

## **Bottom of the Class**

Are falling hygiene standards  
failing primary school children?

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# Foreword

The feeling of independence is an essential part of growing up and this is particularly true when it comes to your understanding of personal hygiene and cleanliness. For children, being able to go to the toilet on their own without the help of an adult is a milestone moment.

Yet it appears that there is a growing issue in the UK with an increasing number of primary school aged children beginning school not yet equipped with the skills to use the toilet facilities on their own, or they're avoiding the use of the facilities altogether. Both of which can negatively impact the health, wellbeing and, ultimately, the education of the children and their classmates.

As a leading hygiene and health company, we decided to take a closer look at this in order to better understand the reasons behind it and commit to helping parents, teachers and children reverse this trend. The results of our research tell us there are some clear issues that need to be resolved.

Our aim in highlighting these issues is to open up a dialogue with schools, parents, children, local authorities and health professionals and work with them to identify simple and easily implementable solutions that will measurably improve the experience of going to the toilet at primary school.

I hope you'll find this report informative but mostly I hope it inspires you to support the need for positive action and change.

**Kevin Starr, UK Managing Director, Essity**





# KEY FINDINGS

## Key Findings

Produced by Essity, a leading global hygiene and health company, this report identifies the key factors behind poor levels of toilet hygiene in primary school toilets and explores the impact this has on children, parents and teachers. The following findings are based on research conducted by YouGov with more than 400 primary school teachers and 500 parents and children.

The findings reveal three clear problems:

- **Teachers, parents and children are concerned about poor levels of hygiene in primary school toilets and the impact this has on health.**
- **Teachers believe children aren't learning essential hygiene behaviours such as washing their hands, cleaning themselves and leaving the toilet environment clean, early enough.**
- **Children are actively avoiding the toilets at school and are adopting unhealthy behaviours in order to do so.**

The combination of these findings suggests there is a detrimental impact on children and it is a growing concern for teachers and parents throughout the UK, putting a strain on primary school teachers as they deal with the effects of poor toilet hygiene.



# 10 Key Findings

## Poor Toilet Hygiene Levels

**1 in 4** One in four primary school teachers and children rate the hygiene standards of their school toilets as poor or very poor.

**1/5** A fifth of primary school teachers report that checks aren't made on school toilets during the school day.

## Poor Toilet Hygiene Habits

**6/10** Six out of ten primary school teachers rate the hygiene habits (washing their hands and cleaning themselves properly) of children as poor and say the problem is getting worse.

**62%** 62% of primary school teachers have seen an increase in the number of four and five-year-old children who are unable to wipe their own bottom.

**1 in 5** One in five primary school teachers spend up to 30 minutes a week cleaning children that aren't properly toilet trained.

**more than 50%** More than half of primary school teachers and parents want better educational materials to help teach children better hygiene habits.

## Toilet Hygiene Behaviours

**44%** 44% of children avoid using the toilet at school weekly. For 11% it's a daily problem.

**73%** 73% of primary school teachers say they're aware of children not wanting to use the toilets during the school day.

**1 in 10** One in ten primary school teachers have witnessed children not eating or drinking in order to avoid having to use school toilets. 13% say this has led to children becoming ill.

**4.7 million** An estimated 4.7m primary school children in the UK actively try to avoid doing a poo at school

## Key Findings

### The Impact

**£11million**

£11m – The annual cost of the time spent by teachers cleaning up children after they've used the school toilets.\*\*

**42%**

42% of primary school teachers say children who avoid going to the toilet at school are unable to concentrate in class.

**1 million hours**

More than one million hours of primary school teaching time are spent helping children clean up properly after using the toilet in school per year.\*

**59%**

59% of primary school teachers believe that improving school toilet hygiene would reduce illness amongst children and teachers.

**more than  
50%**

More than half of primary school teachers say children are losing vital education time because they're wetting or soiling themselves in class. 45% say this leads to bullying.



A close-up photograph of two hands being washed with white, bubbly soap in a white sink. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers slightly curled. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white, suggesting a clean, bright environment. The lighting is bright and even, highlighting the texture of the soap and the skin.

# INTRODUCTION



# Introduction

The findings of this report indicate a serious and growing problem regarding the toilet hygiene standards within the UK primary school system. From inadequate toilet facilities that are unclean and poorly equipped, to poor hygiene habits of children coming to school unable to wipe their bottom properly or wash their hands correctly.

