

The 'water-only' status of Wellington region schools

What is the role of schools in maintaining good health?
Healthy children learn better





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ABOUT REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH

Regional Public Health (RPH) is a business unit of the Hutt Valley District Health Board (DHB) providing public health services to the greater Wellington region, including Wairarapa, Hutt Valley and Capital & Coast District Health Boards. Our business is public health action – working to improve the health and wellbeing of our population and to reduce health disparities. We aim to work with others to promote and protect good health, prevent disease, and improve quality of life across the population. We are funded mainly by the Ministry of Health and we also have contracts with the DHBs and other agencies to deliver specific services. We have 130 staff with a diverse range of occupations, including medical officers, public health advisors, health protection officers, public health nurses, analysts and evaluators.

SUMMARY

Regional Public Health (RPH) surveyed Wellington region schools on their 'water-only' status. Responses from 78 schools (39%) provide a snapshot of variation across the region. Of the schools that responded, only 15% were not considering a water-only policy. The other schools were considering a policy (28%), in the process of implementing it (14%), or had already implemented it (28%). The remaining 15% of schools were practicing 'water-only', but did not have a policy.

Many schools did not see any barriers beyond the time needed for consultation and to gain community support for the move. The main barrier that schools perceived for a 'water-only' policy was a lack of community and/or family support. Monitoring and communication were identified as key aspects of the policy from schools that had implemented. Consultation to bring the school community onboard with good evidence is a key part of the process. Two schools that had implemented a policy, reported self-observed benefits in improved behaviour. Some schools did not see a need for a policy as the practice was already largely limited to water.

The experiences of the schools and their perceptions of the issue also show the wide range of views on the role of schools in promoting healthy behaviors. Part of this is simply the pressure of many competing demands: how does 'water-only' fit into school priorities? Nevertheless, it is clearly becoming a norm to avoid sugary drinks at school. With the joint attention of the Ministries of Health and Education on avoiding sugary drinks, this report aims to further support schools in the region to move to 'water-only'.

BACKGROUND

There is increasing evidence of the harms caused by added sugars. The [World Health Organization](#) notes: "current evidence suggests that reducing sugar intake, especially in the form of sugar-sweetened beverages, may help maintain a healthy body weight." In addition, there is a "a growing research base that shows that increasing water consumption is good for a student's health and well-being and can help improve weight and academic performance." <http://www.waterinschools.org/whywater.shtml>

On 21 March 2016, [The Education Gazette](#) and [He Pitopito Kōrero](#) (The Ministry of Education bulletin for School Leaders) encouraged schools to consider a 'water-only' policy. A 'water-only' policy does **not** exclude milk, but is intended to remove sugary drinks, including fruit juices. The [Ministry of Health](#) advised that: "The World Health Organization recommends schools create healthy food environments so introducing a water-only policy is a great first step for schools".

The links between health and education can create a virtuous cycle as education improves health, and health is a key resource for a child to be able to learn. The Ministry of Education has set up a [resource page](#) to help schools promote healthy eating, and includes a template to help schools formulate their own water-only policy.

To support the initiative, Regional Public Health (RPH) undertook a survey of schools in the greater Wellington region. The aim of the survey was to:

- 1) Assess the regional status of 'water-only' schools;
- 2) Identify schools who want support to consider or implement a 'water-only' policy; and
- 3) Learn lessons from schools that have already done so.

Findings

The survey and a covering note was sent at the start of Term 2 (10 May 2016) by email to all 201 schools in the region that included children up to Year 8. One reminder email was sent before the survey was closed after three weeks. A total of 89 responses were completed from 78 schools (39%): there were two responses from nine schools, and three responses from one school.

Response rate

Table 1 shows response rate by school type and location, and the number of schools in the region. The secondary schools included in the survey started from Year 7. The response rate was similar across areas, with the highest response rate in Lower Hutt (43%) and Wellington (41%), and the lowest response rate in Upper Hutt (31%). None of the secondary schools (with year 7-8 children) responded, but both special schools did. The highest response rate was for primary (Full 43%; Contributing 40%). None of the 10 intermediate schools in Lower Hutt, Wellington or Wairarapa responded.

Table 1A. Number of Wellington region schools, by area and type

	Composite	Contributing	Full Primary	Intermediate	Secondary*	Special	Total
Kapiti			11				11
Lower Hutt	4	21	17	4	1		47
Porirua	1	12	14	2	2	1	32
Upper Hutt		11	2	2	1		16
Wairarapa	2	4	18	1	3		28
Wellington	3	27	32	5		1	68
Total	10	75	94	14	8	2	201

*Only secondary schools with Year 7-8 were included.

