



Featured: BATHROOM REALITY: An illustration depicts two Clarke Central High School students who are taking a break from class in the bathroom, one scrolling on their phone while the other smokes. According to CCHS sophomore Tekit Gill, this behavior is not uncommon, and instead reflects a larger trend among students at CCHS. "(Students) choose to smoke in the bathroom because I think in their minds, they think that's a way not to get caught by the administration and teachers," Gill said. "Other than that, I just think they just do it to do it." Illustration by Antonio Starks

NOWHERE TO GO

From damaged fixtures, to graffiti, to engaging in unhealthy behaviors like vaping, many factors are negatively impacting CCHS students' ability to use the bathroom at school.

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When entering a Clarke Central High School bathroom, the thick, stale smell of urine and pineapple-ice vape smoke overwhelms the senses. The floor is sticky underfoot and graffiti sprawls along the walls. Crowds of students jostle for the next available stall, trying to get through.

To outsiders, going to the bathroom at school may seem like a straightforward endeavor, but students and administrators believe that this necessary task is rarely as easy as it should be.

"There are several things happening. Recently, we had a whole lot of defacement of the restrooms, there was a lot of drawing and writing, very inappropriate pictures, images, inappropriate statements," former CCHS Associate Principal and Latinda Dean, who is currently serving as Whit Davis Elementary School Principal, said. "We have vaping in the restroom of one substance or another. So there are several things that we are working on to keep the bathrooms safe for everyone."

There are a variety of issues facing students every day as they attempt to use the restroom. As a result, the bathroom environment is regarded by students as

generally uncomfortable.

"I see toilet tissues on the floor. I see profanity on the walls (that people write). I see urine on the floor from people who don't care about the bathrooms in it," CCHS sophomore Tekit Gill said. "You see people in there smoking sometimes, you just see all sorts of stuff."

Of the many problems CCHS security officer Chantell Sheats regularly encounters in school bathrooms, vaping is the most common.

"(Students) think (vaping at school) is cool, and they don't necessarily know (how to deal with) stress, so (vaping is) their way of calming down. It gives them a quick buzz, a quick high," Sheats said.

Besides the danger of second-hand smoke, fights in CCHS restrooms have continuously posed significant safety concerns.

"Kids are so sneaky. It has to be a big crowd for us to actually catch a fight in the bathroom unless a student comes (to) tell us that a fight is going to happen or it's being recorded live," Sheats said.

According to Gill, school bathrooms are viewed as an area away from the

THE PROBLEMS

eyes of administration and faculty, ideal for misconduct.

"I've never walked in on a fight in the bathroom, but there's a lot of videos and stuff," Gill said. "That's another place they go to fight, just another place they call a safe spot."

Due to an abundance of hard surfaces and appliances, restrooms are one of the most dangerous places for a fight to occur at school.

"If someone passes out (and their) head gets banged on some metal or anything, it could just go (downhill). It could just be a horrible scene," Sheats said. "Not only that, if someone is cold-hearted enough, they would leave an (injured) person in (the bathroom) and not tell anyone."

Breaking up bathroom altercations is often left to teachers because of their proximity to hallway bathrooms.

"Teachers are good about going in there and clearing it out during hall changes," CCHS Associate Principal Dr. Summer Smith said. "I know that (CCHS math department teachers) Mr. (Eric) McCullough and Mr. (Aaron) Cavin do that a lot down on the bottom floor in the male restroom, by their room. It's a challenge."

Along with physical dangers, bathrooms can pose emotional distress as graffiti and inappropriate messages cover stall walls.

"I've seen people put some very inappropriate things on the stalls like the F-slur," CCHS senior Jeremiah Branch said. "It kind of brings down the condition of the bathroom. It's fairly stupid to me. Why you writin' slurs on the bathroom just to diss somebody else?"

CCHS custodian Tyreshia Arnold is responsible for cleaning a significant portion of the school's bathrooms every day.

"(Students will) write things (on the wall) that they normally can't say out loud. And I get (that) some people just have difficult times, but it (gets) pretty bad," Arnold said. "(There are) a few good things they might write in there, motivational (things), but it's (still) not fun to clean them."

According to Arnold, destruction and misuse of bathroom facilities have also been problematic.

"At least five toilets have trash bags on them (so) that the kids can't use (them), so they haven't been used since last year," Arnold said. "The first floor (had) a bathroom that only had urinals for the boys. They didn't even have a toilet to work."

In addition to outright dangerous and destructive behavior, CCHS English department teacher Benjamin Phillips says CCHS students often use the facilities to skip class.

"The bathroom becomes a safe haven for students who don't want to be in class or where they're supposed to be, which is a problem," Phillips said. "(I have to kick students out) four or five times a week, probably once a day."

For students like Branch, the combination of issues surrounding the bathrooms lead to an unsavory experience.