The results show that primary school children have concerns about using the toilet facilities at school with some unhappy about the standards of hygiene and others actively choosing not to use the toilets at school and attempting to wait until they get home.

Looking into this further, teachers suggest there is a clear link between poor levels of hygiene in primary school toilets and the negative impact this is having on children's education, health and wellbeing.

- **Over 59% of primary school teachers believe that improving school toilet hygiene levels would reduce illness amongst children, teachers and school staff, with 48% seeing a link between toilet hygiene and increased absenteeism.**
- **42% of teachers say children that avoid going to the toilet at school are unable to concentrate in class.**

**“53% of primary school teachers are concerned that children not being toilet trained and having an accident in class means time is taken away from others in the class.”**



# Introduction

The findings of this report are the catalyst for the launch of Essity's School Hygiene Essentials Initiative, which aims to improve education and wellbeing outcomes for primary school children by empowering school staff, parents, local authorities and children themselves to drive genuine action and change to improve hygiene levels in primary school toilets.

The **School Hygiene Essentials Initiative** will see Essity:

- **Work with teachers, local authorities and health professionals in the first instance to identify easily implementable, realistic and affordable solutions.**
- **Pilot these solutions in a number of primary schools to assess the positive impact improving hygiene levels within school toilets has on education and wellbeing over a six-month period.**
- **Share findings from the research and school pilots with the government, local authorities, MPs and other interested parties to demonstrate why improved standards need to be achieved in all primary schools.**
- **Support teachers with educational resources to help teach children better hygiene skills and provide a platform on which teachers can share ideas and access expert advice.**



A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with long blonde hair, wearing a white cardigan over a red top, is leaning over a desk to assist two young students. The students, a boy and a girl, are both wearing red school sweaters with white collars. They are sitting at a green desk, focused on their workbooks. The boy is on the left, looking down at his book. The girl is on the right, also looking down. The teacher's hands are on the desk, pointing towards the girl's work. In the foreground, there are two pencil holders, one orange and one blue, filled with yellow pencils. The background is slightly blurred, showing a whiteboard and some classroom decorations. The word "PROBLEMS" is overlaid in large, bold, white capital letters across the center of the image.

**PROBLEMS**

# Inadequate Toilet Facilities

One in four primary school teachers and children rate the hygiene standards of their school toilets as poor or very poor, while almost a quarter (23%) of primary school children think their school toilets are “quite bad” or “really horrible.”

And that’s perhaps not surprising when you consider that a fifth of primary school teachers report that no checks are made on school toilets during the day. Indeed, just a third of teachers say that their school has any standards or policies in place at all to ensure school toilets are hygienic and fit for purpose, which equates to less than 5,000 of the 20,903 primary schools in the UK.

Many school toilets appear to be poorly equipped too.

**A quarter of teachers say the quality of items provided such as soap and toilet paper is poor. And that’s if they’re even available in the first place, with a fifth of primary school teachers pointing out that they have had to use their own money to purchase hand soap for children. Children supported this view too, with four out of ten saying there was sometimes no soap and over half citing a lack of toilet paper.**

*“My children often return home from school and complain that the toilet seats and floor are covered in wee and that people do not flush the toilets, and some do not even wash their hands before leaving the toilets and sometimes they run out of soap which does not get replaced”. Matthew, parent, Norfolk.*

As a result, significant numbers of children don’t want to use school toilets.

**73% of primary school teachers are aware of children not wanting to use the toilets during the day – half (48%) see this once a week or more.**

*“Toilets are cleaned once at the end of the day and there aren’t any official checks in place to monitor their cleanliness throughout the day. Inevitably, with dozens of children repeatedly using these toilets over the course of a day, they can become messy and unclean very quickly and pretty smelly. With that in mind, it’s not surprising that some children are avoiding using them – I wouldn’t want to use them either.” Lisa, primary school teacher, Leeds*



# Poor Hygiene Behaviour

Inevitably, schools can be a breeding ground for illness as large numbers of children mix closely together on a day-to-day basis. Poor hygiene levels in school toilets can exacerbate this issue.