Table 1B. Response rate by area and type

	Composite)	Contributing	Full Primary	Intermediate	Secondary	Special	Total
Kapiti			36%				36%
Lower Hutt	50%	48%	47%	0%	0%		43%
Porirua	100%	25%	29%	100%	0%	100%	34%
Upper Hutt		36%	0%	50%	0%		31%
Wairarapa	0%	25%	50%	0%	0%		36%
Wellington	0%	44%	47%	0%		100%	41%
Total	30%	40%	43%	21%	0%	100%	39%

Water-only status

The question on the school's 'water-only' policy status had 4 choices (see Table 2) and an 'other' category. For 12 of the 16 schools that responded 'other', nearly all already had a practice that was close to 'water-only' and were placed in a new category ('In Practice'). For example:

"Water is our promoted drink of choice, except for special events like Discos and School Fairs.";

"Students are encouraged to drink water we have water fountains and we provide bottled water for students to buy."; and

"We do not have a policy as such but our students only bring water to drink anyway. It is just part of our school culture."

The remaining four schools that responded 'other' were reclassified:

- 'Not considering': "We do not have an issue with drinks other than water and school milk being consumed at school";
- 'Considering': "May consider - open to learn more.", and "Will raise it with the BoT and Whānau."; and
- 'In Process': "Working toward, as part of a school plan."

Table 2A shows the status of the 78 schools by area and request for a public health nurse (PHN) contact to help implement a 'water-only' policy; Table 2B shows PHN contact request by area. A quarter of schools (n=19) requested PHN contact, with demand across the region, but the least demand in Kapiti, Porirua and Upper Hutt. Two of the 19 requesting PHN contact had responded that they were 'not considering' such a policy, suggesting that they may consider; the others requesting PHN contact were mostly considering the policy or in process of implementing. Of the schools that submitted more than one response, two had contradictory responses about whether they would like PHN contact.

Table 2A. Water-only policy status and request for PHN contact of schools

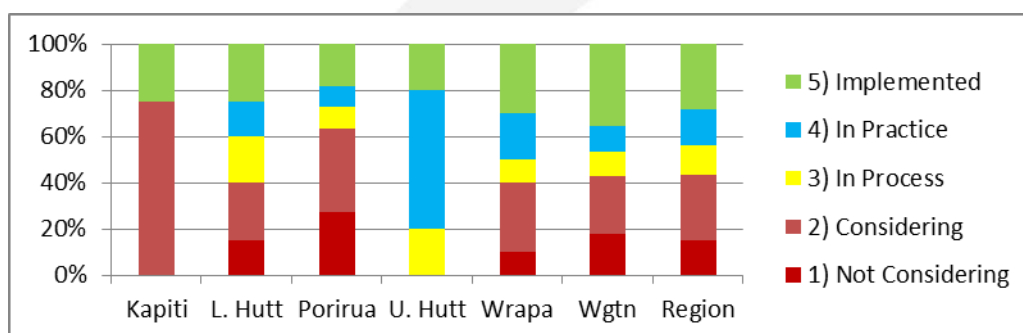
	No	No/Yes	Yes	Total
1) Not Considering	10		2	12
2) Considering	11	1	10	22
3) In Process	4	1	5	10
4) In Practice	10		2	12
5) Implemented	22			22
Total	57	2	19	78

Table 2B. PHN contact request, by area

	Kapiti	L Hutt	Porirua	U Hutt	Wairarapa	Wgtn	Total
No	2	13	9	4	5	24	57
No/Yes					1	1	2
Yes	2	7	2	1	4	3	19
Total	4	20	11	5	10	28	78

Figure 1 shows the distribution of water-only policies by area, with a similar distribution in Lower Hutt, Wairarapa and Wellington.

Figure 1. Water-only policy status distribution (%), by area



Acceptable drinks allowed

Most schools, with or without a policy, only allowed unflavoured milk and water. But many schools also allowed fruit juice, with some of these noting that they were aiming to remove fruit juice from the acceptable list. For some schools the focus was on excluding fizzy drinks.

Barriers to water-only policy

Schools were asked to state the barriers to a 'water-only' policy; the responses are in Box 1, arranged by categories. Not shown are two responses that considered continuing with the school milk would be a barrier. As noted in the introduction, the 'water-only' policy includes milk, so this is not a barrier.

Many schools did not see any barriers; it was just a matter of time and priority. The main barrier expressed was around family and community support for the policy. Two schools mentioned fundraising as an obstacle and another two, mentioned the need for water fountains. One school wanted more information on how to do it. Four schools felt there was no need for a policy for various reasons, including the fact that the children are mostly already drinking water.

