

The ABCs of Green Cleaning in Schools

Eco-friendly products and practices keep students healthy and save money.

BY SCOT CASE

When most government purchasers were in elementary school, the three R's were Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic. Now in many school districts the three R's are Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

Schools are both teaching students about environmental issues and adopting greener practices. One of the easiest and most popular green initiatives is buying greener cleaning chemicals and tissue products.

"Greener cleaning is growing everywhere, but it is growing fastest among schools," explains Mike Sawchuk, vice president for EnviroSolutions, a company that sells greener cleaning chemicals certified by both EcoLogo and Green Seal.

Why schools?

According to Mark Bishop of the Chicago-based Healthy Schools Campaign, there are 53 million students and 5 million school staff members learning or working at U.S. schools every school day. Half of them work in buildings with polluted indoor air, chemical fumes, pesticides, molds and other toxins. Some of the poor indoor air quality and related hazards are linked to chemicals used to clean the buildings.

"Green cleaning helps students stay healthy and learn," says Bishop. "Children are more vulnerable to the hazards associated with traditional cleaning products than adults."

Other school safety advocates agree. "Children are not little adults," notes Claire Barnett, executive director of the New York-based Healthy Schools Network. "Their rapidly growing bodies are much more susceptible than adults to environmental pollutants, including the chemicals found in many traditional cleaners."



Bishop points out, however, that green cleaning is not just about better human health and environmental benefits. It is also about saving money.

"What surprised us in working with purchasing professionals and schools across the country is that green cleaning is actually saving schools money," Bishop says. "Chemical costs remain about the same, although the products schools buy changes. The actual savings come from fewer worker injuries and improved productivity because they are using less hazardous products."

The Green Purchasing Institute and Green Schools Initiative have documented the money schools have saved by adopting greener cleaning approaches including:

- The Palm Beach County School District in Florida is anticipating an annual \$360,000 district-wide savings following a three-month pilot project in which a single school saved \$500 buying green-certified products.
- Kurt Larson, who has been involved helping New York State implement its green cleaning in schools law, reports schools are saving money by reducing the number of different cleaning products purchased and substituting a certified green cleaner instead. The concentrated green cleaners require less product to be effective, thus lowering costs.
- Northern Tioga County School District in Pennsylvania

Resources

ECOLOGO

www.ecologo.org

GREEN SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

www.greenschools.net

GREEN SEAL

www.greenseal.org

DESIGN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

www.epa.gov/dfe

HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

www.healthyschoolscampaign.org/programs/gcs

HEALTHY SCHOOLS NETWORK

www.cleaningforhealthyschools.org



Green cleaning recommendations

According to *The Quick and Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools*, published by the Healthy Schools Campaign, there are five simple steps to greening a school cleaning program:

- ➊ Switch to greener cleaning products
- ➋ Introduce greener equipment and supplies
- ➌ Adopt greener cleaning procedures
- ➍ Use greener paper and plastic products
- ➎ Share the responsibility

Copies of the guide are available online at www.healthyschoolscampaign.org/programs/gcs

eliminated expensive aerosols to improve indoor air quality and produced a \$20,000 annual savings.

- Other localities reporting similar savings include the city and county of San Francisco; Minneapolis; Nassau County, N.Y.; Seattle; Hawaii and others.

Greener cleaning: It's the law

Government purchasers began buying cleaning chemicals and tissue products with reduced human health and environmental profiles in the 1990s. Massachusetts; King County, Wash.; Santa Monica, Calif.; Toronto; and others began specifying biodegradable cleaning chemicals with less toxic ingredients and tissue papers with recycled content and other environmentally preferable attributes. As the prices and performance of these greener products improved to meet or exceed those of traditional products,

more government purchasers began specifying them.

Greener cleaning practices have proven so successful and affordable that they are rapidly becoming the norm. In many places, green cleaning is the law.

About a dozen state governments have passed or are considering green cleaning legislation. Frequently focused on schools, new laws are requiring products to be EcoLogo- or Green Seal-certified or to meet comparable requirements before they can be used in public buildings.

