

The BBC recently reported on a UK wide teacher survey about student use of school toilets (BBC, 2025). Of the 501 teachers questioned by Caerphilly-based company phs group, working with menstrual justice charity Irise international, 65% said that their students were unable to access toilets freely. I suspect that the figure would increase dramatically if children and young people themselves were asked the same question and a huge discrepancy between primary and secondary student toilet access would become evident.

As a young Secondary teacher nearly 40 years ago I noticed that students disappeared for part of the day, sometimes for as little as a quarter of an hour, then returned. When I asked one of them where he had been he told me he'd run home to the toilet. I quickly learned that what I thought was a novel excuse for being caught truanting was actually common practice. The toilets were so frightening for most students that they either went home or held it all day.

I am lucky to visit dozens and dozens of schools each year and 40 years on I see that the issue with toilets remains in too many schools: students either can't or won't use them. When we ask schools why this is, they tell us that they get trashed, graffitied, flooded. Or that they are used for vaping, truanting, texting and sexting. Sometimes all of these things.

When we ask why this happens in some schools and not others the implication is that some student populations are more prone to trashing, vaping and texting than others and some schools will even argue this. The complication here is that this is partly true, but not for the reasons some schools claim. This leads to a lack of clarity that either paralyses decision-makers or drives them in the wrong direction to find a solution.

Student behaviour changes according to context and you only have to shadow one class moving from teacher to teacher in a single day to remember this. What we sometimes forget is that student behaviours change from school to school as well. To build a comprehensive 'toilet' picture I have found it useful to look at

schools where students DO have complete access to them and where vandalism or damage is rare. This approach helps us to analyse what contributes to this success.

What characterises such a school is a 'culture of consent'. The predominant feeling is of community and there is a strong feeling of belonging. The school is clear about its values which extend beyond what is needed for teaching and learning and include the whole person. It commits time to engage young people and adults in making meaningful decisions about what values mean for how members of the school community treat each other and their environment. Values are communicated and celebrated at every opportunity so that they become front and centre of daily life and create a sense of common purpose, community and belonging. Consequences for students who don't or can't join in yet are consistent, supportive, calm, and discreet and these consequences affect them alone, not every single student. There is little talk of rules.

Students are given repeated opportunities to get it right and are supported with subtle, passive supervision and high-profile rewards and celebrations. In this way they learn to self-regulate. The underlying assumption is that the majority of young people will make a positive contribution to their community when given the chance, and that they can learn to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. Schools become nicer, and easier, places to learn and work.

Schools where toilet use is rationed are characterised by a 'culture of compliance.' These schools might seem ordered and calm on the surface or they might feel as if they could slip out of control at any moment. That's because cultures of compliance repress or anger the members of a school community, consciously or unconsciously. We will see a whole range of other indicators of compliance: heavy CCTV use; frequent detentions; covered or blocked windows; minimal or reduced social time for students; a focus on school rules and family contracts; withdrawal rooms; the use of walkie talkies; a well-used process of 'student referral.'

It is hard to resist these measures when things start to go wrong but these approaches are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

To understand why we make these choices we need to remember that schools operate within and have been encouraged to build cultures of compliance for decades. Working from the basic assumption that children and young people are trouble, and that teachers and educators are problematic, past policy-makers have insisted that more rules, more measurement, more accountability and more regulation would make the school system better as well as more coherent. Here we are 50 years on with the same number of schools facing challenges and the same number of young people leaving school without the qualifications necessary for their next steps. It is difficult to remember that many school systems in the world do not work this way. We struggle to find the words and ideas to build alternative cultures. So, when the rules don't work, we introduce more of them, more ways of catching young people breaking them, more punishments. It's exhausting. It's expensive. And it doesn't work.

The condition and use of our school toilets is a window into the culture of our schools. Conversely, when we address how our toilets are used and what they look like, who makes these decisions and how these decisions are upheld, we can reinforce or transform our school culture. If this issue is on your agenda, here are some considerations and ways forward with young people and adults when constructing a strategic plan.

Give everyone a voice. Give curriculum time to agreeing what needs to change with toilet condition and access. Involve the student council, staff in staff meetings, families via your school comms. Take and use the views that will locate the responsibility with the whole community. Avoid the suggestions that reinforce hierarchies, rules and 'good behaviour.'

Reward and celebrate. One school outlined how much was spent on fixing broken toilets and promised to spend every

pound saved via the new approach on outside sports equipment.

Build single-unit cubicles. When you get the chance to add or refurb toilets build private cubicles with floor to ceiling walls and doors. Include a hook for a bag or coat and toiletries and sanitary products in your basin areas.

Domesticate. Decorate your toilets so that they are attractive and homely. When did your own teenager last pull off the toilet seat or graffiti on the back of the toilet door? Brief your site team to respond immediately to issues so that toilets are always usable and clean. The aim is to get the majority on board as quickly as possible and this is a way of acknowledging that most young people are trying to get it right.

Replace the surveillance narrative. Plan for passive supervision. When you are refurbing or replacing toilets relocate them so that they can be seen from classrooms, offices, the staff room or other well populated areas. In the meantime use lighting or make simple structural changes to make toilets more open to passive supervision without compromising privacy. Think of how to include your student leaders to keep toilets open.

Share out the responsibility for all school spaces. We usually assign groups of classrooms to departments, faculties or year teams. We forget about non-classroom space including areas where toilets are located. Ensure that each area of circulation or non-classroom space is assigned to a specific team and member of the leadership group. Engage others in decisions about how these spaces are improved and maintained to create a sense of ownership and belonging.

Follow up on infractions immediately. It is interesting how many schools with comprehensive CCTV have issues with their toilets. What is missing is a determination to find those who are getting it wrong and sanction them immediately. You don't need CCTV to do this but if you do have it, use it. Use

these infractions to reinforce who your community is and what it stands for. Don't punish everyone because a few get it wrong.

Make sure your staff toilets are of a high standard.

Reinforce messages regularly. Use tutor time, PHSE, assemblies and subject time to reinforce what has been agreed, what is going well, and to develop ideas further.

Challenge any 'us and them' thinking. Remember that young people can be wonderful, vibrant, funny, energetic and imaginative when we expect them to be and plan ways for them to succeed.

When coming up with your own activity streams, remember Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development (Kohlberg, 1963). Only the immature members of our school community respond to rules and punishment. Others need meaning and belonging to motivate them. Use this hierarchy to scaffold new behaviours, responses and cultures.

Finally, keep the main issue at the forefront. Most of our children and young people have no access to a toilet for most hours of their waking day. If this was the strap line from an international charity appeal, we would all be horrified. Somehow we have lost sight of how this creates anxiety, embarrassment and humiliation for young people. Whatever our school purpose we can probably all agree that this is not a good foundation for it. Let's accept that the toilet situation needs to change and learn from those who have got it sorted.

References

BBC, May 2025

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1kv8vxzn99o>

Kohlberg, Lawrence: The Development of Children's Orientation Toward a Moral Order I. Sequence in the Development of Moral Thought.
Published in Vita Humana, Vol. 1/2, 1963.

Further reading

The Youth Compass Project at Loughborough University.
<https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/compass-project/>

Dix, Paul: When the Adults Change Everything Changes. 2017.

Further information

For more information on improving your school toilets (and how they are used)
angelinetyler.co.uk