Prioritizing WASH at Mairwe
SWASH+ Phase II

The Water Challenge

Mary Wangeci holds an important role at Mairwe Primary School, a rural public school in Nyeri, Kenya. She is deputy president of her class and an excellent student; she received a score of 360 out of 500 marks on her end of term examinations. But school isn’t always easy for Mary and her fellow classmates. Inconsistent water and unclean toilets often threaten to derail their studies.

“Some days there is no water, and the classes remain dirty. We sometimes carry water from our homes to wash the toilets,” Mary explains.

But borrowing water from the surrounding neighborhood can be problematic, too. It puts the burden on parents to pay for extra water for the school, when many are sending their children to public school specifically because it is free. Schools like Mairwe call parents to regular meetings to discuss water issues such as the need for an increased water supply and the importance of latrine cleanliness. While these issues are concerns in schools throughout Kenya, they can be harder to achieve in public schools.

Mary knows first-hand how water availability and quality can differ across schools. Prior to sixth grade, she attended a private school. She remembers, “water was enough and very clean, and toilets were always clean.” This is in contrast to her current school, where there is only enough water to wash the latrines twice per week.

SWASH+ Phase II Comes to Mairwe

But now Mary, along with her schoolmates, is the recipient of a SWASH+ Phase II intervention. In its second phase, SWASH+ (School Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Plus Community Impact) is examining the sustainable provision of WASH services. In practice, this means ensuring that facilities are cleaned on a regular basis, are supplied with necessary inputs like tissue, clean water and soap, and are used appropriately by students and teachers alike. SWASH+ Phase II is a partnership between Kenya’s Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and Ministry of Health (MoH), CARE Kenya, CARE USA, Georgetown University and Emory University.
In its governance research trial, SWASH+ identifies three underlying sources of failed WASH sustainability: 1) low prioritization of SWASH services; 2) lack of administrative capacity at schools; and 3) weak incentives to provide sustainable SWASH services. To address the first source of failed sustainability, students in grades six, seven and eight at Mairwe Primary School received calendars that deliver messages about the importance of WASH. The calendars also provide information about roles and responsibilities to improve sanitation standards. These messages draw on the lessons learned from research conducted during SWASH+ Phase I.

Pledging to Prioritize WASH

The calendars also provide an opportunity for students and their parents to pledge to be WASH champions at their school. Students submit these pledges each month, competing against their peers on other teams for school-wide recognition. In preliminary assessments, students and parents have responded favorably to the calendars.

Mary likes her calendar for many reasons. “It’s a good calendar, it has letters that you can see from far away. It’s also good because it is free of charge.” School officials in addition to students have noticed the benefit of a free product that can remind households about hygiene and sanitation behaviors and also create a more knowledgeable atmosphere in schools. As Mairwe Deputy Head Teacher George Wangombe Wangeci summarizes, “the [SWASH+] calendars are making it easy for them to know the information.”

SWASH+ Phase II hopes that interest in the calendars continue to grow and that parents and students use the messages to discuss water and sanitation at home. With strong community awareness and support, there may be a greater chance of sustainable water and sanitation in public schools in Nyeri and elsewhere in Kenya.