

Green Cleaning: Non-Toxic Schools



eco-cycle

Snapshot

Many school buildings, school districts, and even states have begun replacing the hazardous cleaning products used in their facilities with products that are safer for human health and the environment.

<https://bit.ly/eco-cycle-zero-waste-schools-guide>

Objective: The school building(s) will be cleaned using products and procedures that are safer for the environment and human health.

Age Group: Adults (staff, administrators, and parents)

Setting: School building

Project Duration: Ongoing

Materials:

- School district or school building cleaning policies
- Examples of current cleaning products used in the school or district
- Examples of non-toxic alternatives available for school cleaning

Why This Project Matters:

Many conventional cleaning products contain toxic chemicals that cause harm to the environment and human health. The use of these products may contribute to poor indoor air quality and can lead to health consequences including respiratory irritation, headaches, dizziness, asthma, and skin irritation. These chemicals should be used with proper safety equipment, good ventilation, and other necessary precautions to reduce exposure. Most of these products must be disposed of as hazardous waste. The aerosols and residues left behind when these products are applied to school building infrastructure can affect the health of students and staff.

Project Summary:

Schools and school districts can develop purchasing and usage policies to encourage the use of “green” cleaners. Many vendors now offer non-toxic, effective cleaning products for school buildings. With the help of the administrative and custodial staff, a school or district can make the switch to non-toxic or less toxic products and procedures for specific applications.

Implementation:

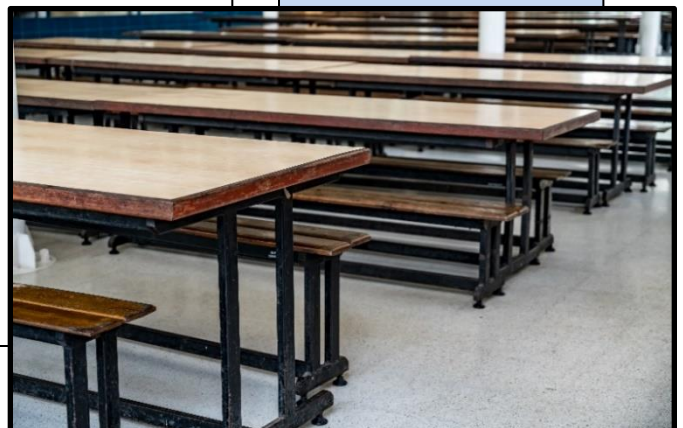
1. Examine current cleaning products that are being used in the school or school district. (Custodial and operations staff interviews can help gather this and other information.)
 - Which products contain toxic ingredients? Which green products are currently in use?
 - Do the products vary by school, or is there a district-wide policy that influences purchasing practices?
 - What sanitation considerations and requirements influence product choice and use?
 - What procedures are in place for the disposal of unused products?



2. Investigate if the school, district and/or state have any non-toxic cleaning regulations or policies for schools. The Environmental Law Institute (www.eli.org) includes an up-to-date and interactive database of laws on a variety of topics, including green cleaning. The State of New York hosts a website devoted to green cleaning, including best practices, purchasing ideas, and training for staff: <http://greencleaning.ny.gov>.
3. Develop a green-cleaning working group that includes custodial staff, building/grounds maintenance supervisors, school administrators, and parents. The diverse membership of the group will help ensure that multiple perspectives are heard when developing policies and best practices.
4. Have the working group draft proposed usage and purchasing policies for cleaning products. Draft policy examples are available on New York State's website: <http://greencleaning.ny.gov>.
5. Working with custodial staff, identify a list of products needed for general operations and cleaning (window cleaner, carpet cleaner, floor cleaner, cafeteria dishwasher detergents, etc.). Determine if there are any duplications among products to reduce the total number. For example, if a general cleaner can be used for many different applications, then separate cleaners may be eliminated.
6. Inquire with approved school district vendors about any green alternatives they may have to replace each product used by the school or district. A very comprehensive list of safer cleaning products is available from New York State: <https://greencleaning.ny.gov/Product/Default.aspx>.
7. Obtain samples of products from vendors and be sure custodial staff receive training on how to use them. Coordinate a pilot project where custodial staff in one or more schools conduct a trial to compare the new green-cleaning products with the existing conventional cleaning products.
8. Request feedback from custodial staff on ease of use and effectiveness. Address potential challenges that may prevent proper cleaning and disposal procedures, such as language barriers, lack of proper cleaning equipment and tools, and/or differences between daytime and evening custodial procedures.

Extensions:

- Report on the school or district's success through presentations at state education conferences and nearby school district custodial meetings.



9. After processing feedback from custodial staff and the working group, launch the broader green-cleaning program. From an environmental standpoint, it is often better to safely use up existing cleaning products before replacing them with the new, less toxic products. However, beginning the summer or school year with the new green-cleaning products before the existing, conventional ones have been used up may be beneficial when considering staff training efficiency.
10. If disposing of unused, conventional cleaning products, inquire with the school district about their protocol for discarding hazardous waste. If no policy exists, identify local hazardous waste disposal/recycling options.
11. Have the green-cleaning working group finalize the purchasing and usage policies for cleaning products along with a list of school district-approved cleaners. Make sure these products are readily available from school district-approved vendors.
12. Notify staff, students, and parents of this positive change by announcing the use of greener cleaners and cleaning procedures in the school or district's newsletter, through posters, P.A. announcements, etc.



Assessment:

Six months after implementation, inquire with custodial staff about their experience with the greener cleaners. Ask if they are still using any conventional, toxic cleaners and if they are utilizing the proper techniques for storage, use, and disposal.

Related Activities:

Purchasing Policy 2: School/District Policy – Chapter 17

