

## COVID Advocacy – ‘Back to school’ messaging and opportunity

### Key messages

- Opening schools safely is an urgent priority, and clean water, toilets and hygiene are essential to enable that. Provision of safe learning environments is key to ensuring that children are able to again realise their right to education. Indications are that school closures have disproportionately impacted the learning opportunities of the most marginalised children, and also risk rolling back progress on gender equality.
- COVID-19 makes the vital importance of good hygiene in schools even more urgent, especially as schools begin to reopen following lockdown closures and children and teachers begin to return. A school without access to clean water, toilets, hygiene, and regular cleaning is not a safe environment and should not be called a school.
- Governments, development partners and schools must act immediately to improve provision of hygiene services to enable safe, quality learning environments, prioritising the huge numbers of schools, children and teachers without any clean water, soap and hygiene facilities at all.
- Schools can also be pivotal in bringing about the necessary hygiene revolution to protect future generations against health crises. Schools have a key role in establishing social norms and healthy behaviours, and children are agents of change. Integrating hygiene behaviour change into the education system can deliver long-lasting improved hygiene behaviours at scale.
- Rapid investment in expanding provision of sustainable and inclusive WASH services in schools must include large-scale hygiene promotion, and training for teachers, as well as the necessary human resources, capital and cleaning, operation and maintenance investments in infrastructure.
- Hygiene services in schools are especially crucial to enable girls, children with disabilities and other groups to return to learning. Facilities must be inclusive, accessible and ensure privacy, safety and dignity, especially to enable girls and female teachers to manage their menstrual health.
- To protect the health of all children so that they are able to learn and realise their potential, hygiene services must be made available not only in schools but in households, communities, public spaces and health care facilities. Nationwide action and additional investment in hygiene services is therefore essential to building back from COVID-19 and achieving prosperity for all.

### Calls to action

- Heads of State/Government must personally champion nationwide efforts to urgently fund and expand hygiene services in all schools (both government and private schools) as a key priority for the reopening of schools post-lockdown. Heads of State must champion a cross-government approach, underpinned by strong coordination mechanisms to drive joint efforts between ministries responsible for education, health, finance and WASH.
- Development partners should urgently support country-led action to expand provision of sustainable WASH services in schools, to accelerate implementation of existing national roadmaps (where they already exist). Financing should prioritise support to the most vulnerable groups including schools with no WASH services, girls, students with disabilities, refugee children and out-of-school children.
- Headteachers and school managers must take all urgent action within their means to improve hygiene, water and sanitation provision and compliance with good hygiene behaviours amongst students and teachers (10 immediate actions that should be taken are [listed here](#)).

### Key stats

- Half of all schools globally do not have soap and water available to students ([JMP 2018](#))
- 900 million children lack soap and water at their school ([JMP](#))

- 620 million pupils do not have decent school toilets ([JMP](#))
- 335 million girls go to school without water and soap for washing their hands when changing sanitary products ([JMP](#))
- Every year diarrhoea and intestinal infections together kill nearly 140,000 school age children. And another 289,000 children are killed by dirty water and poor sanitation before they are old enough to start school. ([WaterAid 2018](#))
- The available data shows that pre-primary and primary schools are least served with WASH services, which are essential to protect more vulnerable younger children from WASH-related diseases ([JMP](#))
- Before children reach school age, poor WASH in the first years of life is closely linked to chronic malnutrition leading to stunting, which has long-term effects on the development and learning potential of children. For instance, estimates suggest that poor sanitation is the second leading cause of stunting worldwide ([Danaei et al 2016](#))
- Across South Asia, more than a third of girls miss school for between one and three days a month during their period. ([WaterAid & UNICEF 2018](#))

### **Suggested advocacy tactics**

- Seek to influence at the highest political level – Heads of State/Government and Ministers of Education, Health, Finance and WASH – positioning the reopening of schools post-lockdown as a critical moment for massively scaled-up political action and financing for WASH in schools.
- Use media, social media and other public comms to highlight the poor state of hygiene in your country's schools, amplifying the voices of communities and teachers who lack these essentials, especially the most vulnerable groups affected such as girls and female teachers, students and teachers with disabilities. Highlight the positive progress that can be made when this is prioritised, and the urgency of corrective action in the context of COVID-19.
- Establish or strengthen partnerships with education-focused CSOs, NGOs and coalitions, seeking their support, reinforcement and endorsement of the calls to action for improving hygiene in schools.
- Identify key 'moments' in your country around which to highlight this issue, such as the announcement of planned dates for partial or full reopening of schools, or the beginning of a new academic year.
- Draw on programming work by WaterAid or others that supports WASH in schools to provide clear case studies and 'solutions' – positioning the issue as demanding strong political leadership and financing from government as the ultimate duty-bearers (i.e. avoid excessively criticising over-burdened/under-resourced schools/teachers).

### **Additional resources**

- [WASH in Schools Network \(2020\) 10 Immediate WASH in Schools \(WinS\) Actions](#)
- [UNICEF, WHO & IFRC \(2020\) Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools](#)
- [COVID Hygiene Hub \(2020\) COVID and Schools \(resource hub, continually updated\)](#)
- [COVID Hygiene Hub \(2020\) Summary report on COVID-19 control strategies for opening schools](#)
- [Country-specific data on status of WASH in Schools \(JMP\) – 2016 data](#)
- [WHO-UNICEF JMP \(2018\) Drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: Global baseline report](#)
- [WaterAid brief \(2019\) Ensuring clean water and decent toilets in schools: links between SDG 6 and SDG 4](#)
- [WaterAid media report \(2018\) The Crisis in the Classroom: The State of the World's Toilets 2018](#)