

Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools

Take-away messages from the second subregional workshop

[Draft]

Brief overview

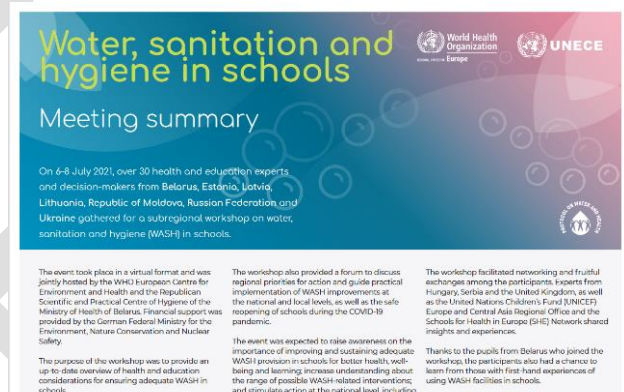
The health, well-being, education and dignity of schoolchildren cannot be guaranteed without access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools. On 4–6 April 2022, over 25 health and education experts and decision-makers from areas and countries from south-eastern Europe¹ gathered for the second edition of a series of subregional workshops on WASH in schools in the WHO European Region.

The event took place in a virtual format and was hosted by the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health. Financial support was provided by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection.

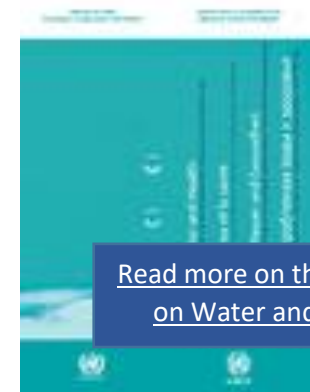
The purpose of the series of workshops is to provide an up-to-date overview of health and education considerations for ensuring adequate WASH provisions in schools. The workshop stimulated discussion and allowed participants to reflect on the priorities and needs for supporting improvements in their local context, while raising awareness of the importance of sustaining adequate WASH provisions in schools. The different sessions of the workshop were aimed at increasing participants' understanding about the range of possible WASH-related interventions; and stimulating action at the national level, including through the Protocol on Water and Health, the primary pan-European policy instrument in the WASH domain.

The workshop facilitated networking and fruitful exchanges among the participants. Experts from Hungary, Serbia and the United Kingdom, as well as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Office in North Macedonia, and the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network shared insights and experiences through their presentations. Thanks to the pupils from Serbia and Scotland (United Kingdom) who joined the workshop, the participants also had an opportunity to hear first-hand experiences of using WASH services in schools and to gain useful insights into the added value of youth participation in WASH improvements – a critical precondition to ensuring appropriate and sustainable WASH services.

This document presents a summary of the key take-away messages from the workshop as well as two selected case studies shared by participants: one on new approaches to surveillance of WASH in schools,



[Access the meeting summary of the first workshop](#)



[Read more on the Protocol on Water and Health](#)

¹ Participating countries comprised Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia.

and one on pupils' engagement. The first subregional workshop featured the same programme and content, with different participating countries; the technical content of that workshop is summarized in *Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools. Meeting summary* (See Useful tools and resources).

Take-away message 1

Point of departure: strengthening the multisectoral and whole-of-society approach for improved governance of WASH in schools

The interdisciplinary nature of WASH services and the multitude of stakeholders in school settings require a multisectoral and whole-of-society approach when planning and implementing improvements. At the same time, effective coordination and cooperation is needed at all levels, inclusive of national and local authorities and service providers, as well as schools, under the lead of the education sector.

In several participating countries, different WASH requirements are spread across several policies and regulations. This often results in unclear division of roles and responsibilities, and overlapping jurisdiction between different ministries and agencies – further challenged by inefficient coordination. Lack of leadership by the education sector has also been observed, primarily due to the many competing priorities and insufficient capacities in schools or education authorities to tackle WASH-related issues. Participants emphasized that more effort is also needed with respect to target setting and evidence-based budgeting.

Workshop participants jointly identified a number of actions that could facilitate the strengthening of multisectoral and multistakeholder cooperation, commitment and implementation for WASH in schools in their local contexts. These include:

- mapping and engagement of all relevant stakeholders, not only from the government and local authorities, but also from the entire school community (e.g. managers, teachers, health staff, pupils, parents, janitors, cleaners);
- setting up a multistakeholder working group under the leadership of the education sector, which would meet on a regular and/or ad hoc basis with a clear action plan and clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
- establishing a platform at the national level for information sharing and exchange, as well as to provide a good overview of ongoing school projects and activities related to WASH in schools (case studies, examples of best practice etc.);
- revising and harmonizing policies and standards across sectors related to WASH in schools, to ensure all critical WASH aspects are covered;
- implementing measures for awareness-raising and strengthening capacity to ensure that schools are aware of regulatory requirements and are enabled to take steps to comply with national standards.