**Six in ten primary school teachers rate the hygiene habits of primary school children using the toilets as poor and say many children don't even know to wash their hands after using the toilet.**

Their concerns are not unfounded; **half of children admit that they don't always wash their hands with soap after going to the toilet, with nine percent saying they hardly ever do. That is the equivalent of more than four million primary school children hardly ever using soap when they wash their hands.**

Children are arriving at school unable to wipe their bottom properly; 62% of primary school teachers have seen an increase in the number of four and five-year-old children who cannot wipe their bottom in the last three years.

*"Often, we find children are scared to go to the toilet when they first start school, for a number of reasons. The main reasons are that they are in a new environment, usually alone and they don't know how to wipe themselves and they can be embarrassed. This can lead to children having accidents at school, developing unhealthy toilet habits and becoming unwell with constipation." Lauren, primary school teacher, West Yorkshire.*

Children feeling pressured to return quickly from the toilet can also contribute to poor hygiene behaviour; **44% of children said they sometimes felt pressured by the teacher to return quickly from the toilet, while seven in ten teachers feel under at least some pressure to ensure that children return quickly from the toilet during lesson time.**



A photograph of a public restroom with two white toilets. The toilets are separated by bright yellow partitions. The wall is tiled with white tiles and has a decorative border of yellow, blue, and red squares. The floor is also tiled with white tiles and has a red square on the left. The word "IMPACT" is overlaid in large, white, bold letters in the center of the image.

**IMPACT**

# The Impact on Education

The findings of this research suggest that a combination of inadequate toilet facilities and poor toilet hygiene habits amongst children can impact their education.

**46% of children admit to struggling to concentrate due to avoiding the toilet when they need to go. Almost half of primary school teachers recall instances of children being unable to concentrate in the classroom due to them avoiding the toilet when they need to go.**

Then there's the issue of lost lesson time due to teachers having to spend time helping children to clean themselves properly after going to the toilet.

**This is the equivalent of more than one million hours of primary school teaching time being spent helping children clean up properly after using the toilet in school per year.**

**And what is the cost of this lost education time? Just over £11m – The annual cost of the time spent by teachers cleaning up children after they've used the school toilets.**

*"I'm finding that I'm having to spend more and more time cleaning up children who are starting school without basic toilet skills and it's starting to become a real issue. It can be really disruptive and it's eating into lesson time meaning children are ultimately losing out. I feel sorry for the children too who arrive without these skills – inevitably other children pick up on their discomfort and it can lead to them being teased." Maria, primary school teacher, Preston*

**52% of primary school teachers are concerned that children not being toilet trained and having an accident in class means time is taken away from others in the class.**

And such accidents are more common than you might think with half of Key Stage One primary school teachers having seen instances of children wetting or soiling themselves rather than go to the toilet.



# The Impact on Health and Wellbeing

The findings in the report suggest there could be a direct link between poor hygiene and the health and wellbeing of primary school children.

Children are avoiding using school toilets, even when they really need to go.

**85% of parents can recall their children avoiding doing a poo at school even when they need one. One in five parents report that it is common for their child to return home having not been to the toilet at school all day.**

In addition, some children admit to not eating or drinking enough in order to avoid using school toilets.

**One in ten primary school teachers are aware of children not eating or drinking enough to avoid using the toilets at school and 13% of these have seen an example of a child becoming ill as a result. It's a concern echoed by parents too; 16% report that during the current school year they have been aware of their child not eating or drinking enough in order to avoid using the school toilets.**

*"There's been times when Sam, my little one, has arrived home desperate for the loo due to him avoiding school toilets. He says they're stinky and full of poo as they haven't been flushed. It can't be good for his health holding it in all day and there's been times when he's told me he's struggled to concentrate because he's needed a wee but refused to go." Richard, father of a five year old, Newcastle*

*"The consequences are that children are at greater risk of developing constipation and other bladder and bowel difficulties - thereby putting extra pressure on already overstretched NHS services. This is particularly the case for school nursing services, and, where they exist, community paediatric continence clinics which specialise in treating these conditions." Dr. Penny Dobson MBE, Chairman, The Paediatric Continence Forum (PCF).*





# The Impact on Health and Wellbeing

As well as damaging their physical health, children who do not use the school toilet when they need to go could see their mental health suffer as a result of bullying and teasing from other children. Research shows that bullying can result in low confidence and self-esteem and impact directly on a child's ability to concentrate and perform in class. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, being bullied can seriously affect a child's physical and mental health. This can include becoming depressed, lacking confidence and trying to avoid going to school.\*\*\*

**“45% of primary school teachers say children who soil or wet themselves in class are bullied or teased by other pupils.”**

The link between poor hygiene levels, illness and absenteeism is clear in the minds of most teachers and parents. 59% of primary school teachers agree that improving school toilet hygiene levels would reduce illness rates amongst children and school staff. Parents are on the same page too; half of them feel that poor levels of hygiene in school toilets impacts upon the levels of absenteeism in schools and the health of parents and siblings.





