

LEADING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL RESTROOMS FROM SOAP TO CITIZENSHIP TO IMPROVE WELLNESS

Part I Project CLEAN: Brief History

In the late 1980s in Decatur, Georgia, six miles east of Atlanta, three students – Jeffrey, Ty, and Stephanie, secondary pupils aged 16, 14, and 13 respectively – complained to parents, teachers, and administrators about their public school restrooms. In too many American public school restrooms, no doors, no sanitary product dispensers or receptacles, and holding it in all day were not unusual conditions then, nor are they abnormal now.

Interviews in the 1990s with numerous individuals produced one horror story after another. A literature search in 1994 turned up few references about school restrooms. Then a day spent cleaning school restrooms changed me into a supporter of the plight of school custodians. These personal stories and that research led to the first written mention of Project CLEAN in a letter to a school official on 25 July 1996. That December a public notice about Project CLEAN was sent to an elected body.

Eleven years later, Project CLEAN has worked in, critiqued, or visited several hundreds of schools in at least half the states in the United States. School districts in Georgia, Delaware, New Mexico, and California have contracted directly with Project CLEAN, while untold students, parents, and educators have received information and suggestions via telephone, the web, and materials in states from Hawaii to Nebraska, Texas to New York.

One Student's Story

In May 2004 a student called me and followed up with a letter. Her words exemplify what many students face and feel:

“Hi, my name is Teresa Clash, and I am an 8th grade student at Eliza Miller Junior School in West Helena, Arkansas.
Our restrooms look unbelievably bad. You need to come to School because of our restroom supplies, our restroom stalls, and our restroom seats....Our restrooms don't have enough tissues, no paper towels, and most of all no soap.
Females need those kinds of supplies for personal reasons.... Our restroom stalls are so hideous that they are leaning over. One of the stalls is bent. Our restrooms make me ashamed because when

visitors come from out of town or when parents visit the school, they have to see our terrible restroom.
...the toilet seats are filthy. They have scratches of paint coming off them. They also are half-broken and some of them are covered with feces. When I walk in the restrooms, they make me feel disgusted....
All in all I think you should come to my school...
I'm willing to organize a group of students that are willing to help raise money if you need to....
Please contact me if there is anything I can do.”

Project CLEAN regularly receives requests, albeit not as painful as Theresa's plea, and I respond whenever I can via telephone, email, and with written materials. Sometimes students send news of improvement in their situation; more often than not, they forget to let me know what happens in their schools.

What is Project CLEAN?

Project CLEAN is an effort to improve the safety, cleanliness, and hygiene of America's public school restrooms. Project CLEAN is a patented service mark and stands for “Citizens, Learners, and Educators Against Neglect.” Project CLEAN is a five-step process that is about changing attitudes and behavior of students and increasing the number of adults who care about improved school restrooms.

Project CLEAN builds a five-step, school-by school communication process.

Step One Gain the trust of the principal or school's authoritative leader.

Step Two Conduct an unchaperoned inventory or sampling of the restrooms.

Step Three Discuss suggestions and solutions to restroom issues with students and selected adults.

Step Four Develop an individualized, written, restroom improvement plan for each school.

Step Five Offer to act as a resource to the school team and principal.

I believe in a school-by-school reform and the individual culture of a school. However, there are more similarities than differences among school restrooms in our country.

The issue of safe, clean, hygienic restrooms is local issue, a state concern, and a national disgrace in a country as affluent as the United States of America. Project CLEAN is one approach to improve public school restrooms. We need others.

Extent of Issue, Standards, Costs

There are no national, state, or local documented figures in the USA about the extent of restroom issues. As part of the emphasis of both parts of this paper, I am concentrating on real lives, issues, and solutions. Because of the traditional decentralized nature of public education in the United States, in 2004-05 there were over 14,200 public school districts which had an estimated 96,000 schools with approximately a million restrooms. Yet consider this one figure. According to a 1993 *USA Weekend* survey, 43 percent, or over four out of ten, sixth-to-twelfth graders, avoided the use of restrooms. Project CLEAN's eleven-year experience has accumulated individual, class, and even school responses to the question: "How many hold it in all day?" The numbers are significant in too many schools.