Box 1. School responses on barriers to implementing 'water-only' policy

None, but needs priority

- No barriers, will begin a consultation process.
- No real barriers just a lot of other issues to attend to at the moment.
- I'm new to the school - prioritising work to be done.
- I don't think there will be barriers when it's time to. Right at this moment there's more pressing priorities.
- None that I can think of - difficulty in policing it as we are near a supermarket.
- There are none. We are going through a review in Term 2 around food and drink and then will implement policy in Term 3.

- Time to communicate this option with the community and establish a programme in the school.
- Haven't discussed issue.
- We have not discussed this with our school community yet. However we do not think there would be many barriers in the way if we did decide to do this.

Family/community resistance/support

- "No-one's going to tell me what I can and can't give my kids."
- Communication/parent buy-in.
- Parental resistance - a feeling that the occasional treat is okay.
- Parent buy-in (education and rationale).
- Parent support.
- Parental consultation period.
- Enforcement with parents and children.
- Getting support from whānau and getting information out to whānau.
- Gaining understanding and buy-in from whānau.
- Children still bring juice along in their lunchboxes. Parents & Friends were selling juice as a lunch order fundraiser.
- Ensuring all stakeholders have a voice in developing a policy.
- Barriers to healthy eating and drinking policy implementation, is getting through to parents. They see a cheap option as easier, unfortunately.
- We are working through what our role/responsibility is and what is the role/responsibility of the parents.
- This is a community decision and communication requires time. So, there are no real barriers at this stage. We need to gather student and community voice.
- ASD students (and their parents) are locked into what they will or will not drink and won't drink at all if they don't have their choice offered. There are health risks if they don't drink that need to be considered.
- Haven't implemented for the annual school gala as this doesn't have community support. Expect we will do this in few years time if parental acceptance improves.

Fundraising

- PTA wanting to sell fizz to raise funds for school.
- We haven't implemented it as part of our fundraising activities and this would likely cause concern for our fundraising committee. We do minimise sugary drinks though.

Have specific needs

- Need more information as how to do it.
- We don't have enough taps or drinking fountains.
- Not enough water fountains and taps around the school.

No need for a policy

- A recent survey of our school found that on most days all children just had water - all 330 children. We struggle with the need to have a policy when there is such a positive attitude to water as a first drink.
- We do not allow students to bring sugary drinks to school and if so, they are removed. There is an understanding and expectation that these drinks are not accepted. Putting it in concrete, such as a policy is creating a battle that is not needed.

- We have considered whether or not to implement this policy and have decided that we prefer to educate students as to healthy food choices rather than remove. We have very limited drink choices available in our school tuck shop.
- Other education business has filled my workload. This has not been a priority as most kids already bring water.

Lessons learned in implementing a water-only policy

Those who had implemented a 'water-only' policy were asked to share any lessons learned. These have been categorised in Box 2. Not shown are four responses that stated that it was easy to implement and was now part of the school culture. The most common lesson was the need for communication to explain the policy and its rationale and monitoring, to ensure the policy was implemented. Consultation was highlighted as a key lesson by three responses; and two noted that the positive impact of the policy, was the lesson learned.

Box 2. School responses on lessons learned in implementing 'water-only'

Monitoring & Communication

- Be watchful of what is provided in lunch boxes!
- Being firm about monitoring and communicating with families on the water issue.
- We have had it for 9 years and we still have to do lots of explaining to families.
- Plenty of information to everyone. Keep hammering it in newsletters/Facebook/website. Get buy in from the kids - lots of examples of unhealthy drinks and why only having water at school is such a cool idea. Written policy by the board so that they are part of and support the initiative. We have been water only for the last 5 or 6 years and in the beginning and for the first year or two some children brought other drinks to school. These were taken off children and given back at the end of the day.
- It is essential that classroom lessons support the implementation of this. This gives the students an insight into why and the benefits.
- Make your rationale clear, and be consistent.
- The expectation that only water at schools, promoted by all staff and children adhere to this. It is in the information booklet for parents and children will be asked to take it home if they bring anything other than water.
- You have to keep pushing it, reminding and now, as has been put in place confiscate anything but returning to them after school. We supported this initiative by bringing in modern water fountains for drinking and refilling bottles.
- Monitoring is always difficult, an area we constantly need to work on; students are good at this.

Consultation

- Consultation is important, research is important, but other than that, it was easy!
- Built into the Health Curriculum, consultation with the parents and buy in from the children.
- It can be a difficult process as some people don't understand the importance of a healthy diet including drinks. Some education beforehand is useful. It is great if the children are on board with the idea and have helped make the decision.

Impact

- Children have more energy and water is a quick fix for a headache or tiredness.
- We made the switch many years ago, with no problems from students or parents. Now just accepted as a way of life. Marked improvement in children's behaviour and concentration after switching.

