

FACT SHEET

Green Cleaning in Schools

Question: What is green cleaning?

Answer: Green cleaning is the use of effective cleaning products and practices that have minimal impact on the environment and human health. In 2005, New York State passed the first state policy requiring all public schools to use green cleaning products. Schools in Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, Connecticut and others are currently using certified green cleaners.

Question: How are green cleaners different?

Answer: One of every three traditional cleaning chemicals is known to cause health problems and/or damage the environment. Facilities workers and children are the most impacted by traditional products, children because their systems are more vulnerable than that of adults, and workers because they are exposed to products more frequently and at higher concentrations than other building occupants. Exposure to the chemicals in traditional cleaning products is linked with the increased incidence of asthma, allergies, learning and behavioral disorders, endocrine disruption, chemical sensitivity, kidney or liver damage, and certain types of cancer. Alternately, certified green cleaners are tested to present minimal impacts to human health and the environment.

Question: We have always used traditional products, why should we switch now?

Answer: Of the 80,000 chemicals on the market today, health impacts have been researched for only about seven percent of those chemicals, making it impossible to get an accurate picture of the full human health impacts of chemicals in our everyday environments. However, we do know that exposure to chemicals in many traditional cleaners can include: dizziness, skin irritation, respiratory illness, asthma, allergies, learning disabilities, reproductive disorders and varying types of cancer. Childhood diseases such as asthma, learning disabilities and particular types of cancers are on the rise across the country. Asthma is now the number one childhood illness, costing American families an estimated 11.3 billion dollars per year.

On the school employee end of this scenario, the average janitor each uses five gallons of known hazardous chemicals each year in the workplace, and more than \$75 million is spent each year on medical expenses and lost time wages for janitors due to chemical-related injuries. Using safer cleaning products and improving ventilation is estimated to increase worker productivity by up to 5 percent, and annually save institutions \$30 to \$150 billion nationwide.

Given the little information that we have about toxic chemicals, and that there are available and cost and performance comparable products on the market, schools should air on the side of healthier products to improve student and staff performance and safety.

Question: How do you know a product is “green”?

Answer: There is no perfect standard for evaluating cleaning products for toxicity. However, we refer schools to begin by looking at Green Seal, an organization that certifies green cleaners that meet purchasing specifications for schools and institutions. Products certified by Green Seal meet health protective standards in thirteen categories. Products certified must also work as well or better than their traditional counterparts. Currently, over 200 products from 37 manufacturers bear the Green Seal mark of approval.

Question: Are green cleaning products more expensive than traditional products?

Answer: Most districts find that over the course of implementing a green cleaning program in their schools, their costs actually go down because a few products take the place of many. Additionally, schools save money due to fewer missed days of work and school.

Question: Do green cleaners work as well as traditional products?

Answer: Products that are certified by Green Seal are tested required to meet or exceed cleaning expectations for the products. Facility managers have typically find that green products exceed their expectations for performance.

Question. How can we purchase green cleaners if they are not an option now?

Answer: Purchasing departments can write into their contract that they will be purchasing products that are less toxic, bear the Green Seal label, or use other such language that will achieve their goals. Many contractors are now offering green cleaning products and services, and will rise to the standard that the purchasing department sets.