If you have a school with one thousand youngsters aged 11-17, about 430 students avoid the restrooms, may leave school during the day to do their business, or rush home to use the bathroom at the end of each day. What is the health and social cost of that one statistic? Let me repeat! Who has recorded the human and civic cost of one child, let alone hundreds or thousands of students failing to eliminate normally? More on the individual's need to eliminate during school hours, and the state's requirement to assist in school sanitation issues later in this paper.

Beyond the human statistics and costs are the physical aspects of restroom maintenance. In United States school districts, no accurate and public data exists on the costs of vandalized restroom accessories like soap, towel, and tissue dispensers. Once I did receive a covert list of school-by-school replacements for these fixtures, and I calculated the cost per unit and cost per school. In too many cases it was hundreds of dollars. Consider also the price per letter for removing graffiti or words etched with a sharp instrument, which I call 'scratchitti.' Too many urban, suburban, and even rural schools have obscene, gang-related, or offensive graffiti, which should be removed quickly, yet when it is left up, contributes to the students' avoidance of stalls and restrooms.

Once again few studies have analyzed what happens to a student who has not relieved himself or herself in a particular school. And there may be some who refuse to use any public toilet because of home training or personal reasons, yet most students just steel themselves because restrooms are, or are perceived, to be nasty. Do boys or girls in upper primary or lower secondary, eleven-year olds for example, become more of a discipline problem in a class? Can a pupil facing the onset of puberty concentrate on learning a subject when he or she needs to go to the restroom? What is the effect on standardized tests of not eliminating? Few want to discuss these relationships between learning and relieving.

Suffice it to say Project CLEAN has evolved certain guidelines. One principle is that whenever there is a child in a school building or on the school grounds there is a restroom issue. A student practicing sports, drama, or music, prepping for a test or being tutored, waiting for a parent or a bus, raising his grades or raising the dickens, that student is a person who may need to eliminate.

Many times school officials and teachers will remark that school restrooms are not a priority. An age of accountability has brought standardized tests to the forefront in the USA. International comparisons over subject matters such as math and science often make school officials push more academics. Business emphasis on qualified workers leads to increased rigidity in curriculum. The constant struggle over equitable funding, the tension with centralized and decentralized controls, a frustration with home upbringing, and the overall condition of being “stressed too thin,” all contribute to school building frustration.

Yet when I hear that safe, clean, and hygienic restrooms are not a priority in our affluent country, I am reminded about the four priorities in a pre-teenager’s life: breathing, eating, sleeping, and eliminating are much more important than algebra or annual yearly progress.

Project CLEAN: Leading Students to Wellness

Schools in the USA are administered locally, controlled within state education systems, influenced by federal legislation, and affected by the media, foundations, professional organizations, and especially by the textbook and testing industries.

This fragmented and complex system of governance makes for many points of authority, influence, accountability, and often confusion. Strangely enough when it comes to the conditions of restrooms the local building and district practices almost always hold sway. Only about three states have direct or indirect legislation on restroom conditions in public schools. Because of this decentralization, Project CLEAN has approached local districts and worked to assist individual elementary, middle, and high schools.

What Has Worked

Students, administrators, and teachers have changed attitudes and behavior in selected cases. Many administrators have stated that their awareness has changed with the presence of and insights from Project CLEAN. Most assistant principals or principals have never had instruction in improving restroom conditions. An administrators' restroom checklist is available for these building officials from Project CLEAN. The checklist covers thirty-nine items in four categories: "Reviewing Restroom Conditions, Supplies, Graffiti, and Communicating About Restroom Conditions."

Phi Delta Kappa International published one of its famous booklets on "Project CLEAN: Safe, Sanitary School Restrooms" (Fastback #495, 2002). The second printing, supported by Bobrick Washroom Equipment Inc., has been widely distributed and is available. Articles, resource guides, a web page, and a video are available and have been used by school building students and personnel.