New York was the first state to pass a green cleaning bill in 2005. Illinois adopted similar legislation the following year, followed by Maine and Missouri. Hawaii passed a green cleaning law in 2009. Additional bills are being considered in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oregon, Iowa, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Jersey and Wisconsin. Other states have adopted green cleaning mandates or guidelines, including Maryland, Missouri and Nevada.

While various approaches are being adopted – some states require green cleaning in schools while others only “encourage” it – there are many similarities in their approaches, particularly related to how they define greener cleaning.

Defining greener cleaning

Schools, with the help of the professional purchasing community, are defining a variety of greener cleaning products and practices. The definitions focus on three key areas: cleaning chemicals, tissue products and cleaning practices.

- **Cleaning Chemicals.** Government purchasers routinely cite EcoLogo and Green Seal standards in their specifications for greener cleaning chemicals. Both standards prohibit known cancer-causing ingredients and other chemicals of concern and require products to pass tough requirements for biodegradability, VOC content (air emissions), pH, low toxicity, skin and eye irritability, dyes, fragrance and other environmental considerations. Recent revisions to the Green Seal standard (GS-37) also include an explicit prohibition of ingredients linked to asthma, a change currently being considered as part of revisions to the EcoLogo standard (CCD-146).

In addition to requiring EcoLogo and Green Seal, government purchasers are examining the benefits of products registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Design for the Environment (DfE) program. While not a standards-based certification program, DfE allows companies to use the DfE label on cleaning chemicals meeting EPA's internal evaluation of environmental preferability. DfE is currently working to make the program more useful to government purchasers, such as meeting purchasers' needs for a transparent standard on which to base purchasing decisions.

- **Tissue Products.** EPA has been promoting the use of recycled-content tissue products for decades. Schools and other facilities routinely purchase tissue products meeting EPA's recommended recycled-content requirements. Legal requirements under the 1976 Resources Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) require entities spending federal money above a \$10,000 purchasing threshold to purchase products containing

recycled-content. As a result, tissue suppliers carry “EPA-compliant” tissue products for facial tissue containing at least 10 percent and for bathroom tissue containing at least 20 percent post-consumer recycled content. Purchasers, however, are looking beyond a limited focus on recycled content to include additional environmental considerations such as the manufacturing process used to make tissue products and the sources of the “virgin” (non-recycled) content. As with cleaning chemicals, purchasers are specifying that tissue products be certified by EcoLogo or Green Seal.

- **Cleaning Procedures.** Green cleaning is no longer just about the products, says Steve Ashkin, a green consultant and one of the founders of the greener cleaning movement. “The way buildings are cleaned is as important as the products used to clean them,” he explains. “It is not enough to just substitute greener products. The products are just part of a broader process designed to protect human health and to protect and maintain the facilities.”

Ashkin advises that janitorial services contracts and internal cleaning procedures be adjusted to include simple procedural changes such as spraying the cleaning cloth rather than the surface being cleaned to reduce inhalation risks; using microfiber cloths and mops that trap dirt more efficiently and prevent it from being redistributed; and using lightweight, HEPA-filtered vacuum cleaners after dusting to permanently remove dirt. In addition, he recommends more effective use of entryway mats to trap dirt before it enters the school building.

Many of these recommendations have been built into performance standards that purchasers can require as part of janitorial services contracts. Purchasers are now requiring service providers to meet the green cleaning requirements specified in the LEED standard for existing buildings published by the U.S. Green Buildings Council, Green Seal’s GS-42 Environmental Standard for Cleaning Services or the Cleaning Industry Management Standard (CIMS) developed by the International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA).

What is possible

The modern greener cleaning movement began with a group of dedicated government purchasing officials who were convinced it was possible to save money, protect human health and improve environmental performance by substituting safer cleaning chemicals for traditional products being used. The political leaders – seeing what is possible – are now beginning to require schools and other public buildings to adopt cost-effective, greener cleaning strategies. While schools are big adopters of green cleaning now, it was a group of independent-minded, government purchasers who taught them how.

About the author

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