

Cleaner, Healthier Schools Without Busting the Budget

By: Robert Robinson, Sr.

School administrators today are caught in a real squeeze when it comes to the appearance and safety of their school buildings. On one hand, the demand for clean healthy school buildings has never been greater. The public is growing more sensitive by the day about the threat of germs and “cooties” at school, such as hepatitis C, HIV, toxic mold, E. coli, etc. At the same time, school buildings are being used more frequently for multiple purposes, such as aerobics classes, church services, club meetings, twelve-step groups, and so on.

On the other hand, building maintenance and cleaning budgets have been slashed significantly over the last 10-15 years. The bottom line is that schools are facing significantly greater cleaning challenges with substantially fewer resources.

What was once simply considered a concern of building and grounds managers now has been elevated to a concern of administrators. The voting public’s perception of how well a school system is run is tied to the appearance of the school. Worse, unclean schools not only create a negative impression on parents, teachers, staff and visitors, but they also inhibit student learning. In fact, a recent issue of American School & University magazine lists building maintenance, restroom cleanliness and indoor air quality as three of the top ten factors in creating an ideal learning environment.

This situation has trapped many school systems in a vicious cleaning cycle. They begin the school year in great shape, but rapidly deteriorate beginning the very first week. The rest of the year is spent playing an expensive game of catch up. But once behind, it’s practically impossible to recover until summer break. Meanwhile, complaints about everything from dirty restrooms, smelly locker rooms, unclean classrooms, kitchens and cafeterias continue to rise from teachers, students and visitors.

The good news is that over the last several years some major breakthroughs in commercial cleaning



How Did We
Get Here?

products and methods have been developed that can help schools break free of this cycle. These innovations have been proven in a number of commercial settings around the world and are beginning to be adopted by a number of concerned school districts to clean their buildings better and keep them consistently clean throughout the year — without breaking their existing cleaning and maintenance budgets.

Before discussing the possible solutions, it is helpful to better understand the factors that have contributed to the problem, including:

- Budget and Labor Cuts
- Misdirected Purchasing Policies
- Outdated Tools and Procedures
- Inadequate Training

Budget and Labor Cuts

As the cost of education has risen over the years, the stress on a district's budget has too. An easy place to cut has been in the cleaning and maintenance areas. As a result, building maintenance and cleaning budgets have been slashed on average by 25-30% over the last 10-15 years. The typical school custodian today is responsible for cleaning an unimaginable 25,000 square feet of space a night. That's the equivalent of ten homes a night! Considering this, is there any wonder that custodians are constantly just trying to catch up?

Misdirected Purchasing Policies — Penny Wise and Pound Foolish

Many school systems have reacted to the resource issue by trying to squeeze every last penny out of equipment and supplies. While on the surface, this may appear to be the sensible response, more often than not it results in the ineffective use of their greatest investment, people. The typical school cleaning budget is allocated across two general categories: seven percent is applied to products and 93% towards labor. In an effort to stretch their budgets, most schools have been focusing on the smallest part of the budget, without regard to its impact on labor. As a result, they often end up with an assortment of supplies and equipment from multiple vendors that aren't compatible and don't work well together.

Getting a good price is certainly important, but administrators would benefit by stepping back to look



at the bigger picture. When building an effective cleaning program, other factors are important too, such as training, solution integration, efficiency, future direction, and so on. Schools don't change textbooks every year just because they found a cheaper one. Given the potential impact on the learning environment, the same consideration should be given to the components of its cleaning program.

Outdated Tools and Procedures

The fact is that antiquated cleaning approaches are no longer adequate for today's challenges. The tools that most school custodians are forced to use have been around for most of the last century: wipers, buckets, mop heads, and so on.

Most mop buckets contain dirty, contaminated water, which mops and wipers simply spread around without penetrating tight spaces and grimy crevices. Only a small portion of the soil is ever removed leaving a "ring around the bathroom" and creating an unhealthy breeding ground for germs and odor-causing bacteria. And worse, workers are forced to wipe dirty, contaminated surfaces by hand and even crawl around filthy restrooms on their hands and knees. Then, the same dirty mop water and mop head that was just in the restroom is now being pushed to the classroom, and later on, to the kitchen.

Not only are these tools ineffective for cleaning, but they are also painfully slow and often result in fatigue, injury and workers' comp claims.

Insufficient Training

Piecemeal and shortsighted purchasing practices have contributed to a training crisis. First of all, in the search for rock bottom pricing, top quality suppliers with systematic approaches to cleaning, including value-added training, are often eliminated. And, since equipment and supplies come from multiple suppliers, workers are forced to fit the pieces of the puzzle together themselves. As a result, most custodians don't benefit from new methodologies that have been developed based on best practices. The cycle is then perpetuated by the fact that more than likely new suppliers and supplies will enter next year leaving no consistency for training.

How Do We Solve This Problem?