One approach that is useful is having students make restroom-related artwork. Computer generated, adult purchased posters have little if any affect on kids, yet we see these type of signs and bulletin boards all over schools. Student generated art is much better, and students from 5th, 8th, and 12th grades have made effective posters on restroom issues. These are also available.

In May 2007, twenty-one middle-school students and a teacher sponsor, wrote and performed a skit about America's public school restrooms. Project CLEAN produced this skit titled *True Dat*, which is slang for 'that is true.' For the first time in the USA, a copyrighted script, accompanying poster, and a video on the making of the skit are available.

In short many materials can be adapted to local school conditions. The five-step Project CLEAN process may be useful. Support letters from administrators have cited the

effort and effectiveness of Project CLEAN. Each school that has implemented and sustained efforts based on insights and suggestions from Project CLEAN has its own story.

One high school in New Mexico went from restrooms with vandalized conditions, fires, and poor maintenance to training students to assess restrooms, write work orders for repairs, design and oversee major renovations. The district spent major amounts on improved fixtures and accessories and the positive behavior towards these spaces has been noticeable. Other schools have installed dividers between urinals, sanitary product receptacles, and better signage, changed custodial schedules, altered monitoring approaches, improved health inspections, and had classes on restroom etiquette. A high school with major discipline issues in North Carolina made major school climate improvements partly from materials and an article written by Project CLEAN.

In another case, Project CLEAN wrote a 'user standard' for schools based on the belief that students should be seen more as citizens and not have restroom regulations based so often on the disruptive action of a few. A statewide accreditation committee piloted this user standard during a site visit. The text, with an accompanying checklist, is straight forward and reads: "Restrooms should be regularly stocked with supplies, as well as periodically cleaned and effectively monitored, in order to foster personal hygiene."

Entire schools in Delaware and Georgia have had class orientation sessions on restroom behavior for all four grades given by Project CLEAN. Over thirty classes on restroom etiquette have been given to middle and high schools, and sports teams have also been addressed on their leadership responsibilities to school restrooms. Custodians have been trained in a "four senses" approach to restroom inspection, while training session on cleaning-restroom improvement have been given in California, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Georgia.

An available video presented on World Toilet Day 2006 features several clips on successes. All in all, increased awareness, effective materials, training sessions, classroom instruction, and school-by-school improvement plans have worked the best. The purpose of Project CLEAN in the USA is always to lead students from soap to citizenship. The better approach to accomplish this journey is to start with concrete conditions, suggestions, and solutions. Since school administrators know the problems,

though many officials and teachers have not thought about solutions, the struggle is to get the school-building family to concentrate and sustain its efforts in practical ways. Project CLEAN is the nudge for that process. The fact that this effort has survived and helped many students and schools shows it has worked to some extent. However, the journey in many cases has been a rocky one, and more caring adults are needed to help along the way.

What Has Not Worked

Of course, since the coordinator of Project CLEAN, is also the founder and spearhead behind its efforts, I must critique my own approach. Passion is not the question. Sometimes style and intensity are. In addition, Project CLEAN has not grown staff-wise so the scale of its offerings has been limited. Thirdly, effectively learning how to generate support is always a constant for any service-oriented effort. To get resources about a problem that is not discussed, about a subject that is a taboo, about a private process within a Puritanically controlled, political environment like public schools is very difficult.

The leading school building administrator must be behind restroom improvement to initiate such an effort, yet paradoxically he or she must engender a team of students, other administrators, a few teachers and custodian and even parents, plus get district support for a project to work. Too few principals have the commitment, skills, time, or feel they can do anything about the real issues. Almost no assistant principals have any training or experience in addressing restroom issues. Too often when there is a problem, for example with cigarette smoking in a high school, the chief administrator “solves” that issue by locking the restroom doors, thus creating a host of other issues.

Sometimes a school official just doesn’t want to be bothered. Once nineteen principals in a large suburban district volunteered to have restroom projects. When I got to one school, the administrator listened to my first two sentences and said, “We don’t need it,” and tossed me out. He was let go two years later.

