

Parliament urges urgent improvements to school water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities

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Lawmakers called for co-ordinated, nationwide action to safeguard student health and learning environments.

The RAA assessed the adequacy, functionality, and accessibility of WASH services in schools, along with the effectiveness of monitoring, management, and awareness initiatives.

A joint parliamentary discussion on the findings will continue today.

The Member of Parliament (MP) for Lamgong-Wangchang and Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Sonam Tashi, presented the "Performance Audit on the Provision of WASH Facilities in Schools under Thimphu Thromde."

The report was based on an RAA audit conducted in May 2025 covering all 20 government schools under Thimphu Thromde.

Recognising the critical importance of WASH, the PAC expanded its review nationwide. The Committee conducted a survey of all 566 government schools and performed field inspections at 10 randomly selected institutions.

These inspections focused on water supply systems, sanitation infrastructure, cleanliness and maintenance, the functional status of toilets and handwashing stations, availability of hygiene materials, and accessibility for students with special needs.

The Committee also held consultations with key stakeholders, including the RAA, and collected additional information from the Bhutan Toilet Organisation, the Bhutan Construction and Transport Authority, the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, the Ministry of Health, and Thimphu Thromde.

As part of the audit process, the RAA reviewed key documents, including the National Standards for WASH in Schools, National Sanitation and Hygiene Standards, National Education Statistics, the Draft Strategy for WASH, school policies and Health Action Plans, UNICEF WASH guidelines, and documentation related to WASH promotion and awareness activities.

“The PAC’s nationwide survey captured key challenges, including limited access to toilets, unreliable water supply, and concerns related to water quality and hygiene supplies,” MP Sonam Tashi said.

He added that the proposed and approved education sector budgets under Thimphu Thromde were also assessed to examine resource allocation and financial support for WASH activities, along with records related to the operation and maintenance of facilities.

“Site inspections were carried out in all schools to assess the condition, adequacy and functionality of existing facilities,” he added.

To complement the document review and inspections, the RAA conducted interviews with school management, health coordinators and waste management coordinators to gather insights on challenges, priorities and maintenance practices.

The Committee’s consultations revealed inconsistent coordination between schools and local governments, with many schools receiving limited technical or financial support. Budgetary constraints were highlighted as a major obstacle.

MP for South Thimphu, Tshewang Rinzin, said that most schools lack sufficient funds for upgrades and maintenance, leading to deteriorating infrastructure.

“Many initiatives start as projects without continuity unless schools have the capacity to sustain them,” he said.

In response, Education Minister Yeezang De Thapa said that the ministry has recognised WASH-related issues.

With support from UNICEF and WHO, the education ministry developed the National Standards for WASH in Schools 2024 to establish minimum facility standards.

“Most schools across the country, including those under Thimphu Thromde, are old and do not meet the updated 2024 WASH standards,” Lyonpo said.

The education ministry has carried out a nationwide WASH assessment and developed a management action plan this year.

In fiscal year 2024–25, 32 toilet units were constructed with a budget of Nu 18.1 million, and inclusive toilets were built in four Thimphu schools with Nu 10.4 million. Sky-hydrant water filtration systems were installed in 19 schools, with plans to extend them to 10 more.

“The ministry is also providing capacity-building training, along with a budget allocation of Nu 300 million under the 13th Plan, specifically for the WASH programme,” Lyonpo said.

She added that block grants allocated to gewogs should be better prioritised to support WASH facilities and programmes, stating that effective collaboration at the gewog level is crucial.

RAA recommendation

The RAA recommended that the education ministry, in consultation with Thimphu Thromde and school management, develop a prioritised plan to ensure WASH facilities meet national standards, upgrade facilities for students with disabilities, and secure sustained budget allocations for maintenance.

The RAA further recommended that the ministry, in consultation with the Royal Civil Service Commission, specify staffing requirements for cleaners based on student population. In coordination with Thimphu Thromde and the Ministry of Finance, the ministry should also prioritise and secure adequate, sustained budget allocations for the maintenance, upgrading, and improvement of WASH facilities.

Thimphu Thromde was advised to establish mechanisms for regular water quality testing and remediation, ensure a continuous water supply to schools, and provide alternative water storage where required. School management, meanwhile, was recommended to develop comprehensive operation and maintenance plans for WASH facilities.

MP for Drukjegang-Tseza Sonam Dorji, stressed the need for a comprehensive and integrated WASH awareness programme involving students, staff, and parents. “Everyone must be involved to ensure a wholesome education and healthy learning environments for students.”

PAC observation

The PAC observed that the issues in Thimphu schools reflect nationwide challenges. Its survey revealed unreliable water supply, inadequate sanitation, non-functional handwashing stations, and insufficient hygiene supplies across dzongkhags.

“These findings reflect broader and recurring challenges experienced across government schools nationwide,” MP Sonam Tashi said.

The Committee also found systemic issues such as weak monitoring mechanisms, insufficient budget allocation and limited technical capacity at the school level across most dzongkhags.

Significant gaps were observed in the adequacy of WASH facilities nationwide, including insufficient toilets for both male and female students, inadequate water supply, and poor sanitation and hygiene conditions.

MP for Gangzur–Minjey, Loday Tsheten, said that of the 297 schools surveyed, 257 (86.5 percent) reported inadequate budgets for WASH facilities and services, while 40 relied on unsustainable fundraising. Water quality testing was inconsistent, with 41 schools (15.3 percent) never conducting tests, posing a public health risk.

“A national WASH flagship programme could address not only management issues but also inclusiveness, particularly for students with disabilities,” MP Loday Tsheten said.

PAC recommendation

The PAC recommended launching a national WASH flagship programme, beginning with a comprehensive assessment of all schools, and strengthening collaboration between schools, local governments, and relevant agencies.

The Committee also emphasised the need to strengthen collaboration among schools, thromdes, dzongkhags, and relevant agencies to ensure reliable and sustained support for WASH facilities.

Finance Minister Lekey Dorji supported the RAA’s 10 and the PAC’s two recommendations, confirming that the government would fund WASH initiatives through short, medium, and long-term measures.

He, however, clarified that the Nu 14 billion central school budget would not be diverted for this purpose.

Lyonpo Lekey Dorji added that solving WASH challenges requires multi-agency cooperation and endorsed practical solutions such as rooftop solar panels for heating.

The Speaker asked the education ministry to consult the Royal Civil Service Commission on cleaner requirements based on student population and to co-ordinate WASH training and awareness programmes for local governments.

Similarly, the finance ministry and education ministry were directed to explore appropriate budgetary measures, including outsourcing, for WASH facilities.

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport was tasked to lead a review of water quality testing and remediation works undertaken by Thimphu Thromde. All ministries will present their reports during the winter session.