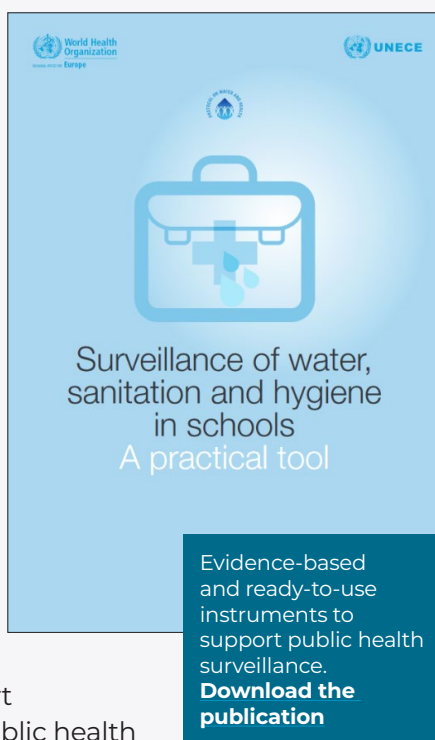


Slogan used in Scotland

Surveillance as the first step towards improving WASH in schools

Improving WASH conditions in schools, or maintaining existing good conditions, requires reliable information and adequate national surveillance systems.

The workshop reconfirmed the vital role that routine surveillance plays in monitoring compliance with standards, tracking progress and determining the impact of efforts to improve service provision. Several indicators and tools were presented that could support education and public health authorities in monitoring and assessing WASH conditions by conducting school management interviews, onsite inspections and consultations with pupils.



“Joint efforts involving education and public health authorities are needed for efficient assessment of WASH in schools.”

Elena Guzik, Belarus

Current surveillance systems do not always take into account pupils' perceptions, but no assessment of WASH in schools can be complete without the inputs of schoolchildren themselves.

Surveillance data needs to be analysed, reported and linked to decision-making processes and resource allocations. Continued collaboration between public health and education stakeholders remains essential.

Beyond the provision of infrastructure: operation and maintenance

Provision of adequate WASH facilities in schools includes a range of operation and maintenance procedures, which are essential to ensure that services are clean and usable (accessible, functional and private) in the long term.

Adequate operation and maintenance is a visible indication of the school's commitment to providing a healthy and safe learning space. Yet, unsatisfactory conditions related to maintenance are often reported by school staff and/or pupils

in almost all the countries represented at the workshop.

The workshop outlined several measures to strengthening WASH operation and maintenance in schools:

- standards and guidance that address day-to-day practices;
- dedicated budget lines for minor repairs;
- valuing staff for cleaning and repair;
- regular inspections to identify problems;
- creating a sense of ownership and incentives for pupils to look after facilities and report problems.

“WASH facilities need to be properly inspected and supervised. It is especially important to ensure cleaning of the facilities after periods of high use.”

Vijolė Miškinienė, Lithuania

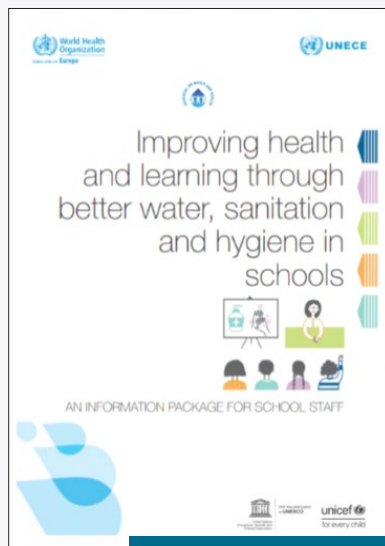


Way forward: adequate financing and step-wise improvements

Adequate budgeting is indispensable for ensuring safe and sustainable WASH services in schools. In many countries, WASH is mainly financed by the government, but the funds allocated often do not match actual needs. The participants concurred that it is important to understand all costs related to ensuring adequate WASH in schools in order to improve budgeting and decision-making.

Countries should be able to set or review national targets for the standards and levels of performance necessary to ensure safe, equitable and inclusive learning environments. The workshop called attention to the role of the Protocol on Water and Health in this regard, which offers an effective tool to help national governments to set targets according to country-specific needs and priorities.

Given that it is not possible to address all gaps and issues at the same time, the workshop promoted a step-wise approach and working progressively towards compliance with the national standards and reduction of inequalities.



Information package for school staff on how to address common WASH problems and deliver improvements at the school level.
Download the publication

Useful resources:

Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/337576?locale-attribute=de&_accessioned=4%20October%202021).

Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19. Geneva: WHO; 2020 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/332052>, accessed 4 October 2021).

Core questions and indicators for monitoring WASH in schools in the Sustainable Development Goals. Geneva: UNICEF and WHO; 2016 (https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/coverage/wins-core-indicators-and-questions-4-pager.pdf, accessed 4 October 2021).

Interim Guidance for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools. Geneva: UNICEF, WHO and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (https://www.unicef.org/media/66216/file/Key%20Messages%20and%20Actions%20for%20COVID-19%20Prevention%20and%20Control%20in%20Schools_March%202020.pdf, accessed 4 October 2021).

Period dignity [video]. Edinburgh: Scottish government; 2021. (<https://vimeo.com/504825160/a53e8e82c2>, accessed 4 October 2021).

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Progress on drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: special focus on COVID-19. Geneva: UNICEF and WHO; 2020 (<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789280651423>, accessed 4 October 2021).

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Water, sanitation and hygiene standards for schools in low-cost settings. Geneva: WHO; 2009 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/44159>, accessed 4 October 2021).

Water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management for the COVID-19 virus: interim guidance, 19 March 2020. Geneva: UNICEF and WHO; 2020 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331499>, accessed 4 October 2021).

Youth for advancing water, sanitation and hygiene in schools [video]. European Environment and Health Youth Coalition; 2016 (<http://www.eehyc.org/wash/>, accessed 4 October 2021).