Take-away message 2

Acknowledging the value of routine surveillance for decision-making

Recognizing the importance of routine surveillance and data collection as the first steps towards target setting, decision-making and resource allocation, workshop participants reported several common gaps in the current surveillance practices:

- Overview data on the national situation is often lacking.
- Data collection instruments are not comprehensive in their coverage of all WASH aspects (e.g. hygiene and menstrual hygiene management are often neglected) and often do not consider pupils' needs and the acceptability of WASH facilities by end-users.
- Surveillance activities have limited coverage due to insufficient human resources and the stretched capacities of public health staff in charge of on-site inspections.
- School staff and pupils are rarely engaged in monitoring and implementation activities.

Taking stock of the progress made in North Macedonia (see case study), participants concurred that there is a need to reconsider the value of surveillance at the national level, increasing its use and scope, and improving dissemination of results to all concerned stakeholders, including school managers. Practical actions to address some of the reported gaps were discussed and included, for example, combining on-site inspections with self-reporting systems, review of instruments for systematic data appraisal, and introducing digital systems for data collection and evaluation.

Case study: rethinking surveillance of WASH in schools in North Macedonia

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Public Health, under the Ministry of Health, supported by UNICEF North Macedonia, jointly launched an online tool for self-assessment of WASH conditions in schools by school managers. The main objective was to encourage and enable schools in developing data-informed hygiene improvement plans, while data are also evaluated at the national level to support the national government in identifying priorities and investment needs. The tool integrated questions on WASH aspects considered in the existing school inspection programme by the Institute of Public Health, and on WASH-related measures for COVID-19 prevention and response set out in the recommendations for schools reopening. Acknowledging the need for capacity strengthening, a webinar was organized to ensure that school managers understood how the assessment should be carried out, what the process looks like and who should be involved.

Previously, surveillance was conducted in different schools in rotation every three years using paper questionnaires. These traditional surveillance methods were reported as time and resource consuming, resulting in a limited number of schools that authorities could visit and a low frequency of data collection. An additional challenge reported by the surveillance authorities was that, by the time the data was published, in most cases, the results were considered outdated.

With the new digitalized questionnaire accessible to all schools, the data coverage has increased. To ensure accuracy, self-assessments are combined with on-site visits by inspectors from Regional Centres for Public Health, in order to validate the self-reported data. Data from all completed questionnaires automatically feeds into an online national dashboard, providing publicly available data in real time on the number of schools that took part in the assessment, the number of students per school, key information on WASH service provisions in each school and an overview of the most common needs.

Schools are encouraged to use the data to develop school-specific hygiene improvement plans, as well as to inform possible advocacy and fundraising activities with local municipalities. Thanks to this initiative, mobile handwashing stations were procured for schools in critical need.

Take-away message 3

Hygiene: maintaining the momentum for good WASH services after two years of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was a strong reminder of the importance of hand hygiene. Participants reported numerous awareness-raising and improvement efforts, in some countries led by the education authorities with technical guidance from the health authorities:

- dissemination of public health messages through various sources (social media, mainstream television, radio, print posters and other nudges, etc.) about the importance and the correct techniques for handwashing;
- significant increase in financing for hygiene in schools together with a more regular supply of soap;
- provision of age-appropriate and easy-to-understand written instructions for ensuring good hygiene behaviours among schoolchildren;
- enhancing the role of teachers, school principals and other members of the school community in fostering a culture of hand hygiene in schools.

Workshop participants expressed their concerns, however, that interventions may not have considered the sustainability of improvements, which may be seen as temporary public health measures in times of crisis, and that the collaborations created may not continue beyond the health emergency.

Taking stock of the Hand Hygiene for All Global Initiative, workshop participants outlined several measures that could help channel the momentum around hand hygiene into long-term sustainable change in the school context, such as:

- integration of hygiene into the curricula for continued education and promotion of good hygiene practices in schools to ensure good handwashing habits in the long-term;
- awareness raising among teachers and school managers to keep hygiene high on the school agenda among the many competing priorities;
- ensuring consistent routine monitoring of hygiene practices and availability of soap and water in schools;
- advocating for government commitment to sustainable financing of hygiene in schools.

Hand Hygiene for All Global Initiative

The Hand Hygiene for All Global Initiative by WHO and UNICEF aims to translate WHO's global recommendations and national efforts on hand hygiene to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 into lasting improvements in infrastructure and behaviours. It calls for countries to lay out comprehensive roadmaps – addressing both communities and public spaces, including schools – and it offers a framework to support and strengthen country-led efforts and investments, fostering coordination and collaboration. In particular, countries are encouraged to strive towards the four core dimensions:

- securing political leadership to embed a culture of hand hygiene;
- strengthening the institutional and policy environment to drive progress;



- ensuring the availability of hand-hygiene stations, alcohol-based hand rubs and soap and water where they are needed;
- drawing on evidence-based behaviour change approaches to encourage sustained hand-hygiene practices.

