Cleaning for Health in the Classroom
Tips for Teachers and Paraprofessionals

What is Cleaning For Health?
Cleaning for Health is a cleaning program that protects public health, without adversely affecting the health of staff, building occupants or the environment. It includes using safer chemicals and practices and a new generation of cleaning equipment, designed to protect user health and improve the indoor environment.

Why is it important?
Schools are densely populated buildings (up to four times more populated than commercial office spaces), and are often occupied for up to ten hours a day. On top of the regular school day, many children attend before and after school programs and weekend activities, exposing them to potentially harmful chemicals used in cleaning and maintenance products for long periods of time. Many of the chemicals in the cleaners haven’t been tested for their effects on the developing bodies of children, who are more vulnerable to toxins than adults. Some of these cleaners can also impact the health of school staff, particularly men and women of childbearing age and custodians who work with these cleaners. The high activity levels within our schools also kick up dust, dirt, and other indoor air pollutants that require a rigorous cleaning program. Otherwise, asthma rates among children, and occupational asthma among adults, will continue to rise, resulting in lost school days and lost learning opportunities. By focusing on ways to keep cleaning pollutants to a minimum, you’ll contribute to a healthier and cleaner school environment that enhances the teaching and learning process.

Recent air testing in California schools for emissions from cleaning products found they released 457 different chemicals including those identified as asthmagens. Comet Disinfectant Powder Cleanser, Simple Green and Febreeze were among the 21 cleaning products tested. Six out of the 457 chemicals are known to cause asthma; 11 are known or probable carcinogens and others are respiratory irritants and endocrine disruptors. The most effective healthy school cleaning program should be a team effort that involves all staff members.

Cleaning for Health in the Classroom
Students, teachers, and paraeducators spend most of the school day in the classroom. From the science class to the art class to the kindergarten class, there are a variety of pollutants introduced for the purpose of teaching. Classrooms are unique environments because of the variety of objects and surfaces that are touched often by many different hands. Toys, computer keyboards, and other hands-on-learning tools require special attention when cleaning. And, like all rooms in the school, classrooms are prone to Indoor Environmental Quality problems, like mold. Although it is not the responsibility
Best Practices in the Classroom

Rooms “Ready to Clean”

These simple steps can help your custodial staff do their jobs more efficiently and more effectively.

- Keep clutter to a minimum. If you clear it, custodians will clean it.
- Store paper, books, and other supplies in plastic tubs so they won’t collect dust and other air pollutants. Stack tubs neatly so custodial staff can easily clean around them.
- Involve your students in the team effort. Ask them to pick up their stuff at the end of the day, put it away in their desks, and dispose of all their trash properly – preferably in containers with lids that close securely.
- Keep your univents clear of plants or papers so that it is easy for the custodial staff to clean and service them.

Tricks of the Trade

These simple steps help keep classrooms healthier for students and staff, especially during flu season.

- Remember to always use district-approved products – do not bring in cleaning products from home.
- Ask for Material Data Safety Sheets (MSDS) on your school’s cleaning products. Not only do they provide directions for use, they list product ingredients, health hazards, and special protections you can take, which are especially important if you are pregnant or have special health considerations.
- Check to see if cleaning products are certified by a third party, such as Green Seal or EcoLogo, which means they are safer for you and for your students.
- Leave the disinfecting to the custodial staff members trained in the use of these hazardous products. Students should never use disinfectants. Common disinfectants may contain ingredients that have been identified as asthagens, respiratory irritants, carcinogens or have other health impacts.
- Use microfiber cloths that absorb particles rather than dispersing them in the air for damp dusting, an effective way to clean your computer station, keyboard, and mouse. A plastic keyboard cover makes cleaning easier.
- Collect chalk dust and clean white boards with damp microfiber cloths. (Check with the custodial staff to see if water is compatible with your white board.) Most white board cleaners give off volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. Avoid using these cleaners by using only white board markers that are water-based, which can be removed from the board without using solvents.
Help prevent the spread of germs, especially during flu season, by cleaning student desktops and high-touch surfaces in the classroom (doorknobs, computer keyboards, light switches, etc.) Use a third-party certified all-purpose cleaning product supplied by the facilities department with a microfiber cloth or paper towel. Microfiber cloths have demonstrated a superior ability to capture microbes, but should be used as part of a program that includes appropriate laundering.

