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A Smarter Way to Clean America's Schools

By Rochelle Davis — posted 03/24/2009

Students, teachers, and staff around the United States are breathing a little easier at school these days, thanks to state and district policies that support green cleaning in schools.

Growing numbers of school leaders are recognizing the benefits of green cleaning, especially in connection with student health and the readiness to learn. Just recently, the state of Missouri adopted recommended green cleaning guidelines for schools, while Illinois and New York have adopted laws requiring green cleaning in all schools. [For more on the status of green cleaning in these states, see pg. 20 — Ed.] At least six major U.S. school districts have enacted similar policies while many others have made the switch without formally adopting mandatory policies. It's still early in 2009, yet no fewer than 13 states have already introduced some version of a green clean schools bill.

Protect Health, Promote Learning

The increasing interest in this method of cleaning in schools also highlights a growing awareness of the simple but very important idea that healthy students are better learners. When students are healthy, they miss less school and are better able to focus on their lessons. [For more on this topic, see the May/June 2008 issue of ISSA Today—The Cleaning/Learning Connection, pg. 48 — Ed.]

Schools are an especially important place to focus on green cleaning because exposure to traditional cleaning chemicals can be much more harmful to children than to adults. Children's immune systems—like all their organ systems—are more vulnerable because they are still developing. Children also eat, drink, and breathe proportionately more than adults, and exhibit behaviors that can lead to greater chemical exposure: sitting on the floor, resting heads on desks, putting objects in mouths, etc.

In addition to possible long-term effects of chemical exposure to developing systems, traditional cleaning chemicals can have immediate health effects on children. Most commonly, exposure can trigger asthma attacks in the more than 17 percent of American children who suffer from this condition. (Asthma is the leading cause of school absence due to chronic disease in American schools, accounting for more than 10 million missed school days per year.)

How can schools protect children both from chemical exposure and from the risk of illness that arises when buildings are not properly cleaned? Green cleaning, which simply means cleaning for health while protecting the environment, is a natural solution for schools because it achieves both of these important goals.

In addition to protecting children, this new way of cleaning protects the health of custodial staff, increases the lifespan of facilities, and preserves the environment. In many cases, school districts also save money when they implement green cleaning programs.

Green Cleaning Advocate

As a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to making schools healthy places to learn and work, the Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) promotes green cleaning by providing resources to school staff and by promoting policy for wider adoption of green cleaning in schools.

In November 2008, the organization brought together advocates and leaders in the fields of education and cleaning for the first Green Clean Schools National Summit. At the summit, the HSC assisted advocates in building coalitions and strategies to bring green clean legislation to their states. Through alliances built at the summit, advocates are now working together in states around the country to promote green clean schools legislation.

The strategies shared at the summit were built on lessons learned in Illinois, where the HSC brought together a diverse coalition of stakeholders—school leaders, businesses, and public-health advocates—to advocate for legislation requiring green cleaning in schools. The success of this legislation shows the broad support that exists and sparked interest from advocates and legislators around the United States. One year earlier, New York became the first state to require green cleaning in schools.

Marketplace Support

Equally interesting as policy change is the response of the cleaning industry to public concern about children's health and the environment. Major corporations are rolling out lines of green supplies, and third-party organizations, such as Green Seal™ and Environmental Choice, are setting and refining standards to certify products as green.

In September 2008, the HSC released the second edition of *The Quick & Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools* with the support of 39 cleaning-industry corporate leaders and 16 national education organizations. This "green team" includes nearly four times as many corporate sponsors as the first edition of the guide, which was launched with the backing of 10 cleaning-industry leaders in October 2006.

Since the guide's first release, more than 70,000 copies have been distributed to school stakeholders and others interested in greening their schools. The HSC has also launched the www.greencleanschools.org Web site, and distributed a quarterly *Green Clean Schools* newsletter to several thousand education and industry leaders. The guide has been featured in more than 50 publications and dozens of presentations.

This broad engagement of corporate and not-for-profit stakeholders illustrates the power of green cleaning to mobilize support across sectors to advocate for simple, practical changes in the way we clean our schools.

The Quick & Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools provides everything school decision-makers need to make the transition to green cleaning in five easy steps, including product directories and strategies for long-term maintenance of positive changes.

To learn more about green cleaning in schools, visit www.greencleanschools.org or some of the other organizations working to improve student health and readiness to learn by changing the way we clean our schools.



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