



Drinking Water Access in Schools

By increasing access to free drinking water, schools can help promote children's readiness to learn, and their overall health. This fact sheet offers strategies for schools to make drinking water more readily available, including ways for parents and community members to get involved.

The drinking fountains of our youth are all but relics of the past: at many schools today, sugary beverages are far easier to come by than safe, free drinking water. Inadequate water consumption can have negative consequences on children's overall health and their ability to learn. Children who are dehydrated tend to experience a drop in their cognitive performance, particularly short-term memory and concentration.¹

Making matters worse, instead of drinking water, children tend to drink beverages that can contribute to excess weight gain and tooth decay, such as sodas, sports drinks, and sweetened teas.^{2,3} About a third of children and adolescents in the United States are overweight or obese, and studies link rising obesity rates to the consumption of soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages.⁴

Because children spend most of their day at school, school policies and programs can have a significant impact on encouraging – or discouraging – healthy water consumption. With the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, federal law now requires schools participating in federal meal programs, such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), to make fresh drinking water available during mealtimes in school food service areas at no cost to students.⁵ States have the authority to enact broader requirements, as Massachusetts has done, requiring schools to provide free drinking water throughout the school day.⁶

Challenges

Schools face a variety of barriers to making free drinking water readily accessible, including deteriorating school infrastructure, fears about water quality, and the prevalence of sugar-sweetened beverages.

A majority of U.S. schools were built before 1969, and many are in need of significant infrastructure repairs for old plumbing or fixtures.⁷ Students tend to avoid water fountains that are broken or dirty, or produce water that tastes bad.⁸ Where drinking fountains are still usable, there may be few, situated in inconvenient locations.⁹

Staff, parents, and students alike express fears – both founded and unfounded – about the safety and quality of tap water. Most schools obtain their tap water from public water systems, and while federal law authorizes states and local jurisdictions to establish water testing and remediation programs, a recent survey found that only half of U.S. schools required inspections for lead in their drinking water.¹⁰ The absence of policies and practices for testing, reporting results, and taking corrective action only contributes to fears about tap water safety.

Bottled water has become increasingly popular in schools as an alternative to tap water, but it is not necessarily safer. It can also become costly for students, in addition to being environmentally wasteful.¹¹

Meanwhile, students are consuming more and more calories from sugary beverages,¹² which are widely available at or near schools. State nutrition guidelines, school board policies, and voluntary industry initiatives have reduced the availability of sugary beverages in schools, but a recent national study found that almost half of elementary school students could still buy unhealthy beverages (including sodas, sports drinks, and high-fat milk) in school vending machines, a la carte cafeteria lines, and student stores.¹³ Replacing sugary drinks with artificially sweetened ones, such as diet soda, may reduce the number of calories consumed, but these drinks are still displacing water and other, more nutritious beverages.

Furthermore, because many schools rely on vending machine sales to help fund school activities, they may fear losing revenue by removing soda and other drinks from the machines.¹⁴ Similarly, schools that rely on bottled water sales for profits may also be reluctant to offer free drinking water.

School policies can serve a crucial role in making drinking water more accessible, but only a handful of schools have such policies in place.¹⁵ Most have focused on reducing the availability and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, and while this is important, these policies don't address the need to increase drinking water availability. Some schools have policies that actually *discourage* water consumption. For example, some schools forbid students from using reusable water bottles because of concerns that students will bring in alcoholic beverages; other schools forbid water consumption in classrooms due to concerns about water spills and the need for restroom breaks.¹⁶

Four Strategies

Schools can take a variety of steps to encourage students to drink water throughout the school day:

Improve water quality. To make free drinking water safer and more appealing, schools can test their drinking water and correct any problems. For information on testing programs, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has developed guidance for schools. (See “3Ts for Reducing Lead in Drinking Water in Schools,” available at www.epa.gov.) Schools can implement hygiene standards for drinking fountains, and restore deteriorating infrastructure by working with local and state government or securing federal funding to cover the costs of repairs. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District used funds from a city bond earmarked for school improvements to repair plumbing in its schools.¹⁷ By performing regular testing and maintenance and making the information accessible, districts can help assuage student and staff concerns.



Scale back on sugary beverages. Schools can promote healthier beverages, including water, by limiting the availability of soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages. They can ban the sale and advertising of sugar-sweetened beverages, opting to raise money in ways that do not promote unhealthy products.^{18,19} Schools may also gain revenue by increasing their participation in the federal school meals program.²⁰ They can promote both student wellness and district finances by adopting vending agreements with clear contract terms that support children's health.

Push for school policies. While federal and state policies that govern nutrition standards in schools can promote drinking water availability, school boards also have the power to make policy at the local level. At a minimum, schools can strengthen their policies by including language that specifies free and safe drinking water be made widely available in varied locations on school campuses. School policy that encourages student consumption of water throughout the school day might include offering drinking water at the lunch counter and allowing students to bring water into classrooms in clear, capped containers. National, state, and local governments offer funding and other incentives to support schools in these efforts.

Invest in a water dispenser. Schools can increase access to free drinking water by providing a water dispenser (i.e., water jug or water cooler) in the cafeteria. Going a step further, they can install a filtration device to provide a permanent source of clean and appealing drinking water—but to purchase a filter, schools may need money for installation, maintenance, labor (to fill and sanitize dispensers), and purchasing cups.

The USDA does not consider potable water as part of the NSLP reimbursable meal, and there is no separate funding available for it. However, necessary and reasonable costs associated with providing drinking water, such as pitchers and paper cups, are allowable expenses that food services can charge to its nonprofit food services account (which holds revenue from selling meals and a la carte items; the funds can be used to operate and improve school food service).²¹ For more information on what the USDA considers an allowable cost, see the USDA memo “Water Availability During National School Lunch Program Meal Services,” online at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/CNR_schoolprograms.htm.

Parents and other interested community members can work with school boards and local government to build awareness about the problem and raise funds for the solution; schools can also partner with industry to cover expenses. For example, New York City public schools received financial assistance from the city's departments of education and health (with federal funding) to install water jets in their cafeterias similar to commercial water and ice dispensers used in restaurants.²²



Conclusion

Getting children to drink more water promotes their overall health and readiness to learn, and it can play an important role in the fight against childhood obesity. When they drink more water, young people consume fewer calories from sugar-sweetened beverages, stay hydrated, and increase their energy levels and ability to concentrate. Simply encouraging children to drink more water isn't enough if safe, free water isn't readily available to them. Schools, students, parents, local government, and private industry can work together to implement policies and practices that support access to free drinking water in schools.

For additional tools and resources, including examples of how schools across the country have partnered with local agencies and private companies to fund drinking water programs, go to www.nplan.org. There you will find several helpful publications, including, “Water Access in Schools: Model Wellness Policy Language,” and “How to Enforce a Wellness Policy: A Guide for Parents and Community Advocates,” among many others.



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