

From Soap to Citizenship — European Union Style

The problem is the same in every nation, and the solution is the same as well.

By Dr. Thomas Keating



Generation E. Students in Berlin, Germany, brainstorm to come up with school restroom improvements. Like every other place in the world, restrooms are problematic areas of the schools that require more attention for maintenance and safety.

The Jacques Brel Youth Hostel, on Rue de la Sablonniere in Brussels, is an unlikely place to begin understanding two seemingly unrelated concepts — European Union citizenship and the condition of school restrooms in the 27 nations of that same Union.

Yet, this 40-year career educator went during the last week of April for those two reasons to the capital of Europe, and this Hostelling International location, just two stops from the European Parliament.

During my seven days in Brussels, I

asked at least 45 individuals, “What does it mean to you to be an European citizen?” Because of my grandfather’s lineage and Irish law, I had become a foreign-birth Irish national in 2007. As a citizen of a member state of the European Union, the recently effective Treaty of Lisbon declared my European Union citizenship is “in addition to,” that of my Irish status (and I have my maroon passport to prove both affiliations). Of course my resident citizenships in the state of Georgia and in the United States are long-standing. Some say I have dual citizenship; I claim four and take each seriously.

Since the European Union is an evolving, new and different type of supranational entity, I went to Brussels first and foremost to understand the duties, obligations, rights and privileges of EU citizenship.

After a week of interviews, document research, reading and reflection, I have a better sense of the opportunities for me and my family to move and reside freely within these same 27 nations. Yet, what does citizenship in theory and in practice have to do with government school restrooms in member states of the European Union from Latvia to the Iberian Peninsula, from Berlin to Limerick?

My question, “How are public or government school restrooms in Europe?” began where it must – listening to students who are, after all, citizens of their member states and of the EU. Fittingly, while I waited at 9:45 a.m. in the lobby of the Paul Henri Spaak Building for a 10 o’clock group tour of the European Parliament, I chanced upon two teachers and students from a small Barcelona high school.

One of the faculty chaperones allowed me to chat with the students, who chorused in Spanish about their nasty restroom conditions, which from the male physics teacher’s reaction were unbeknownst to him.

These Generation E students (“E” for feeling they are Europeans, sometime more than Spaniards) were singing the same woes as many urban, suburban and rural American citizen students. Like too many 11- to 18-year-olds in public institutions, who in a few years can vote, they know restrooms were nasty, yet no adults have ventured forth in their school to help them improve their conditions, nor, if you will, to connect soap to citizenship for an improved sense of wellness.

Four French girls, two Slovenian young men, two British girls, Brussels teenagers playing pick-up soccer and a Portuguese student who shared our six-person room at the Jacques Brel, all recited complaints about poor, under-stocked, vandalized school restrooms when they talked with me from Rue de Loi to the Madou metro station.

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school restroom conditions, as well as student and adult citizen responsibilities, he blurted out in the hostel courtyard, “School restrooms always suck.” A book title was born.

Yet, they don’t have to be nasty. After 17 years of work in the United States as the founder and coordinator of Project CLEAN (Citizens, Learners, and Educators Against Neglect) — a school and community effort to improve school restrooms — I have met middle and high school students from many of these European countries. Certainly, some ministries of education and local schools in Europe want to improve their school restrooms with assistance from committed educators and caring students.

While my first forage into EU citizenship taught me many aspects of its definition, and my first European effort to understand upper-level school restrooms confirmed that many needed improvement, I also reflected on my earlier experience for two weeks in September 2009 in Berlin.

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There the German Toilet Organization (GTO) and Project CLEAN worked in five high schools on a project aptly titled “Toiletized World (Klobalisierte Welt).” The day-long workshops, and subsequent projects in each school, combined acknowledging local school conditions, studying hygiene and sanitation content and reaching out practically to understand toilet conditions in other parts of the world. The GTO/Project CLEAN effort encouraged students to see their conditions in their host school, grapple with theoretical and realistic conditions in the world and complete a project that captured thinking and acting both locally and globally.

On November 19, 2009, celebrated each year as World Toilet Day, over 100 students from these five Berlin schools presented skits, displays, exhibits and materials at the Brandenburg Gate, addressing the reality that about half the planet has never used a toilet.

So, as I interviewed a range of people in Brussels, about the meanings of European Union citizenship, and listened to many students talk about the realities of government school restrooms, I understood a realistic connection. Restrooms in government schools, and by extension publicly funded libraries, parks, recreation centers and swimming facilities,

must function as “common good” places, where young citizens, not yet with the right to vote, can nevertheless be encouraged by adults and their peers to be responsible. This practical approach to citizenship begins with soap, towels, tissue, water, partitions, doors, refuge bins, absence of graffiti, smoking and vandalism.

Citizenship begins with the concrete and advances to the more abstract — with a continuum of soap to citizenship for personal and societal health.

So now with my quadruple citizenship — Georgia, US, Ireland, and EU — and 17 years experience in the U.S. improving school restrooms, I plan to work with more 11 to 18 year olds in the EU, based on the creativity shown by the Berlin students. More school leaders and students on both sides of the Atlantic should share their best practices and grapple with the condition of their own schools, the restrooms in their nations and, as Generation E citizens, throughout the entire European Union.

School restrooms can go from nasty to nice. They don't have to suck. Student and adult citizens can change them.

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For more information on the German Toilet Organization, contact www.germantoilet.org or post@germantoilet.org



Taking a Closer Look. Project CLEAN coordinator, Tom Keating, leads Berlin students and GTO staff on “Four Senses Inspection: of a local school restroom during one of the day-long workshops that was held recently.

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