Another principal, two years from retirement had an administrative mandate to get more discipline in a school. She walked around with a yapping dog in her arms yelling at kids and refused to let 4th and 5th graders have soap, towels, or water in the restroom. She quit and things changed.

Sometimes principals and head custodians feel they can wait out the edicts of a district superintendent and refuse to take out bad or unhealthy accessories like tin cans used for sanitary product receptacles. All too often disgruntled custodians leave graffiti up for days, even weeks. Too regularly health and physical education teachers ignore the instructional aspects of safe, clean, hygienic restrooms. Most regular subject teachers not only refuse to monitor, let alone use school restrooms, but they also do not try to connect their subject with restroom issues and etiquette. If they did students would see better the instructional aspect of this basic human habit. School-wide approaches to “character education,” which stress respect, perseverance, honesty or other virtues rarely connect these abstractions with damaged dispensers, graffiti, and unflushed toilets. American students learn better from the concrete to the abstract; our pupils acquire knowledge moving from the known to the unknown, from the concrete to the abstract. Character education needs to reverse its methodology and then it might help students get and keep nice restrooms.

Recently the federal government passed a law dealing with wellness, specifically nutrition, physical activity, and other school-based activities. This later phrase certainly could have included schools providing safe, clean, and hygienic restrooms. Many nutrition, health, and nursing staff actually fought including restroom references, and only one state and five districts mention the relationship of hygienic restroom sanitation to wellness.

District or system supervisors manly seek only good publicity, and too often do not support a school’s needs or the systematic approach which should be taken to address safe, clean, hygienic restrooms. Too much attention in the USA is taken to CYA and AYP.

Boards of education often hold meetings at schools and they may see the principal’s restroom, or the newly cleaned ones in the front hall near the meeting space. These officials go too infrequently to the locker room or the back hall bathroom and see doorless stalls, paperless dispensers, and graffiti on the walls.

Parents are not encouraged by school officials to stress the importance of restroom etiquette especially with their older offsprings. However the home is the child’s

first place of learning and parents have a serious wellness obligation, which PTAs and school councils could do more to foster.

And students, who use restrooms, and especially the two-ten percent who abuse them, are not educated nor confronted by the 43 percent who avoid them, nor by the majority who use them reluctantly. In America we are good at the blame game; we are not good at accountable, sustained political will to make change. And political will is necessary even in affluent school systems. Despite all these obstacles, the aspects of Project CLEAN that have worked outweigh those that have not. After more than a decade, Project CLEAN is now beginning a new phase to learn about, and hopefully contribute to, school sanitary concerns in other countries.

Part II An Approach to School Sanitation in Selected Countries

After eleven years experience in the United States, Project CLEAN is now ready to learn about school sanitation in five selected countries, Belize, Ethiopia, Ireland, Peru, and United States. There has been extensive work done by many reputable agencies, NGOs, organizations, governments, and the UN entities on the Millennium Development Goals, especially for the purpose of this conference on MDG Goal 2: “Achieve Universal Primary Education,” and Goal 7, “Ensure Environmental Sustainability”, Target 10, which reads, “Halve by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.”

Much more visibility and many actions will be taken during the 2008 International Year of Sanitation. New emphases, a new office for advocacy and awareness on water and sanitation issues, meetings, and reports are certainly forthcoming.

Although Project CLEAN is beginning to study school sanitation in other countries, even its introductory research into the five nations mentioned above, pointed out many challenges which more experienced hands already know. Comparative country data, definitions, and time periods give new meaning to the word ‘difficult.’

Certainly UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), which is responsible for monitoring education-related targets of the MDGs, is an excellent place to start. Comparative tables for these five countries have been built for this paper and are

available upon request. Yet Project CLEAN determined that a different starting point was preferable. This approach emphasizes behavior, politics, and education. Hopefully this methodology will be helpful not only in these five countries, but also in others.

First, determine the ages of compulsory attendance in each nation. Even researching this fact in reputable documents is difficult so contacts with individual ministries of education are underway. It seems as if the ages of compulsory education in the five subject countries are:

Belize 5-14;

Ethiopia 7-12;

Ireland 6-15;

Peru 6-16;

USA 6-17, with state differences.