Other

- You need to offer good options for drinking of water; we have water cooling units around the school.
- If non-water drinks are seen as treats and are available at school events, then it is easier for parents and children to accept the notion of a 'treat', where non-water drinks are 'occasional' rather than 'usual'. Having a blanket 'water only' policy at all school events would be unworkable, unrealistic and not in the spirit of an occasional treat concept, which is educative.

Support needed

The survey asked what kinds of support the schools would need to consider or implement a 'water-only' policy. Box 3 shows the responses. Not included are responses that stated they did not need support, and one who stated "I don't agree with it, and feel that it's more work for overworked staff that are at school to educate not police lunch boxes and drink bottles." One school noted that they had spent "\$1,500 getting a water filter installed to lower the nitrate levels... and it would be great if there was funding available to help."

Most schools asked for practical support around developing a policy; information resources for parents, students and staff, including educational resources; and information around the whole process of implementation. Two schools noted the need for water fountains and two the need for national programmes of support.

Box 3. School responses on support needed to consider or implement 'water-only' policy

Policy

- Policy template, info for parents and some education resources for teachers.
- Policy drafts would be great.
- A sample policy ready to use. Recommended process to follow to put it into place so it actually happens and is not just on paper.
- Seeing some examples school policy docs.
- Seeing other school's policies.
- Current policy to look at. How do you enforce water only?
- Always happy to receive information and ideas as well as policy examples- but not too much as we seem to be getting a great deal through from various agencies.

Information

- Clear simple information for parents.
- Pamphlets to show the benefits to parents. Lesson ideas to educate students.
- Education for the community - Reasons why our school should.

- Educational resources to support the reason.
- Educating the parents to not include juice in lunches. Perhaps someone come to talk to the children so they can educate their parents!
- Information and statistics about the benefits or positive impact on learning and motivation a water only policy has.
- Evidence of the outcomes for students based on this policy.
- Plenty of why's and wherefores'. This needs to be compelling.
- Resources for parents explaining why this is a great idea would be very useful, not just one copy, enough for all families, in our case 85 children.

Model/process of implementation

- Models of how this has been implemented.
- Examples of processes other schools have used. Examples of policies.
- Info from schools who have already implemented it. Info from Min of Health to put in school newsletters etc.
- Probably good to hear of other schools journey and, the process towards implementation. What is the stance towards staff?
- How to gather information and support from whānau. How to implement a policy that suits our school and whānau. What information to put in newsletters. The timeline and structure of implementing this policy. Possible speakers/visitors to talk to students about importance of having water. Good communication and support with the corner dairy about not selling sugary drinks to our students before school (if possible).

Water fountains

- Decent water fountains - ours are inadequate, old, leaky.
- Better water fountains (that offer facilities for filling water bottles). We have investigated these, but they are very costly (once you factor in the plumber).

National action

- A nationwide push. Nothing like a bit of peer pressure. Incentives over a month or so to break the habit.
- Govt mandatory policy for all schools pre school - secondary schools.

Time to complete survey

The median time to complete the survey was 2.5 minutes, and three-quarters of responses (n=68) took less than five minutes. Ten respondents took more than 10 minutes to complete the survey, which may reflect the fact that they were engaged in other tasks during its completion.

Comments

The survey had a reasonable response rate (39%) for an email survey with only a single prompt. The results show the distribution in the status of 'water-only' in greater Wellington schools. In general, water is the main drink consumed, but practices and policies vary widely. The results provide a baseline for the region to move to 'water-only' in all schools.

The barriers and lessons learned responses, show that it is vital to engage the entire school community to understand and support the policy. For some schools, there is a reluctance to embark on the process, either because they feel that current practice is effectively 'water-only', or because they do not see the policing of drinks as being related to education. Despite the scientific evidence on the importance of avoiding sugary drinks, some schools remain skeptical of the value of such a policy for learning. Further evidence was provided by two of the schools in noting the positive impact of water-only. The 10-year experience of going sugar-free at Yendarra school is described in [this inspirational talk](#), where going water-free was the first step in transforming the school culture with positive impacts on educational achievements.

A policy by itself does not lead to change, and the importance of monitoring the policy and continuing to communicate it to parents was also highlighted as a key lesson. Of course, access to potable water through fountains and other sources is a pre-requisite. One small school noted the cost needed to make their water potable, and the need for funding support.

Next steps

The survey met its aims of providing a picture of the water-only status of schools, and learning lessons and challenges for implementing such a policy. It also identified those schools that would like public health nurse support on the policy, and these will be followed up.

This report is being prepared to share the lessons and issues with schools across the region, to encourage schools to consider and implement a 'water-only' policy. It also provides a baseline to measure progress on the issue.