



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
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MEMORANDUM

In recent months the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and local boards of health have received a growing number of complaints about a lack of access by students to bathrooms within their schools. Schools lock student bathrooms for a variety of reasons, including tobacco use, vandalism, and concerns for safety.

The lack of adequate and available restroom facilities (including liquid soap, water and paper supplies) poses several health risks:

- Hand washing is the first line of defense against infectious disease. Unwashed hands are the primary carriers of infection. When restrooms are locked, students and staff have fewer opportunities to wash their hands at critical times such as before eating and handling food, before feeding a child, after handling bodily secretions, after cleaning, and before and after giving or self-administering medications.

- At least 20% of young women develop urinary tract infections by adulthood. Requiring students to delay urination may increase their symptoms and worsen this condition.
- Young women are also at increased risk because of menstruation; failure to change tampons regularly can lead to the life-threatening bacterial complications of toxic shock syndrome.
- Students with certain special health conditions require access to bathrooms on a regular basis. For example, irritable bowel syndrome is one of the most common gastrointestinal disorders among youth. Students with this condition require frequent bathroom use. Other students may have ostomies (surgically created openings into the bowel or bladder) and may require *immediate* access to bathroom facilities. Students requiring intermittent catheterizations, who have learned how to self-catheterize, need to be able to use the bathroom for this procedure on a regular basis. (Because of nerve damage, many of these students have a higher risk of infection, which can lead to kidney damage.) Failure to provide access may raise questions of possible violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

For *all students*, the discomfort and poor hygiene resulting from lack of restroom facilities, at the very least, is demeaning. It also may impede learning because of an inability to maintain attention. A further consideration is that failure to make available all facilities required by the Plumbing Code may constitute a violation of that code.

We urge all school districts to make bathrooms readily available to students. Parents, students, teachers, administrators and school health personnel should be part of the process of establishing the rules. Key to success is the expectation of responsible action by the students. A number of school districts have found ways to improve access without jeopardizing safety and health issues. The following are examples:

- Establishing an "honors" bathroom where students sign an honor code emphasizing personal responsibility; (They are given a computerized card permitting access to specially designated "honors" bathrooms.)
- Monitoring the bathrooms by students, teachers and/or custodians;
- Enforcing the school's tobacco control policy, including following through on violations;
- Designing new facilities in a way that provides for privacy yet permits ease of monitoring.

We hope these suggestions will prove useful if bathroom availability is an issue in your school. Thank you for consideration of this important matter.