

Critical gaps in school sanitation and hygiene in Thimphu: RAA

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Sherab Lhamo

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The RAA's findings highlight critical gaps that could undermine the functionality, accessibility, and management of these facilities, with far reaching implications for students' health, well-being, and educational outcomes.

Comprehensive auditing, which surveyed 20 government schools in Thimphu, was aimed at assessing the adequacy of these vital facilities and their alignment with national standards.

"This audit represents a proactive effort to ensure that WASH facilities in government schools are sufficient, aligned with national standards, and contribute to student health and a positive learning environment," the report states.

Much of the inadequacy stems from old infrastructure built before the new standards, necessitating urgent upgrades.

Thimphu schools were chosen due to inclusive and diverse student population with more policy influence. "A benchmark for replication in other dzongkhag schools," said an official from RAA.

The report was assessed based on the National Standards for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) launched in May 2024. These standards aim to ensure that all schools and monastic institutions meet specific requirements for toilets and handwashing facilities.

In preparation for the report, the RAA engaged in consultations with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) and the Thimphu Thromde.

The RAA found gaps in the provision of adequate sanitation facilities across schools. Only eight out of 20 schools met the required standards for male toilets, and five schools met the standards for female toilets. A total shortfall of 63 male toilets across 12 schools and 149 female toilets across 15 schools was identified.

Handwashing facilities were better, with 18 schools surpassing national standards, largely due to covid-19 pandemic installations. However, only five schools met the drinking water standard of one tap per 50 students, an imbalance acknowledged by Thimphu Thromde as critical for student health.

Menstrual hygiene facilities in all the schools provided free sanitary pads, often through donations. However, only 10 out of 20 schools have toilets with separate changing rooms. Four schools lacked them entirely, and six had changing rooms that were not used as intended. Pad disposal bins were available but sometimes uncovered.

Budget constraints were a primary reason for the inability to construct or maintain adequate facilities, although the MoESD planned to distribute pad bins to all schools by May 28, 2025, as per the report.

It was found that most toilet facilities fell short on design and functionality features outlined in the National Standards. Many older toilets lacked adequate lighting and proper flushing systems, with no schools having health faucets, and urinals often fitted without bottle traps. Essential items like toilet paper holders and washbasins with mirrors were frequently missing.

Importantly more so, toilet pots, urinals, and washbasins were often not age appropriate for younger students, impacting accessibility.

Overall, more than 50 percent of schools lacked essential design features. Thimphu Thromde clarified that most school toilets predate the 2024 WASH standards, and upgrading them requires dedicated funding. They are integrating new standards into future projects and prioritising maintenance.

Despite the schools having water storage and running water, inconsistencies were reported. Six schools experienced shortages, relying on stored water. Student surveys indicated that 39 percent had running water most of the time, while a concerning 1.7 percent never did.

This inconsistency led 18.2 percent of students to avoid toilets due to lack of running water, and 21.2 percent due to unpleasant odors. A significant vulnerability was found with 19 schools depending on shared community water sources, making them susceptible to shortages.

The audit also uncovered widespread non-functionality and accessibility issues. Non-functional toilets, urinals, flushes, washbasins, and door latches were prevalent. Around 759 students across 20 schools felt unsafe using toilets due to broken or transparent windows and non-functional door locks.

Many facilities were inaccessible, toilets in 12 schools were over 100 metres from main academic blocks, leading 1,908 students to avoid them. Ramps in some inclusive schools were steep, and toilet doors were not wide enough for wheelchairs, hindering equitable education for students with mobility challenges, girls, and younger students.

Budgetary constraints also impacted basic hygiene supplies, with 16 schools citing insufficient funds and nine relying on donations for soap and toilet paper. This issue discouraged proper hygiene, with 21.8 percent of students rarely or never using toilets without soap.

Water quality testing was inconsistent, lacking proper communication and coordination. Worryingly, water in six schools showed E. coli levels exceeding zero in August and September 2024, with one school registering a high level of 1000 units.

Consequently, 46.2 percent of students reported missing school due to waterborne diseases, and 38.1 percent desired better quality drinking water.

A critical systemic gap identified was the absence of a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for the WASH programme. The Education Monitoring Division under MoESD has not yet undertaken this vital oversight, hindering progress tracking. Schools also lack specific WASH management plans, relying on limited annual health action plans, leading to facility deterioration and structural damage.

"The annual maintenance budget of Nu 50,000 for overall school maintenance is insufficient for WASH needs," the report states.

An RAA official also highlighted a significant gap within Thimphu Thromde due to the absence of a clear monitoring framework and defined schedules for conducting oversight activities regarding WASH facilities.

Health co-ordinators, though responsible, lacked structured supervision, leading to inconsistent practices and hygiene issues. Staffing for cleaners was based on school level, not student population, leading to shortages, with seven schools recruiting cleaners through parent contributions.

The report highlighted on the lack of dedicated budget line for WASH maintenance, where funding came from the general maintenance budget, leading to inadequate allocations and reliance on donations.

WASH awareness activities were largely confined to observing global days and general health talks, lacking structured approaches or continuity. While 60.1 percent of students received some hygiene education, 35.4 percent received limited education, and 4.5 percent received none.

There was also a lack of training for health coordinators and staff involved in awareness efforts.

The RAA has listed ten recommendations to enhance WASH facilities and services in government schools. Key recommendations include developing a prioritised plan to expand and upgrade facilities to meet diverse student needs, including those with disabilities.

The RAA also suggests establishing a cleaner-to-student ratio standard for staffing and securing a sustained budget for WASH facility maintenance and improvements.

Recommendations highlighted on improving coordination with the Royal Centre for Disease Control for water quality testing, ensuring continuous water supply, and developing a comprehensive operations and maintenance plan.

The RAA also advises implementing structured training and awareness programmes on WASH for students and staff, instituting a robust monitoring framework, and conducting a nationwide assessment of WASH facilities to guide targeted interventions.

The official said the relevant stakeholders will be following through a management action plan detailing steps taken and future actions, along with timeline and accountability measures, to address the audit's recommendations.

The RAA will then conduct follow ups after each deadline to ensure compliance and progress on improving WASH facilities and services in schools.