Just as the problem resulted from multiple contributing factors, the solution is complex as well — but it doesn't have to be complicated. As elementary as it sounds,



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the key to achieving healthier buildings is simply deeper, more thorough cleaning capability. Equip custodial workers with new tools that clean more thoroughly while delivering quantum leaps in productivity. In addition, start taking a whole-system approach to cleaning and maintenance. Lastly, find good trustworthy partners to help you fit the puzzle pieces together.

Multiply Your Resources With Innovative Tools

Over the last several years, some new developments in cleaning technology and methods have arrived that are revolutionizing the cleaning industry. These innovations not only deliver much better cleaning results, but also improve productivity by a factor of three or more. This frees existing custodial staff to stay on top of the problem throughout the year. And, in many cases, schools have been able to save money by eliminating unnecessary outsourcing. Plus, they can reduce chemical usage by as much as 80-90%. These tools generate a rapid return on the school's investment and usually pay for themselves within the first year of use.

One such recent innovation is No-Touch Cleaning machines. Designed for total soil and bacteria removal, No-Touch Cleaning equipment combines pressure washer, chemical injection and wet vacuum in a single machine. Workers simply spray solution on fixtures and floors, blast the soils to the floor, then vacuum dry. This allows workers to deep clean restrooms, kitchens, stairwells, locker rooms, etc. without ever touching soiled, contaminated surfaces.

Another recent innovation is the use of microfibers. Old-fashioned cotton fiber mops simply push soil around, leaving surfaces dirty and wet. Microfiber pads, on the other hand, lift and trap up to seven times their weight in dirt and moisture. They can be used wet or dry to clean walls, floors, chalkboards, desktops and any other hard surface, combining multiple cleaning steps while eliminating the need for specialized tools. Then, when the microfiber pad becomes dirty, they are simply exchanged for clean ones. Several models are equipped with reservoirs so that custodians use only fresh, clean solution. Simply changing to a clean microfiber pad eliminates any threat of cross-contamination.

Besides being more efficient and effective at cleaning, these newer tools simplify equipment requirements by replacing a variety of tools, such as cotton mops, buckets,



wringers, and sometimes even costly auto scrubbers.

Many of these next generation cleaning tools are also ergonomically engineered. This is important as it increases worker safety, productivity and satisfaction while reducing the district's workers' compensation liability.

Cleaning vs. Disinfecting

With conventional mops and rags, workers typically wash the floors and fixtures with contaminated water and disinfectant and then don't rinse. Then, they claim that the room is disinfected. But the reality is, the only way to truly disinfect is to completely remove the source of bacteria and odors - soils. Once the soil is removed, the bacteria die, which also kills odor.

The No-Touch Cleaning approach is very similar to washing dishes — wash with detergent and fresh water, rinse with clean water, then air dry. The conventional approach, on the other hand, is similar to washing dishes in used water with a dirty rag and disinfectant and then not rinsing. Which dishes would you rather eat from? Conventional approaches not only fail to disinfect, they also contribute to a bigger issue of irresponsible use of chemicals and disinfectants.

Look at the Big Picture

It takes a total integrated system to efficiently clean a school district, including a compatible mix of equipment, chemicals, methods, training, documentation, etc. To achieve best results, these pieces must work together properly. Many school systems "can't see the forest for the trees." Saving a few dollars on equipment and supplies here and there may cost dearly in terms of lost productivity and cleaning effectiveness. And ultimately, it often results in higher equipment and supply costs because of lost efficiency benefits.

Pick a Good Partner

A good, reputable distributor that specializes in schools can be a tremendous advantage in developing a strategic cleaning plan for your district. Top quality distributors don't just sell products, but they are experts at the business of cleaning schools. They know how to apply the products in the most effective ways and are adept at transferring that knowledge to your facilities staff. They keep up with the latest developments, not just the products, but the



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best ways of using them. First-rate distributors will be able to perform an in-depth district-wide analysis of your cleaning program. They can help you identify potential areas of improvement along with the optimum mix of equipment and supplies as well as identify underutilized or redundant equipment.

Good distributors may not always be the cheapest; however, in general they are competitively priced. And, they can save school districts a lot of money by helping to avoid redundant and incompatible products. Beware of working with distributors whose sole value is lower price. They are often able to do this because they have cut back in other areas, such as training, quality, and service.

Summary

In today's environment, it is important for school districts to get the most out of their stretched cleaning and maintenance resources. To make this happen, however, often requires involvement of school administration or business management. Considering the potential impact on the learning environment and the public's perception, it is well worth the effort.

About the Author

Bob Robinson, Sr. is the founder and president of Kaivac, Inc., a manufacturer of industrial cleaning equipment and chemicals based in Hamilton, Ohio. Internationally recognized for delivering innovation and quality, Kaivac, Inc. is the originator of No-Touch Cleaning. According to Robinson, "Kaivac does for the custodian what the bulldozer does for the ditch digger - moves more dirt, in less time, with pride."