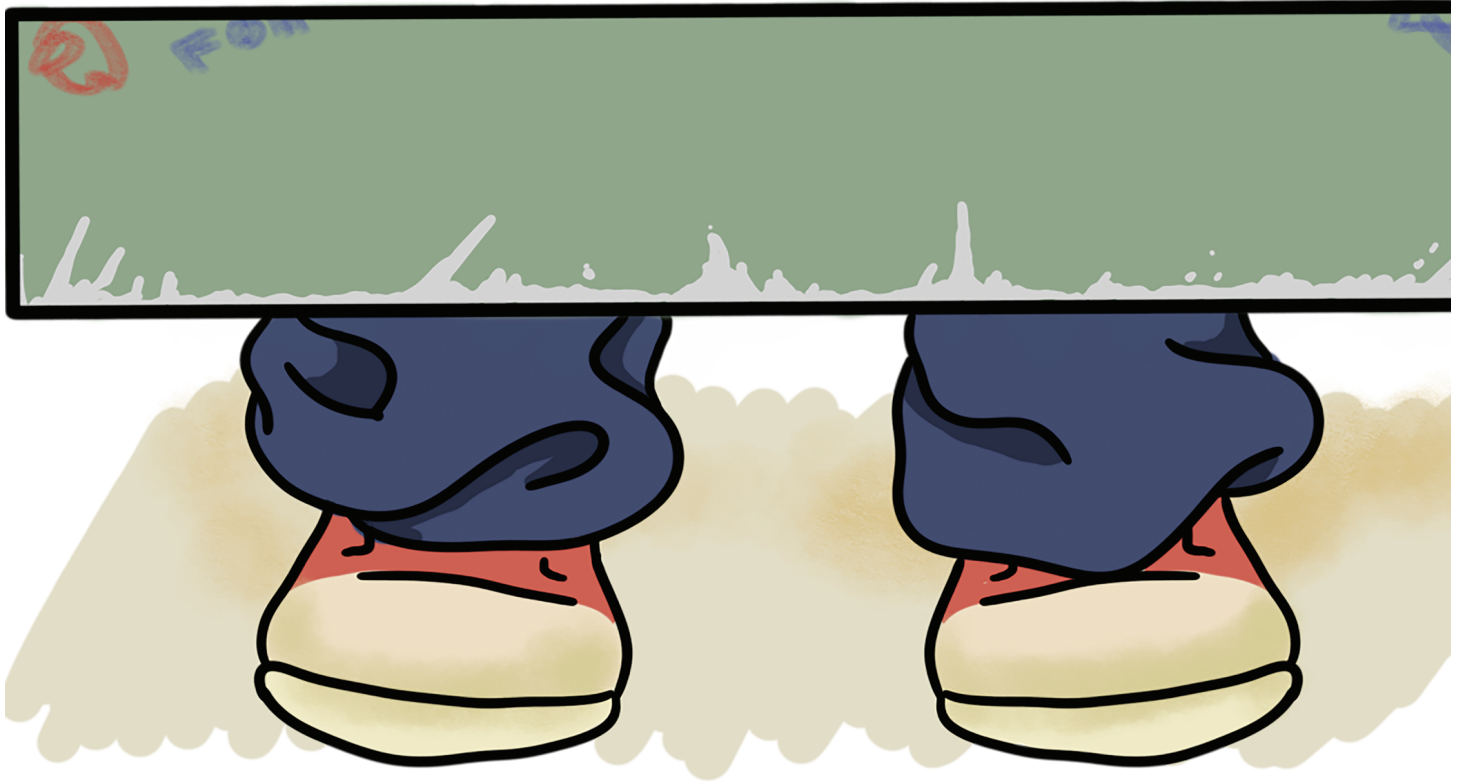
"The bathrooms just kind of be nasty," Branch said. "When I step into one of those stalls, I feel so uncomfortable."

"I see toilet tissues on the floor. I see profanity on the walls (that people write). I see urine on the floor from people who don't care about the bathrooms in it."

-- TEKIT GILL,
CCHS sophomore



Featured: CROWDED CHAOS: An illustration depicts one lone student who stands nervously at the entrance of a crowded Clarke Central High School bathroom, amidst the chaos of graffiti-covered stall walls and vaping students. According to CCHS sophomore Tekit Gill, the dangerous atmosphere of CCHS bathrooms makes some students reluctant to use them. "Some students don't like going into bathrooms just because of those matters because they don't want to get caught up in the drama with the fights, and then they don't want to get in trouble for somebody else's doing," Gill said. "If somebody's smoking in the bathroom and then administration walks in, they (may) assume that you have been smoking with them." Illustration by Antonio Starks



THE CAUSES

Like the problems themselves, the causes of misconduct are diverse. An absence of surveillance in the school bathrooms is one that allows for their abuse.