Read more: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/hand-hygiene-for-all-global-initiative>

Take-away message 4

Giving pupils the lead to ensure sustainable WASH improvements in schools

Recognizing that poor acceptability of school toilets remains one of the most common factors in fostering avoidance and hindering healthy practices by pupils in schools, workshop participants acknowledged that pupils are still rarely consulted, and that dimensions of toilet use such as security, privacy, dignity, comfort and convenience are rarely considered in surveillance and improvement planning.

Upon listening to a good practice example from Scotland (see case study below), the workshop reconfirmed that proactive engagement of pupils is the first step for developing informed policies for the effective promotion of health and well-being in schools, and providing inputs for the design and upgrade of WASH facilities to meet users' needs. Listening to and actively engaging pupils in WASH improvement contributes to building a sense of ownership and may result in facilities that are more appropriate to pupils needs and are better looked after. The workshop concluded that a pupil-centred approach could enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of improvement measures, in addition to improving the school-going experience of children.

Case study: young people in Scotland empowered to end period poverty in their schools

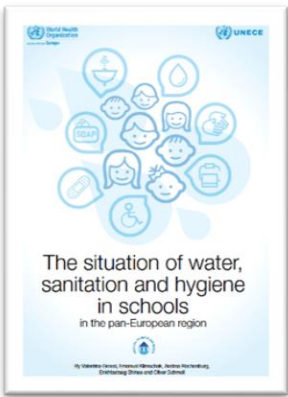
Since 2017, secondary school students from Glasgow, Scotland, have been actively engaged in awareness-raising and education activities about menstrual hygiene, supporting the identification of challenges and possible solutions for pupils to access to menstrual hygiene products, and ensure equal opportunities for those menstruating to fully participate in education.

With support from the government, a number of youth-led activities were conducted, which eventually contributed, among other things, to the commitment by the Scottish government to provide freely available sanitary products in all schools in Scotland. These activities included:

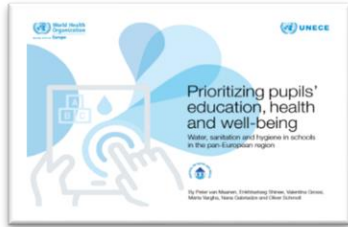
- a survey for girls in schools, which revealed the need for action to tackle period poverty;
- a Girls Assembly for student representatives from all Glasgow secondary schools to share best practice in the city-wide fight against period poverty;
- media interventions to raise public awareness on the topic by informing about the work done.

In order to ensure the sustainability of the activities, older students trained younger classes and handed over activities to a new group of younger girls, so that they can continue with messaging and peer-to-peer education about menstrual health.

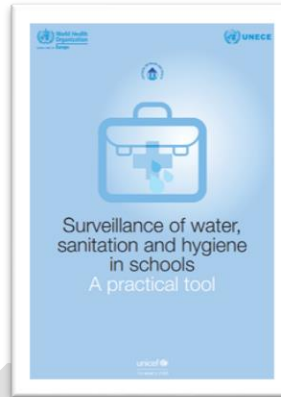
Useful tools and resources



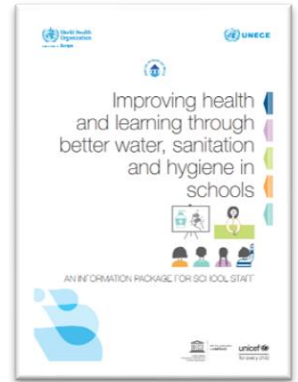
[First situational analysis of WASH in schools in the pan-European region](#)



[Advocacy for policy-makers of all involved sectors to prioritize WASH in schools](#)



[Evidence-based and ready-to-use instruments to support public health surveillance](#)



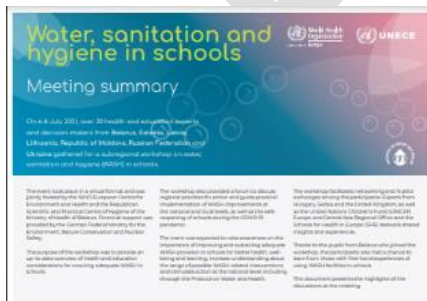
[Information package for school staff on how to address common WASH problems and improve provisions](#)



[Poster series on WASH in schools for pupils](#)



[Tiles on menstrual hygiene management](#)



[Summary report of the first subregional workshop](#)



[Testimonies from the Region on the benefits of addressing menstrual health at school](#)