

## New school washrooms bring better hygiene practices

By Charmaine Seitz and Monica Awad

**QABATIA, State of Palestine, 21 April 2016** - When children learn in schools that are poorly equipped in terms of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, the lessons they receive undermine even the best teaching.

Inadequate bathroom facilities, for one, create an atmosphere of uncleanliness and tension that can lead to absenteeism and in some occasion even bullying. At the Khawla bint Al Azwar School for Girls in Qabatia, West Bank, for example, more than 700 students from grades 1-8 had to wait in line to use the school's nine restrooms – out-dated facilities that were always filthy and unhygienic due to overuse.

“Before we had the new bathrooms, all the bathrooms were dirty and it was very hard for me to use them,” says 13-year-old Raghda Zakarneh. “I used to hold myself until I got home, and I got sick several times.”

In 2015, this girl's school was one of the schools that benefited from construction of water and sanitation facilities, in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE). The project was supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

“We used to have a crisis when it came to the restrooms,” recalls school principal Ruwaida Zakarneh. “The bathrooms were always dirty because of the intensity of their use, which delayed students from their classes for as long as five minutes each.”

“Now we have 15 restrooms,” she goes on, “and have been able to divide the restrooms between younger and older students.” This provides more privacy to students with different needs.



HEALTHY LEARNING

When schools barely have the resources needed to pay teachers and provide basic materials, building maintenance can fall by the wayside. In northern West Bank villages in particular, where many residents work in agriculture or as labourers, basic services are lacking.

“The school health programme is an extremely important project, and we are very grateful to the Australian Government for their financial support and UNICEF for their continued commitment to children,” says Director General of School Health Directorate at Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Dr. Mohammed Rimawi.

“As a physician, I can testify to the impact of this programme on students, where their improved hygiene practices have reduced morbidity and enabled them not to miss out on school days.”

According to the recent assessments conducted for the 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview, around 275 schools in the West Bank and Gaza need rehabilitating water and sanitation facilities.

For girls, especially, added privacy and space cuts back on absenteeism and those who drop out entirely.

“I am very happy that we have restrooms allocated specifically to us older students. This way, younger students will not see our private matters,” says 13-year-old Bara’a Kmeil.

## **REDUCING FRUSTRATION**

At Sanour Basic School for Boys, 290 students no longer push and shove to get their turn in the school’s eight bathrooms since the facilities have been doubled in size. At this primary school, violence too often spills over from the home where children are frustrated and have not learned other ways of coping with stress.

“This really solved one major problem,” says school principal Ahmed Arda, “since students were fighting each other to use the bathroom. This also created a serious problem for 6-year old students, many of whom were wetting themselves because they were unable to wait for their turn to go to the bathroom.”

Today, hardly any students wet their pants, says the principal, resulting in less embarrassment and teasing and allowing students and teachers to focus on their studies. The change also allows time for students to practice good hygiene.

“Now I am able to use the bathroom the right way,” says 12-year-old Kutaiba Ayaseh. “I can take my time and wash my hands with soap, because they [our teachers] taught us that we have to wash our hands well after each bathroom use and before eating.”

In 2016, this project aims to reach additional 69,000 students, half of them girls, with educational hygiene messages and skills through the Global Handwashing Campaign and 162 school hygiene kits will be distributed in the same number of schools.

Overall, 4,750 children will be provided with better access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation through the construction of washrooms, and students with physical disabilities have their own toilets in the new and rehabilitated facilities.

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