

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND COMMUNITY:

GETTING TO YES! What You Need to Know to Start a Cleaning for Healthy Schools Program

Your school may already be doing green cleaning. Find out. But not every school has done so. This fact sheet will help parents, community groups and others to understand and to overcome any local doubts or resistance to change.

Why does our school get so dirty?

Schools are four times as densely occupied as commercial office spaces and children are not known for neatness. Constant foot traffic stirs up dust and tracks in mud, dust, and debris. Some over-crowded schools have adopted split sessions, some provide breakfasts, after school programs, sports activities, and summer school sessions. Some school buildings and grounds have become “centers of community” and are used for evening and weekend programs. The bottom line: schools have more users for more hours than ever before.

The combination of dense occupancy, more than full-time use, lack of storage space for instructional materials or student projects, back-logged school building repairs, materials or furnishings that collect dirt or require special cleaning, and maintenance staff cut-backs can easily overwhelm facility directors and custodial staff.

Tip: Make part of your pitch for green cleaning support for basic maintenance and support for helping to prevent dirt and grime from entering or accumulating.

What to look for in a vendor, and in product price and performance.

Vendor. First of all, anyone selling cleaning products to schools must be reliable. Find out if your school’s vendor will offer free samples, free demonstration, and supply the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) with the bid. Does the vendor deliver on time and give a phone number for technical assistance?

Price. Price should mean the whole cost of the product from delivery to storage to disposal, not just the up-front purchase cost. While in the past environmentally preferable products were more expensive, today these products are proven cost-neutral. New York State agencies and schools have reported cost savings. Don’t forget, schools are often willing to spend money on things they believe are important to the community, say, new lighting for the football field.

Performance. Does the product actually clean up spills or heel marks? Is it easy to use? Does it affect the user’s health or add to indoor air pollution? Third party certified products must clean effectively- it’s part of the certification process.

FAQS: How schools purchase cleaning products.

Public schools and public agencies, therefore their purchasing is regulated by state law and or local school district board policy.

As local public agencies, districts may specify product characteristics, and then choose the lowest responsible bidder that meets those specifications. Schools need reliable products. Poor performing products or hard-to-use products can create hidden costs in labor, handling, air pollution or disposal. Product “specs” can include chemical composition. School boards appoint a school purchasing agent (often Business Official) who may keep bidders’ lists, circulate requests for proposals, buy locally or buy from state contract. Schools purchase year-round, but usually stock up just before vacations when heavier cleaning and repairs take place.

Check with your Facility Director or look in your school board policy manual for the district's purchasing policy and the designated purchasing official. Make sure that health and environmental criteria are part of the school board purchasing policy and actual specifications.

If my school is old, can we still do green cleaning?

YES! Eleven states now require or promote the use of green cleaning in schools; some also require it for state agencies. The White House and The Capitol in Washington, DC are old buildings that are kept clean and in good repair.

Tip: Ask if health and environmental criteria are part of the purchasing policy. Maybe no one ever asked before!

How can I tell if my school has enough custodians?

A very old building in poor shape might need more day-to-day work than a newer building. An overcrowded building will need more work than a building at or below occupancy limits (see the Certificate of Occupancy for the number of people your building can hold). But looks are deceiving: think about types of occupants, hours of use, types of use/dirt (bathrooms need different cleaning than libraries), and types and condition of surfaces needing daily cleaning (old tile, new carpeting, wood, metal, plaster, plastics, laminates).

Here is how one New York school facility director convinced his Superintendent and community he needed more custodians:

Total Hours each year buildings are used: 17 hours/day x 350 days a year = 5950 hours/year

Number of custodians cleaning the school: 24 each day

Total facility space in square feet (ft²): 394,734 ft²

Average residential square footage in our community = < 2,000 ft²

CALCULATE School size as number of homes: 394,734 ft²/<2,000 ft² = >197 homes

CALCULATE "Homes" cleaned per day per worker: 197 homes/24 custodians = 8.2 homes/day

Tip: Get figures for your school and do your own calculations.

If your school is not interested, start your own local group. If the top elected and appointed officials in your school system are not interested, ask the local PTA-PTO to help, or start your own community group.

Tips for starting a successful local group

- Ask a few parents, friends, or community members to join you for coffee and discuss shared concerns. As a group, pick the issues you all agree to work on and how you will work on them.
- Adopt a name and a mission: for example, Parents & Others for Healthy Schools who believe that every child and school employee should have an environmentally safe school that is clean and in good repair.
- Outline your mission and your first goals, then ask others to join you
- Investigate facts together; share information at regular meetings
- Write letters for the group, keep copies, and track written responses.
- Do not visit or call a school alone. Always have another person with you. Regretfully refuse a telephoned response; request a written response you can share with the group (email works).
- See change happen.
- **Celebrate. Say thank you with a Letter to the School Board or the local news Editor!**
- **Celebrate and educate on National Healthy Schools Day, in April each year.**
 - See www.NationalHealthySchoolsDay.org for more information