**CONCLUSION**

# Conclusion

The findings of this report indicate that inadequate toilet facilities and poor levels of hygiene amongst children using primary school toilets are negatively impacting on children's education, health and wellbeing.

The problem is widespread and transcends the socio-economic boundaries – it's happening everywhere, and the impact is being felt at scale in primary schools across the UK.

We are seeing children avoid using the toilets and then demonstrating poor hygiene habits when they do so. Our report shows how this is affecting their quality of education, their health and the health of their peers.

Quite simply, by not paying enough attention to hygiene levels in primary school toilets and the hygiene behaviours of the children who use them, we risk undermining all the fantastic work that is going on elsewhere in our schools and in education in general.

We are clear that the solution cannot be schools simply need more money, and we don't believe that is the only solution. Instead, our ambition is to create a platform where the collective expertise and experience of those at the heart of this issue can be utilised to measurably improve toilet hygiene standards in primary schools throughout the UK with little or no cost to schools.

Our commitment is to work with schools and educational bodies and collaboratively find the right solutions that will make the biggest difference to the toilet hygiene levels in schools. By doing this, we aim to deliver significant health and wellbeing benefits, reduce absenteeism and increase the self-esteem and confidence of children in the UK.

We are already trying to play our part. Since the beginning of 2017 Essity has donated over 100,000 toilet rolls that primary schools can access through HRH Prince of Wales' charity In Kind Direct. But beyond donations we recognise there is more that can be done.

Kevin Starr, UK Managing Director, Essity UK



# Our Pledge

We believe that improving hygiene in primary school toilets is a complex issue but improvements can be achieved through simple steps including better and more readily available education materials. And the parents and teachers we spoke to agree.

More than anything else, 65% of primary school teachers feel that resources to help educate children on good hygiene habits would make the greatest difference in raising standards of hygiene.

Half of parents feel that placing more emphasis on children being taught correct hygiene behaviour would make the greatest difference in raising standards of hygiene in school toilets.

Our commitment is to work with and have an open dialogue with teachers, teaching bodies and other relevant organisations to identify practical, affordable and easily implementable solutions that improve hygiene standards and education.

We look forward to sharing our progress with you and we welcome your support in helping us to put this issue onto the agenda of those that can help us influence positive change.

## Support our campaign

**If you are a teacher or would like to find out more about the campaign, visit [www.schoolhygieneessentials.co.uk](http://www.schoolhygieneessentials.co.uk).**



# Methodology

This research has been conducted using an online interview conducted in partnership with YouGov Plc GB panel of 350,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys.

The total sample size was over 400 primary school teachers and 500 parents and primary school children across the UK. Fieldwork was undertaken in February 2018. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the UK school population.

YouGov is an international, full service online market research agency offering custom research, omnibus, field and tab services, qualitative research, syndicated products and market intelligence reports.



