## A HEALTH EDUCATION IN WATER

The medical profession has been telling us for many years that children do not drink enough water during the day and that the resulting dehydration contributes to health problems. Now with new food and drink standards coming into play, how do schools ensure access to fresh drinking water is both easy and of high quality – and does it really make that much difference? Education Today finds out.

The government's guidelines for food-based standards in education are brought into force this autumn, and with them comes a responsibility to provide free, fresh drinking water on school premises at all times.

Although it may sound like common sense, research has shown that pupils do not drink enough water and even less when the facilities are unappealing and inadequate.

This is despite the fact that drinking the right amounts of water can help prevent a range of short and long-term health issues, including headaches, bladder, kidney and bowel problems.

Water, equally, has none of the health problems associated with drinks containing sugar, additives, sweeteners, acids or caffeine.

And, according to the Food Standards Agency, when we're dehydrated mental performance deteriorates by 10%, so it makes sense to presume that pupils concentrate better when they're not distracted by being tired or irritable through lack of fluids.

These issues have been taken up by a number of children's health organisations such as ERIC (Education & Resources for Improving Childhood Continence), which runs the Water is Cool in School campaign.

This campaign aims to increase public awareness of the health benefits to children of drinking good levels of water regularly during the school day, improving the quality of provision and access to fresh drinking water in primary and secondary schools and obtain comprehensive legislation on drinking facilities in schools.

Penny Dobson, Director of ERIC, said: "We have been encouraging schools to install modern hygienic water facilities and quality mains fed water coolers designed for robust use in schools".

"People want to drink from the same attractive facilities routinely enjoyed by adults in offices and perceived by children as desirable".

"Our guidance to schools points out the importance of the water being fed from the mains and not storage tanks and that it is chilled and palatable".

"Water coolers need to be safe and hygienic and therefore should be regularly monitored as well as serviced and sanitised on a frequent basis".

Point of use (POU) water coolers also known as mains-fed, are more practical and cost effective in schools than bottled coolers. Standards of equipment and customer service have been the focus for another organisation, the Health Education Trust. The only water cooler the Trust has recommended for use in schools under its Real Choice initiative is called the Hi-Flow Plus unit, supplied by one of the UK's largest independent providers of mains fed water coolers.

Joe Harvey, Director of the Health Education Trust, said: "The Real Choice initiative has been designed to raise the standard of school food and drink vending provision. "When assessing a company we ensure their products would contribute positively to a child's dietary requirements and meet our Real Choice criteria. An endorsement such as the one given to the Hi-Flow Plus is designed to give schools the confidence of knowing the equipment and service they receive is of the highest quality and also to set the standard for water coolers in schools".

Premier Watercoolers, which is the sponsor of ERIC's Water is Cool in School campaign, recently commissioned YouGov to conduct a survey of water consumption amongst UK adults, including 18 year old school children. It revealed that only 39% had access to a water cooler at school or at work. It also showed that when people have access to good water supplies they drink up to 62% more.

So what should schools look out for when updating or installing new water coolers? Phil Langley, Managing Director of Premier Watercoolers, said: "Based on feedback we receive, schools need to be wary of what they are buying into as what might appear to be the most economic solution on the surface may not be in the long term. Our advice is to go with a provider that can offer a total service package in line with government objectives and the guidance provided by ERIC's Water is Cool in School campaign".

"This covers the supply of equipment, installation, a six monthly sanitisation and hygiene visit, preventative maintenance and a guaranteed time frame for call outs. Also, ensure there is adequate provision of and accessibility for water dispensers throughout the school building".

One school has already made the step to dramatically improve its water provision is the PFI-built Wootton Bassett School in Wiltshire, which procured mains-fed water coolers from Premier following requests from students to provide more water outlets.

The school's business Manager Husham Khan said: "Previously, pupils had the choice of one water fountain and tap water from the restaurant and we recognised this could be improved. We also needed a product that was extremely robust and could 'stand up' to the needs of school children. Therefore, mains-fed was the best option because the supplier we found was cost-effective as well as having well installed, hardwearing products".

"The result is that pupils are drinking more water, which is helping to improve their health and wellbeing".

For more information on ERIC's water provison checklist for schools, visit www.wateriscoolinschool.org.uk.

For more information on the new food-based standards for schools visit www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk.

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