"Students (are) using the bathroom as an opportunity to skip class," CCHS foreign language department teacher Erica Cascio said. "(Bathrooms are) a sensitive area, so it's difficult to survey what goes on in there. It would be great to have maturity and accountability (from students), but in the absence of those things, adult supervision (would be) helpful."

However, with the growing number of students at CCHS in recent years and the large size of the building, supervision has become increasingly tricky.

"We have a lot of doors, a lot of stairwells (and) if you open all the bathrooms, we have a lot of bathrooms. We only have a limited number

of personnel available during classes because teachers are in classrooms with students," Cascio said. "It's a tough logistical problem, (but) I think that the (administration) and security are doing their best to work that out."

In the 2021-22 school year, social media trends drove students to damage and steal bathroom fixtures in schools all over the country, including CCHS.

"It was like a challenge. It was a nationwide situation with TikTok, where kids

would steal the tissue rolls or the soap dispenser, break it off the wall," Sheats said. "(We would) have to discipline kids and also replace it. So that takes time out of everybody."

When it comes to graffiti, one underlying cause could be students' mental health. Sheats believes students use graffiti as an outlet.

"They don't have a person they can talk to, they don't have a person they can vent to, cry to. They don't have a person at the end of the day," Sheats said.

"(Graffiti is) a cry for help and they want to feel loved. They want to feel wanted. They want to feel like they belong to someone."

According to Sheats, another factor that has led to an increase in bathroom graffiti is the presence of gangs at CCHS.

"We have different gangs in the school and they want to make it known that they're here, so they want to put their artwork on the wall, they want to lash out on who their rivals are. That's what we've been trying to minimize," Sheats said. "(The graffiti) is just them trying to bring more attention or possibly recruit others."

A significant portion of reported graffiti contains fierce and outright racist, homophobic, anti-semitic or otherwise hateful messages. Clarke County School

"The bathroom becomes a safe haven for students who don't want to be in class or where they're supposed to be, which is a problem."

-- BENJAMIN PHILLIPS,
CCHS English department teacher

Above: STICKY UNDERFOOT: An illustration depicts a Clarke Central High School student's shoes peeking out from within a scratched-up restroom stall door. According to CCHS counselor Catherine Melton, there are concerns about the appropriate usage of the CCHS restroom facilities. "We want to make sure that our building is clean and safe for all of our students. We want to encourage students to make good choices about how they use their time out in the hall and (use) our restroom facilities appropriately, not for skipping or making poor choices, or vandalism or things like that," Melton said. Illustration by Antonio Starks

District psychologist Dr. Marcia Page believes there are several reasons students might feel compelled to leave behind negative writing on the bathroom walls.

“Those that engage in such hateful acts are likely seeking to feel more powerful,” Page said. “I also think it is sometimes related to fear of the unknown and inaccurate assumptions about people different from them. People who feel things are not going the way that they want them to are often looking for a scapegoat.”

“I’ve seen people put some very inappropriate things on the stalls like the F-slur. It kind of brings down the condition of the bathroom.

-- JEREMIAH BRANCH,
CCHS senior

According to Page, the primary underlying cause of bathroom abuse stems from disrespect on students’ end towards the school and difficulties in supervising facilities.

“No one wants to walk in the bathroom and see some hateful message about them. We all want to be in a nice school with nice things and nobody wants to feel hated on when they’re trying to just use the bathroom,” Page said. “(Students need to) think about other people’s feelings and that if (students) want to have a nice community and feel respected, (they) have to give that out. (They) have to set that example (themselves) to treat people well and not vandalize the bathroom.”

This story is part one of a two-part series on school bathrooms. Here, the issues and causes of bathroom misconduct are explored. Part two will explore the impacts and solutions, and will be published in the next issue of the ODYSSEY.



Above: NOT A TRASH CAN: An illustration depicts a Clarke Central High School toilet with a lunch tray shoved into the bowl. CCHS senior Jeremiah Branch says that regular maintenance of the CCHS bathrooms is not something he has seen. “One time I went to the upstairs bathroom, because that’s probably one of the cleanest ones, and someone had ended up putting a desk on top of the stall,” Branch said. Illustration by Antonio Starks
Below: LOCKED OUT: An illustration depicts two Clarke Central High School students banging on locked doors on the first floor of the West Wing. Many students believed that keeping these bathrooms locked was inconvenient when it comes to preserving class time, but CCHS foreign language department teacher Erica Cascio, who teaches on the West Wing, believed locking the bathrooms was more beneficial than detrimental. “I know (it’s) unpopular with the students, but I’m a fan of locking those bathrooms and centralizing the facilities (in the main building) for all the students (and) cutting down on the amount of time that they can spend there, so that those facilities will be adequate to accommodate all the students’ needs,” Cascio said. Illustration by Antonio Starks

