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## To Grow Healthier Kids, Just Add Water

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As a parent of a soon-to-be third grader, I know that my most important job is to make sure that my daughter is healthy, active, and ready to learn. I also know that when it comes to promoting children's health and active learning, experts are quick to encourage a healthy diet and plenty of exercise. Yet, the time has come to focus on something even more fundamental to health and well-being: drinking water.

Children who do not drink enough water have shown a decline in academic performance. According to Philippa Norman, M.D., even mild dehydration impacts learning:

"Water is essential for optimal brain health and function. Water is necessary to maintain the tone of membranes for normal neurotransmission. It enhances circulation and aids in removing wastes. Water keeps the brain from overheating, which can cause cognitive decline and even damage. This is one of the main reasons to encourage students to drink water during exercise. Dehydration most commonly occurs because children go long periods of time without drinking water. When they are thirsty they often choose sweetened drinks instead of water. By the time thirst is felt, there may be a loss of body weight up to 2 percent from water loss, and a 10 percent cognitive decline may be present. Dehydration can lead to fatigue, dizziness, poor concentration and reduced cognitive abilities. Even mild levels of dehydration can impact school performance."

A 2009 survey revealed that 40 percent of California schools do not offer free drinking water during school meals. Dirty water fountains, or ones with weak water pressure, are unappealing to students and make vending machines more enticing. The sugar-sweetened drinks sold in vending machines add to the childhood obesity epidemic, increase tooth decay, and contribute to a host of other disease-related illnesses, such as the alarming rise in childhood fatty liver disease and early onset diabetes. Often, water from fountains or taps doesn't taste good, reflecting poor water quality and in some cases, dangerously high lead content. Moreover, some schools outright discourage drinking water by banning reusable bottles, not allowing kids to drink water in the classroom, or not offering tap water at lunch.

Fortunately, federal, state, and local policymakers have stepped up to improve water access in schools. California's Senate Bill 1413 and the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act dictate that water be provided in school lunchrooms. Local policymakers, school boards, and public agencies are taking steps to implement these directives. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) is rolling out their Drink Tap campaign in schools, in an effort to increase consumption of tap water, reduce the purchasing and disposal of bottled water, and educate kids about where their water comes from. School wellness policies are beginning to include soda-free zones and require free water access. More and more, schools are starting to ban bottled water sales in favor of bottle refilling stations, in an effort to save the environment and precious student dollars.

Perhaps you're a school board member who wants to get your district to include water access in its wellness policy, or a parent who wants to raise funds for a water tap. Maybe you are a physician who has read the alarming studies on dehydration, sugary beverages, and children's health, or a concerned resident reading here for the first time that our kids are not getting the water they need to reach their full potential. Whether you're a school administrator, medical professional, policymaker, parent, or student, resources and support are available.

In California and elsewhere, funding opportunities exist for schools whose administrators want new fixtures or hydration stations installed. The San Francisco Foundation is providing support to the UCSF Department of Pediatrics to develop a user-friendly toolkit on how to boost water access in schools. The SFPUC is installing refilling stations throughout the Bay Area. Various delivery methods are available, from refilling stations to large jugs. There is even an entire website, [WaterInSchools.org](http://WaterInSchools.org), dedicated to this issue.

Further implementation will reveal what works best in individual communities, but options already exist for every budget and school. When it comes to improving children's health, water is one easy solution we can tap into now.

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