Effective Access to Drinking Water in Schools

What is it and why does it matter?

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Effective Access means that safe and appealing drinking water is readily available at no charge to all children.[1] Children and adolescents spend many hours at school, making schools an important setting to support hydration and to promote healthy habits. Improved access and promotion of drinking water at school is a cost-effective[2] way to increase water consumption and prevent childhood obesity.[3,4] Concerns over water quality and cleanliness can lead students to avoid drinking fountains.[5,6]

Effective access to drinking water in school is water that children and adults can and want to drink.

This ➔

➔ Not this

Key strategies to provide effective drinking water access in schools:

✓ Certify Drinking Water Safety	💧 Assure that school drinking water meets safety standards for lead and other regulated contaminants and communicate results to the public.[7]
✓ Place Accessible Drinking Water in Multiple Key Locations	💧 Ensure that free drinking water is available throughout the day in key locations such as the main hall, gym, and playground.[8,9] Provide water sources that are accessible to all.[9]
✓ Maintain Drinking Water Sources	💧 Adequately maintain the condition, appearance, quality and flow rate of drinking water sources.[9,10,11]
✓ Use Water Dispensers with both Appeal and Function	💧 Use dispensers such as water bottle filling stations that permit more water intake than traditional drinking fountains.[4,12] Students report higher satisfaction and intake with chilled water.[12,13]
✓ Enable Use of Cups and Reusable Water Bottles	💧 Providing a cup or other drinking vessel increases consumption. The average sip from a fountain is only a few tablespoons of water.[14]
✓ Promote Healthy Hydration	💧 Provide age- and culturally-appropriate material promoting drinking water.[5,12,14] Encourage staff to model healthy beverage behaviors.[8] Include strong, actionable drinking water language in wellness policies.[15] Designate a water champion.[16]

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School Drinking Water Fast Facts

Easy access to safe and appealing drinking water is important for all children.

Water is essential for health and wellbeing.[17] Replacing sugar-sweetened beverages with water can reduce childhood obesity[3,4] and dental caries.[18] Further research is warranted,[19] however, improving hydration status may support academic achievement by promoting cognition,[20,21,22] focus[23,24] and mood.[24,25,26]

Yet, **1 in 2 children aged 6-19 in the U.S. is not adequately hydrated, with disparities by race and gender**.[27]

Improving water access and promotion is especially important for low-income and minority children who are at higher risk for obesity,[28] report more negative perceptions about tap water,[5] and have poorer beverage intake habits.[5,29]

Data suggest drinking water access in U.S. schools is insufficient.

The 2014-15 USDA School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study reports that 95% of schools were observed to meet the HHFKA mandate to provide drinking water access at mealtimes.[30] However, USDA observed that:

- Only 1 in 2 schools offered drinking fountains within the cafeteria and another 1/3 were placed within 20 feet of the cafeteria.[30]
- Less than 1 in 4 schools offered water dispensers or coolers in the cafeteria; only 3% of schools offered water bottle filling stations.[30]

A 2016 convenience sample of 325 water sources in 40 racially, economically and geographically diverse U.S. schools found that 37% of cafeteria water sources had a cleanliness issue; 23% had less than satisfactory water flow; 8% were broken or had no water flow; only 7% provided cups, and less than 1% had promotional signage.[31]

A 2016 study in MA public schools found 30% of drinking water sources were broken or appeared dirty at any given time.[10]

Observations in a representative sample of 240 California public schools in 2016-2018 found over 75% made water available. However, only 18% met all of the study's criteria for excellence in effective access.[32] Criteria include administrators' perception that water is safe and appealing and that water sources are clean and functional, provision of water in at least 4 of 5 key school locations, at least one water source that allows more than sipping, a high density of water sources.[9]

Current federal school water legislation.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, (HHFKA) Section 203 requires:

- *"Schools participating in the school lunch program under this Act shall make available to children free of charge, as nutritionally appropriate, potable water for consumption in the place where meals are served during meal service, including breakfast."*[33]
- *In 2016 USDA's Food and Nutrition Service issued a memorandum calling on all its regional offices and state agencies to ensure that children in the National School Lunch Program have access to drinking water that is both free and safe.*[34]

95% of U.S. schools participate in the National School Lunch Program. Thus, effective implementation of HHFKA water provisions would provide over 50 million children with access to appealing water at no charge.[35]

Help schools develop *effective* access to drinking water and meet the "spirit of the law," not just the "letter of the law."

A tool to document effectiveness of water access in schools.

Researchers from University of California Nutrition Policy Institute, Stanford University and University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition developed, validated and feasibility-tested a photo-evidence tool to assess the effectiveness of access to drinking water in schools and other community settings.[32,36] The tool allows data collection using a Citizen Science approach and can be used to identify any components of effective access that are missing. The full toolkit and related resources may be found at AQWA: Assess the Quality of Water Access.[37]

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