

Toilets – the black holes of school administration

Dr Keith Tronc, OAM, FACEL, Barrister, Supreme Court of Queensland

Recent publicity has highlighted horrific cases of rape within school toilets.

In one case, an older student digitally raped an infant, while in the second, a convicted paedophile on parole, invaded the school grounds, lurked in wait in the toilets, and raped a young boy.

School toilets are an administrative nightmare for principals. They are often subject to willful damage, vandalism, deliberate fouling, paper strewing and graffiti spraying. The costs of repairs and replacements can make big inroads into maintenance budgets.

School toilets are often a favourite chosen locale for bullies, providing a private place for beating up their victims, or carrying out their sexual harassments.

In secondary schools, toilets have often been the center of drug deals, and drug taking, while providing a relatively safe and undisturbed opportunity for pornographic indulgence.

And apart from all the incidents of criminality already referred to, going to the toilet frequently, can be a highly successful ploy in the art of semi-truancy.

What can principals do, to minimise the abuse of, and in, school toilets?

Obvious potential answers are to somehow limit the whole practice of toilet visiting; to limit the durations of student absences from the classrooms; to limit the numbers of students visiting the toilet at any one time; to provide protection for infant toilet users, involving a sort of buddy system; and to implement a workable teacher surveillance system.

All these possible solutions are fraught with bureaucratic burdens, involving the issue and retrieval of 'passes' and 'tokens', the recording of times, the systematic awareness of absences and identities, and



the danger to toilet supervising teachers, from malicious and vindictive false allegations of sexual impropriety.

Most schools encourage children to use the toilets only before school and during recess and lunch periods. But such encouragements, if successful often result in student traffic jams and queues, particularly at the doors of the girls' toilets, where the use of mass urinals is not possible, by architectural design and bodily restrictions.

Some schools have very unwisely taken the legally dangerous step of unlocking the toilets only before school and during lunchtime and morning recess periods. Not only can there be serious physical ramifications at those times, if the toilet-unlockers are slow off the mark and become trampled in a stampede of desperate students, but the school authorities can also face serious challenges and legal retribution through the court system, by

disgusted, aggrieved parents.

Children cannot successfully or realistically be constrained to hold their natural toilet urges for long periods of time. Saying "no" to a request for toilet absence during class time can result in a dash by the teacher for the mop. More seriously, the child which soils itself in class, as a result of not being allowed to go, will face enormous subsequent problems of peer vilification, bullying, derision, ridicule, and the loss of self-respect and self-esteem.

Some children who need the toilet, may be suffering urinary tract infections, or diarrhea following food poisoning, and may not know it. Others with incontinence may have failed to disclose the fact through embarrassment.

Denying children the general right to go to the toilet is a form of child abuse and is certainly child cruelty, affecting the innocent majority, in a misguided attempt to control the misconduct of a minority. And the cruelty is often compounded by the fact that the most stern of toilet-denying teachers are often the ones who themselves feel obliged to hypocritically satisfy their own needs, at frequent intervals during the day.

Supervision of toilets is the other big administrative nightmare. Achieving same-sex toilet supervision is important in the interests of dignity and the avoidance of allegations of lasciviousness. But how to find enough male teachers to supervise boys' toilets? Education has become an over-feminised profession and male teachers in schools are now a threatened species, if not totally extinct in some locations. Finding two male teachers to patrol boys' toilets together, in order to avoid false allegations of sexual misconduct is an almost impossible logistical demand.