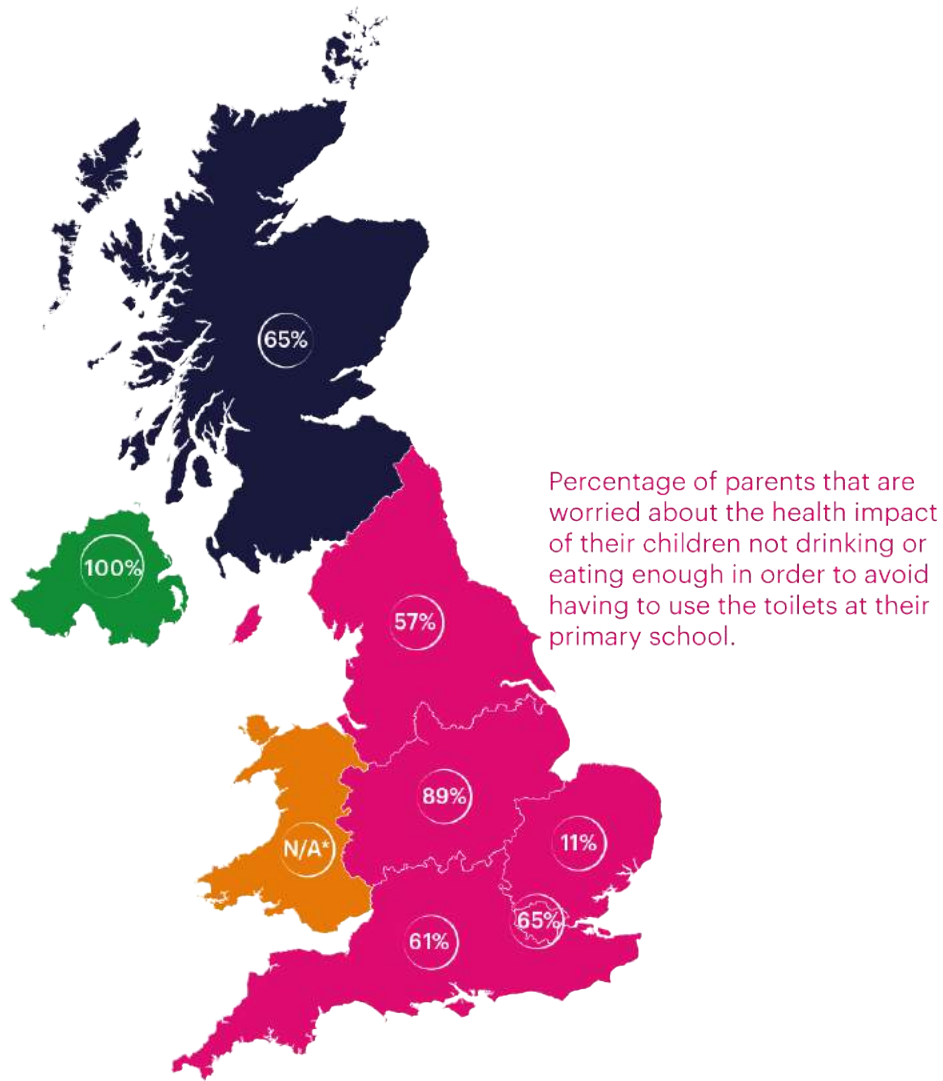
# APPENDIX

A close-up photograph of a young child with blonde hair lying in bed, wearing a blue and green plaid shirt. An adult's hand is holding a white digital thermometer with a blue grip, which is inserted into the child's mouth. The child's eyes are looking upwards and to the right. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue. The word "APPENDIX" is written in large, bold, white capital letters across the center of the image, partially overlapping the child's face and the thermometer.

