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Staying Hydrated in School Stirs Controversy; Some policies prohibit students from carrying water bottles to class

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At a school in the middle of the Nevada desert, students actually chained themselves to a water fountain in a protest. The reason? A school policy banning water bottles from the classroom.

Schools are learning that such bans can spark strong feelings from students, parents, and health advocates, who are concerned about dehydration and its effect on academic performance.

Many schools prohibit students from bringing liquids, even water in clear plastic bottles, into the classroom for a variety of reasons-- from simply preventing spills to keeping alcohol from being smuggled in.

Officials at the 350-student Indian Springs Schools, a K-12 campus near Las Vegas, enacted a ban in 2005 in response to behavioral problems involving water bottles in class. The ban was overturned only about a month after it was enacted.

"Teachers were concerned about a couple of distractions," recalled Katherine M. Christensen, the principal. Specifically, some students were poking holes in the bottles and squirting other students during class.

Kayla N. Smith, then a 16-year-old junior at the school, was one of the four students who participated in the protest.

The protesters made T-shirts with the slogan "Legalize Water" across the front, put up posters around the water fountains in the school, and used zip ties, chains, and handcuffs to chain themselves to a water fountain on campus.

The protest, which lasted about 10 minutes, led to talks with the principal, the students, and their parents, and shortly thereafter, the roughly one-month-old ban was overturned.

Hydration and Achievement

Bans on water bottles are often met with opposition because of arguments that ready access to drinking water throughout the school day can keep students awake and alert, and even bolster academic performance.

"When kids are hydrated, they perform better and focus better," said Jane Bluestein, the author of *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*, who has been campaigning for schools to either allow students to bring water to school or provide water to students in the classroom.

The amount of fluid each child needs varies depending on height, weight, and level of physical activity, but generally hovers around 1.8 liters, or about eight glasses of water or other fluids each day, according to a 2004 report on recommended dietary intakes by the Washington-based National Academy of Sciences. Most healthy children meet this requirement by using thirst as a guide, said the report.

"One of the best selling points for me is that there is some documentation that if kids are hydrated, they perform on tests better," said Ms. Bluestein.

In addition to keeping students alert, ensuring that children are hydrated can also lead to a healthier environment for both students

and teachers, she said. She cited one example of a principal in a school near Fargo, N.D., who, after installing water coolers in all the school's classrooms, observed a significant decrease in the number of sick days in both the students and the faculty.

"It was a dramatic change, in only about six months," Ms. Bluestein said, "just by making sure there was a water cooler in each classroom."

Research suggests that even low levels of dehydration can affect alertness, said Kristen E. D'Anci, a research psychologist at Tufts University, in Medford, Mass., who has studied the effects of dehydration on cognition in children.

"People who are dehydrated tend to feel tired, distracted, and we did find that there are some problems maintaining vigilance and attention," she said. "When you're hungry or thirsty, are you thinking about your work? It's a very real distraction."

Advocates vs. Skeptics

Some countries have responded to health advocates' concerns.

For example, a group called Water is Cool in School, based in Kingswood, Bristol, in England, has campaigned for unrestricted access to clean drinking water for children in primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom since 2000.

The country's Department of Health responded in 2003 by launching the Water Provision Project, which aims to increase the number of water coolers, fountains, and filters in schools.

But the issue has not caught on as quickly in the United States, and some pediatricians question the necessity of such efforts. They believe students consume enough liquids in the course of a day by what they drink at breakfast, lunch, after school, and at dinner.

"The concept that you'd have to be constantly sipping water out of a water bottle [during school] isn't relevant," said Dr. Stephen R. Daniels, the chairman of the department of pediatrics at Children's Hospital in Aurora, Colo.

Although dehydration can lead to fatigue, lightheadedness, and nausea, students in a classroom are not likely to see those effects, he said.

"Where you usually see dehydration is when it's very hot, when kids are sweating a lot, and when they're not replacing fluid. [For example], more-athletic situations with athletes that are doing practices during the late summer," he said. Even students who have sports right after school should have adequate time to hydrate themselves before practice, he added.

Janice Bristol, the parent of a student-athlete, disagrees.

"My daughter dances three to four hours a night, Monday through Thursday," she said. "I need her to be hydrated [throughout the school day]."

Ms. Bristol, the adviser to her daughter's elementary school student council in Bellevue, Wash., near Seattle, is an advocate of proper hydration and continual access to water during school hours. When her daughter's 5th grade teacher announced that no water bottles would be allowed in class, Ms. Bristol began researching the health effects of poor hydration and brought them to the attention of the teacher.

The teacher now allows students to bring in water bottles, according to Ms. Bristol, as long as they have spill-proof caps.

Smuggling Alcohol

High schools are more likely than elementary or middle schools to ban water bottles to prevent students from sneaking alcohol into the classroom.

For example, the 1,300-student Red Land high school in Lewisberry, Pa., prohibited water bottles during the 2005-06 school year after a series of infractions involving students' smuggling of alcohol into school in such bottles.

The temporary ban was enacted during the final months of the year and lifted at the start of the next school year.

"It was really a matter of bringing awareness to the issue," said Edward Novosel, the principal of the school. Since then, there have been no similar disciplinary problems at the school.

Amy Garcia, the executive director of the Silver Spring, Md.-based National Association of School Nurses, agreed that it was important for students to be hydrated throughout the school day. She also warned against depending solely on water fountains for hydration.

"Drinking from a cup allows more fluid intake than drinking from the water fountain," she said. "Children do not like to drink from the fountains, because the water is often warm and the fountains are often not clean."

One Student's Study

At the 550-student North Bend Middle School in North Bend, Ore., Kycleray Katherman, 13, conducted an informal study last spring for an English class in which he tested the amount of bacteria on a school water fountain spigot, which students often put their mouths on when drinking water. He compared his findings with the levels of bacteria in school toilet water. He concluded that the spigot was less healthy than the toilet water.

"He actually tested the spigot from the drinking fountain," said Vince Swagerty, the school's principal, who pointed out that Kycleray was not comparing the fountain water with toilet water. In fact, the principal said the drinking water from the fountain "was just fine." Administrators replaced some of the contaminated water fountains and cleaned the others. In response to the boy's informal study, many teachers also installed water coolers in their classrooms for students.

At North Bend Middle School, after a number of incidents in 2003 involving students' bringing alcohol into the school, administrators enacted a policy prohibiting students from bringing any liquids, including water bottles, into classrooms. The ban was lifted a year later, however, after growing opposition to it.

Now, students are allowed to bring water bottles with them to school, but are not allowed to have open containers in the hallways.

Katie Ash

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