What matters for this analysis is that these countries require all eleven-year-olds to attend school by force of law.

These pre-puberty pupils, these eleven-year-old boys and girls are supposed to be in a child-friendly learning environment each school day. They are compelled by the state presumably for the betterment of society and the welfare of the students.

Therefore Project CLEAN now asks several factual questions concerning these five nations, and by extension all delegate countries at the 2007 World Toilet Summit, and by further generalization all signatory nations to the MDGs.

How many eleven-year oldsters are in compulsory schools? How many are at each location? How are their toiletry needs being met? How should they be met to reach national and local definitions of wellness? How are you leading your students from restroom sanitation to wellness? In the United States, I have phrased this last inquiry as a passage from soap to citizenship. Other developing countries may have more basic needs, yet all eleven-year-olds, should they still be in school, have bodily sanitation needs in order to exist and to continue being well.

I could not by the deadline for this paper find numbers for this age cohort. This is not a deterrent for the analysis however. The paper asserts that since each of the five countries, and most other nations, insist students attend school by the force of law, these

same states, and their ministries of education have a compulsory obligation to address basic toiletry sanitation needs of its students, including the eleven-year old cohort.

The State's Sanitation Obligation

What is the scope of that obligation? Allow me a delicate yet natural approach to this behavioral and political issue. Each eleven-year-old in school on an ordinary day may have urination and bowel movement needs. Suppose each eleven-year-old has a six-hour education day, including getting to and from school, which is beyond the hours in many locations and within normal hours in other places. Assume each child needs to urinate twice and have a bowel movement once during those school hours. And lastly expect an eleven-year-old to eliminate six ounces (.17 kilograms) of urine each setting and four ounces (.11 kilograms) of excrement each bowel movement. Thus each eleven-year-old student eliminates measurable quantities of urine and of feces within school-related hours in all of these countries.

How does each state required system of schooling deal with the needs of one, hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of students eliminating their waste products? One hundred students would urinate 75 pounds (34kg) and would excrete 25 pounds (11kg) of stool on a school day. A thousand kids would pass 750 pounds (340kg) of liquid and 250 pounds (113kg) of solid waste daily.

In one school I visited in 2003, in one of the example nations, over 5,000 kids a day passed through the compound walls in primary and elementary grades. The math is overwhelming and the sanitary conditions are still unforgettable.

Consider there are basically three places where solid and liquid waste can go in a school setting – on the ground, in a hole, or in a fixture to some distant location for disposal or a treatment process.

My preliminary thinking and anecdotal inquiries gathered during the course of preparing this paper have led me to conclude that state compulsory education systems have a legal, political, and educational obligation to solve the school sanitation issue as long as any state compels children, including eleven-year-olds to attend. Failing to address the sanitation needs by quantifying the number of age cohorts, the amount of liquid and solid waste, and the sanitary approach to its elimination falls on

state officials, not children and families. Any approach must include a range of educational instruction on proper hygiene, cleanliness, respect for equipment, and the school as a common good. Despite the state's legal obligation, paradoxically the children, families, and sanitation advocates must lead this political and educational movement through any legal, fiscal, and societal means possible. As a native-born Indian teacher, now an instructor in the USA, said while discussing compulsory education and elimination needs: "Sanitation and education go together. It's fair, just, and right."

Project CLEAN leaves for others to debate definitions such as "duration of education, compulsory," "reference years," and "transition to secondary education," "dropout rate," and "graduation rate." The preferable starting points are the simple need and quantity of each child's urination and bowel movements, the number of eleven-year-olds, and the necessity to effectively handle the stool and urine by-products of young citizens in a compelled learning situation. To lead students to wellness, which is inherently connected to learning, one must address sanitation as a means of achieving citizenship.

Project CLEAN looks forward to learning more about successes and challenges in other countries and to sharing any approach that helps students in government schools.

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World Toilet Summit 2007
31 October – 3 November 2007

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