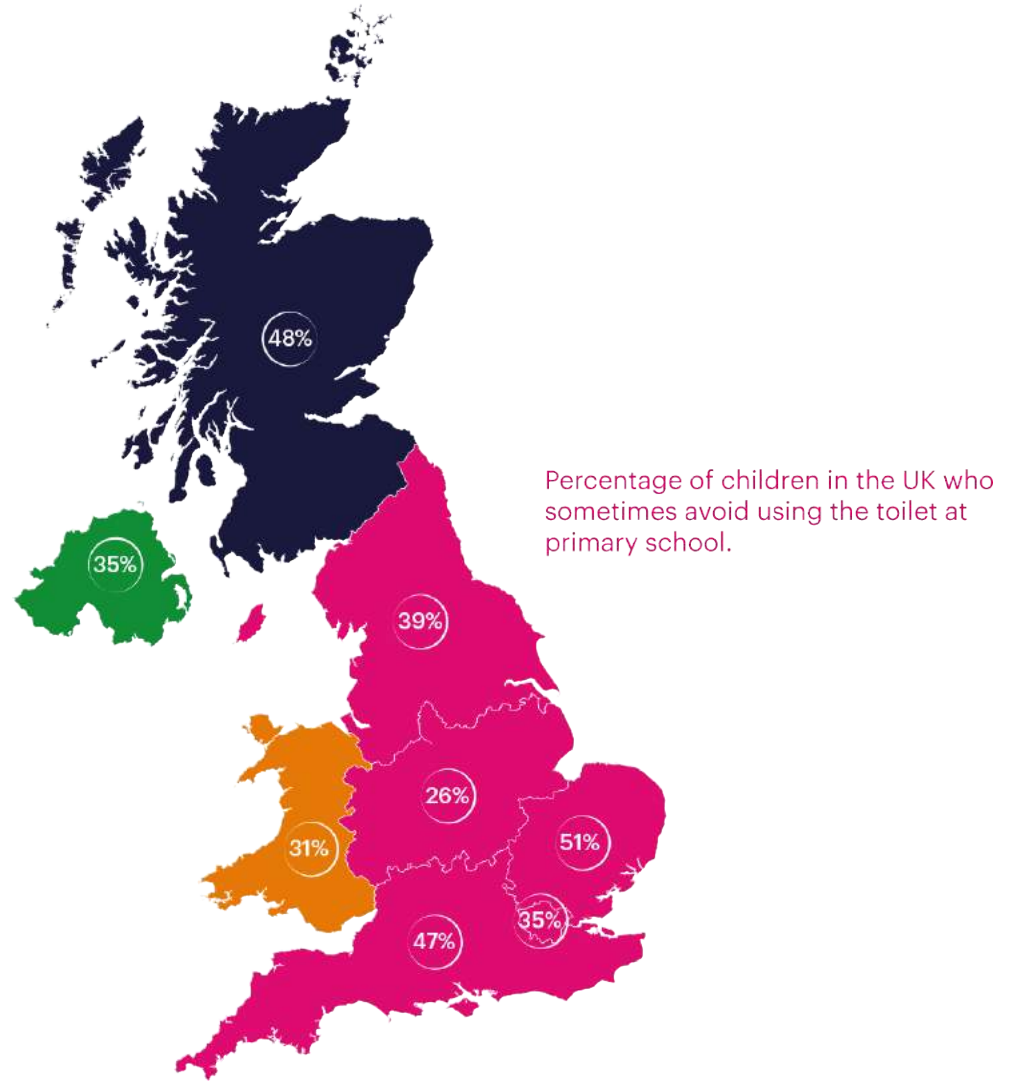
# Appendix : Heatmaps



# Appendix : Heatmaps



\* sample size too small





# Appendix : Organisations that support our campaign

Bladder and Bowel UK are aware of the difficulties for schools, particularly those in older buildings of providing clean, well ventilated and resourced toilets for children to use. Schools are under continued and increasing pressures on many levels. There is different legislation on school toilets in the different countries of the United Kingdom, but without appropriate guidance to support this, implementation may not adequately meet the needs of the children.

As the report suggests, the issues are multifaceted. Not only do children need good toileting facilities to maintain bladder and bowel health, they require open access to these, which includes sufficient time to toilet and feeling confident to ask to go. Children also need access to a healthy diet and to be encouraged to drink adequately throughout the school day to prevent problems such as constipation and urinary tract infection. Parents, carers and teachers need good quality, evidence-based information on normal development of continence and toilet training, on promotion of independence and good hygiene practices in children and on common bladder and bowel problems in childhood.

**Davina Richardson, Children's Nurse Specialist, Bladder and Bowel UK**

This report highlights the far-reaching effects that poor toilet hygiene in schools can have on children's health, wellbeing, education and development. What it also makes clear is the importance that the availability of everyday products, which most of us take for granted, can have in addressing wider hygiene issues.

In Kind Direct has been working with manufacturers and retailers for over 21 years to ensure that everyone has access to life's essentials and that no usable product goes to waste. Over the last two years we have seen continuous growth in demand for hygiene products from the charities we support. A recent survey revealed that three quarters of them are using products from In Kind Direct to help address poor or neglected personal hygiene.

We are delighted to be working with Essity to ensure more hygiene products are made available to schools and charities across the UK.

Schools, charities and not-for-profit organisations can register for free with In Kind Direct to gain access to supplies of toilet tissue and other hygiene products donated by Essity. To learn more and sign up, visit [www.inkinddirect.org](http://www.inkinddirect.org) (terms and conditions apply).

**Robin Boles, CEO, In Kind Direct**



## Appendix : Organisations that support our campaign

We welcome this latest research by Essity and the findings highlighted in the report really strike a chord with our own experience and what we hear anecdotally from parents and those working in schools and early years settings. We know that more children than ever are starting school without being toilet trained. Seven hundred education staff working with children between the ages of three to seven responded to a survey we undertook jointly with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers in summer 2016. Seventy percent told us that more children are now starting school without being toilet trained, compared to five years ago. This increased to 100% of staff working with children aged three to five. Many members said they were concerned that the amount of time staff are having to spend dealing with a pupil who has a toileting incident means they have less time to spend with the rest of the class.

