Back to School – Without a Bathroom!

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Photo Credit: Energy for All 2030 via Flickr

Imagine the bathrooms at the school you attend or the school your children attend are out of order – what would you do? In the U.S., it's likely the school would be closed for the day and children sent home until the repairs could be made. Unfortunately, in many places around the world, the school bathrooms are permanently out of order forcing children to go in the street. If that were the case – would you keep your child home from school?

All too often, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, that's the choice that parents face and it frequently means that girls in particular stay home. While recent reviews of U.S. schools have estimated that 40 percent of our 100,000 public schools are in "bad to poor condition," a recent UNICEF survey of 60 developing countries showed that more than 50 percent of schools in poor countries still lack the basics - safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities.

I work with CHF International, a non-profit humanitarian relief and development organization, and have seen the impact of poor quality schools first hand in Ghana. In 2010, the Ministry of Education in Ghana reported that only 50 percent of Ghana's 36,822 schools have access to toilet facilities. CHF is working with the government, teachers, students and local partner organizations to improve school sanitation in the poorest slums in two of Ghana's largest cities - Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi. We're using rainwater harvested from the school roof and collected in tanks to flush the toilets and conserve precious water. Already schools have reported increased attendance rates, more frequent hand washing by children, and even families improving sanitation at their homes as a result of what their kids learned in school. (To learn more about why sanitation is such a huge global issue check out this creative graphic about what happens when you flush).

A key solution to improved schools is community involvement. With CHF's help, the Government of Ghana just released a new strategy to promote community participation in solving access to clean water and sanitation. You can also get involved in raising awareness about the need for healthy learning environments in your community and around the world by joining CHF International in support of the Center for Green School's Green Apple Day of Service on September 29. Working with our local community partners, CHF International will be organizing service projects in the cities of Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana, as well as in the West Bank, Colombia, India and near our headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. Stay tuned for more details.

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