

Are we providing our school kids safe drinking water?



An Analysis of California Schools Impacted by Unsafe Drinking Water: Executive Summary

Schools throughout California have been unable to provide students safe water from the tap, and many schools' water supplies have repeatedly violated safe drinking water standards. This report assesses the magnitude, location, and characteristics of the impacts of unsafe water in California public schools, and provides a basis to guide further research and public policy solutions. Neither the state nor local jurisdictions maintain a record of school water system providers, so this report matches 6,974 California schools with public water systems through both direct matching and spatial correlation. It then uses spatial analysis to overlay water quality violations to assess the magnitude of water quality violations on schools. This first-of-its-kind report provides Californians with insights into a statewide problem that has gone unmeasured, untracked and unaddressed for too long.

Key Results

- **979 to 1,688 schools** may have been impacted by unsafe drinking water between 2003 and 2014, representing up to 24% of the 6,974 schools reviewed in the study. That means these schools were correlated with a water system that served water that violated a primary safe drinking water standard.
- **514,269 to 1,048,222** students attended schools impacted by water systems that did not meet primary safe drinking water standards.
- **The problem could be even worse if the pipes and drinking fountains in schools added lead or copper to the water supplies.** These contaminants were not included in the study because there are no statewide monitoring or tracking systems for these distribution system contaminants in schools.
- **6–9% of schools** were impacted in multiple years, some for a decade or more. 254–332 schools were impacted by recurring bacterial violations (i.e., the water systems serving them experienced bacterial violations in more than one year), and 177–207 schools were impacted by recurring arsenic violations.
- **Bacterial and arsenic** violations were the most common types of violations impacting schools, followed by the pesticide DBCP, disinfectant byproducts, and nitrates.
- **While the problem exists statewide, the Central Valley** had both the greatest number and highest percentage of schools in the region impacted by unsafe drinking water.
- **1 in 4 schools** in the Central Valley and **1 in 3 schools** in the Tulare Lake region were impacted by unsafe drinking water.
- **The 320 schools** that still operate their own water systems (e.g., a single well run by the school) were more likely to have a water quality violation and to have recurring violations than schools receiving water from larger community water systems.
- **Schools impacted by unsafe drinking water had higher percentages of Hispanic and Latino students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.**
- **State agencies do not currently have access to sufficient information to assess the magnitude of the problem and ensure that children have safe drinking water at school.**

Recommendations

Address Immediate Needs

- **Provide funding for safe water access points at schools that lack access to safe drinking water,** particularly those with recurring violations where the systems lack the capacity to reliably provide safe drinking water or resolve problems in a swift manner. An investment of \$10 million could provide funding for roughly 1,000 filtered water bottle filling stations, which would be enough for each of the 103–144 schools impacted in 2014 to receive 7–9 safe water access points.

Monitor and Track the Problem

- **Ensure adequate tracking, transparency, and public reporting from state agencies about water quality at schools.** The State Water Resources Control Board should work with the California Department of Education to develop and maintain a database that enables parents, teachers, students and school staff to search for any public school and access the most recent Consumer Confidence Report (explaining the water quality for the water system that supplies the water to the school). This database should also provide any school site-specific testing for distribution system contaminants, like lead. The state should also maintain a priority list of schools that are unable to provide safe drinking water from the tap so they can be tracked and targeted for assistance.
- **Develop a statewide monitoring and reporting system for lead and copper in schools.** This study could not attempt to assess the prevalence of contaminants like lead and copper, which may enter drinking water through a school's internal distribution system, because the state lacks a monitoring system to track these contaminants at school sites. Public water systems, which are already required to test for lead at a representative sample of locations within their systems, should also test for lead at all school sites. All data on school tap testing should be easily and publicly accessible.
- **Require schools to report whether they provide functioning and appealing safe water access points (e.g., fountains or filling stations).** We recommend this information be collected by the California Department of Education, perhaps as part of each school's annual Local Control Accountability Plans, to assess and track the scope of water access need in the state.

Promote Sustainable, Community-Wide Solutions

- **The best solution for schools is ensuring safe, robust and resilient community-wide water systems.** Schools that operate their own water systems were more likely to be impacted by unsafe water than schools receiving water from larger community water systems. Decision-makers should target resources to schools and struggling small water systems to consolidate them into larger water systems that can more reliably provide safe water. These consolidations will enable schools to focus their limited resources on providing education rather than safe water, since a larger entity with more technical, managerial, and financial capacity would then be responsible for maintaining the public water system.



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