Germ Prevention – During Flu Season and Beyond
Cleaning for Health can help prevent the spread of flu and other communicable diseases. Cleaning and disinfecting are part of a broad approach to preventing infectious diseases in schools. To help slow the spread of influenza (flu), the first line of defense is getting vaccinated. Below are some other everyday tips on how to slow the spread of flu.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. Keep away from others as much as possible to keep from making others sick.

Frequently Asked Questions
What’s the difference between cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing?
- General Surface Cleaning – physically removes visible dirt, organic matter, viruses, fungi, and bacteria. It is accomplished with water, detergent, and physical scrubbing of the surface. This option uses the least-toxic products.
- Sanitizing – reduces but does not necessarily eliminate all the bacteria on a treated surface. Sanitizers do not have claims for viruses or fungi.
- Disinfecting – destroys or irreversibly inactivates infectious or other undesirable microbes, but not necessarily the spores (reproductive bodies similar to plant seeds) of bacteria and fungi.

What can I do to decrease asthma triggers in my classroom?
- Refrain from using products with added scents, including air fresheners, hand sanitizers, soaps, markers, perfumes and personal care products. Non-scented versions of most products are now available.
- Remove upholstered furniture, stuffed animals, bean bag chairs and pillows from the room.
- Use cleaning products only after students have been excused for the day.
What is the correct procedure for handling bloodborne pathogens (blood or other body fluids)?

- Contact the custodial department immediately. Custodial staff members have been trained to handle bloodborne pathogens clean-up and have special products and procedures for this process.

Should we thoroughly disinfectant the school when there is a flu outbreak?

Spraying disinfectant products into the air is not an effective way to control germs and may be irritating to the respiratory tract. Proper cleaning of surfaces and disinfecting where necessary is the best means of controlling infectious disease.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide the following guidance, “Flu viruses are relatively fragile, so standard cleaning and disinfecting practices are sufficient to remove or kill them. Special cleaning and disinfecting processes, including wiping down walls and ceilings, frequently using room air deodorizers, and fumigating, are not necessary or recommended. These processes can irritate eyes, noses, throats, and skin; aggravate asthma; and cause other serious side effects.”

Although we do not recommend teachers use disinfectants, if you feel you must disinfect surfaces in your classroom, use the following procedures:

- Disinfect after your students have been excused for the day.
- Identify high-touch areas (touched by many hands) such as shared desks and worktables, shared computers, headphones, scissors, toys, telephones and handles on doors, cabinets, and file drawers.
- Use only disinfectants approved by the school and follow the label directions exactly.
  - Clean the surfaces first - many disinfectants are not effective in the presence of dirt.
  - Cover the surface to be disinfected with the product so that it is uniformly wet.
  - Leave the disinfectant on the surface for the recommended “dwell” or contact time that is listed on the label. This is essential because otherwise you are not destroying the germs and may be contributing to the creation of “superbugs”.
  - Wipe or rinse the surface if the label states that this step is required.
  - Otherwise, the residue may injure any skin that it comes in contact with.
- If disinfectant wipes are used, clean the surfaces first and then follow the directions on the wipes carefully. Check the container to make sure the wipes have not exceeded their effective date. Make sure that they are uniformly wet. It may be necessary to use more than one wipe to keep the surface wet for the stated length of dwell time. Rinse the surface with a clean cloth or paper towel after the dwell time is over, if required.
Additional Resources


Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “How To Clean and Disinfect Schools To Help Slow the Spread of Flu”, Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/flu/school/cleaning.htm.


Informed Green Solutions, Fact Sheets, Available at: http://www.informedgreensolutions.org/?q=publications