The 0-5 Early Years Foundation stage of a child's development is the critical window for establishing good toileting practice and preventing long-term health conditions. One of the early years learning goals defined by the Department for Education is that by the time children start school they should be able to manage their own basic hygiene and personal needs successfully, including dressing and going to the toilet independently. We fully support Essity's commitment to work with teachers and teaching bodies to define easily implementable standards and educational resources and urge that early years settings with such a key role to play are also integral to this.

Access to decent toilets whenever the need arises is a fundamental human right and necessary for good health and wellbeing. Essity's research has highlighted two key issues which mirror our experiences – we hear on an almost daily basis from parents calling our helpline that children are avoiding using the toilets at school because they are dirty, smelly, lack basic provisions or are just not private enough. We are also concerned by the increase in contacts from parents worried that their children's access to the toilets in school is restricted to break times. Open access to high quality toilet facilities is crucial to pupils' health and wellbeing. Good toilets can have a positive influence on pupils' willingness and ability to learn as well as their behaviour, morale and attendance levels. We agree with the findings that children are limiting how much they eat and drink to avoid using the school toilets. Not only does 'holding on' risk wetting and soiling accidents but can also lead to more serious problems with their bladder and bowel such as urinary tract infections (UTIs) and constipation. Essity's ambition to improve hygiene in schools will undoubtedly also raise awareness of the issues and encourage best practice in supporting children to effectively manage their toileting needs.

**Juliette Randall, CEO, ERIC, The Children's Bowel and Bladder Charity**



## Appendix : Organisations that support our campaign

The School and Public Health Nurses Association welcome this report which evidences the poor state of the toilets within our schools and the negative impact these are having on our children, young people and families. Whilst we acknowledge that local authority budget cuts will inevitably have some impact on the finance available to ensure adequate standards, this makes no economic sense. It will cost far more in the long run in terms of the education, health and well-being of our children and young people. It is also critical in our fight against Anti- Microbial Resistance. The findings amplify previous works, dating back well over a decade, demonstrating considerable evidence highlighting the effects that inadequate toilets can and do have on the whole school community; specifically, the children and young people. We know that an effective layout, efficient cleaning and maintenance alongside good access policies are all essential to ensure that school facilities are valued and accessed.

Children and young people need to be healthy to be able to learn and grow; depriving them of basic needs such as toileting facilities should not be a big ask and a public health approach is urgently required to address these unacceptable shortfalls.

**Sharon White OBE, CEO School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)**

This is an area which is often a cause for concern in schools and we welcome moves to improve the situation. Primary schools play a vital role in helping to shape children at a critical time in their lives, providing the springboard for all their future learning and shaping the habits and behaviours that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. This environment is the first community outside of the family where we all begin to understand our place in the world.

**Peter Cansell, National Executive Information Officer, National Association of Primary Education (NAPE)**





\*Based on 1/5 of teachers are spending up to 30 mins per week on cleaning up a child at school = 53,710 (out of 268,554 teachers) teachers are spending up to 30 mins per week.

39 weeks in a school year x 30 mins per week = 19.5 hours per year per teacher in the UK (based on the 1/5 of teachers that are)

53,710 teachers (1/5 teachers) are spending 19.5 hours of term time each per year on cleaning up a child

= 1,047,345 hours per school year in total of the 1/5 of teaching population are spent on cleaning up children in the UK

More than one million hours of primary school teaching time are spent helping children clean up properly after using the toilet in school in the UK per year.

\*\*The average salary of a primary school teacher is £24,525

There are 190 days of teaching time and 11.9 hours of classroom time per day (2,261 hours per year)

£24,525 divided by 2,261 hours = £10.84 per hour

If there are 1,047,345 hours per school year being spent on cleaning up that equals (1,047,345 x £10.84) £11,353,219 per year of teaching salaries being spent on cleaning up children in the UK

More than £11m a year of primary school teacher's salaries is spent helping children clean up properly after using the toilet at school in the UK per year

\*\*\*The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2017, The emotional cost of bullying: information for parents, carers and anyone who works with young people. <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyoungpeople/parentscarers/bullyingandemotion.aspx>