

SCHOOL HAZARD FACTS FOR FAMILIES

UNITE FOR SCHOOLS FREE OF DUST, DIRT AND GERMS

If families and school staff work together, schools free of dust, dirt and germs are more likely and all will benefit. See the *Unite for Healthy Schools* factsheet for how to do this.

Good housekeeping and clean schools relatively free of dust, dirt and germs are vital for student and staff health. Buildings that are dirty have been associated with increased complaints, illnesses and discomfort. A clean school tends to be a healthy school.

DIRT AND DUST CONTROL

It is less expensive for the school district to keep dirt out of the school to begin with than to keep the school clean. There are several simple techniques that can be used to maintain a cleaner school with less effort: reduce the amount of dust and dirt that enters the school and reduce the amount of dust released from vacuum cleaners and other cleaning methods. Dust can affect students when it is breathed in. It can cause illnesses and make asthma episodes more severe.

Walk off mats are the best way to keep dirt and dust out of the school. Families should look to see if the school has mats at each doorway, both outside and between the door area and the rest of the building.

All mats should receive frequent and thorough cleaning to keep the dirt from being carried into the building and will prevent mold from growing under the mats due to water.

GERM CONTROL

The best way to control the spread of germs is to stay home when sick, cover nose and mouth when



sneezing or coughing, take prescribed medications and frequent hand washing. If many children are out with colds or flu, special cleaning in certain areas may need to be undertaken. This may include:

- **Cleaning**, which physically removes dirt and microorganisms by scrubbing with water and soap or detergent followed by rinsing. This is sufficient for most areas of a school.
- **Sanitizing**, which kills some microorganisms and is recommended for food preparation and service areas and diapering and toilet areas.
- **Disinfecting**, which kills many microorganisms, and is needed to clean up areas heavily contaminated with vomit, blood or bodily fluids.

CLEANING METHODS

Cleaning methods that don't raise dust should be used throughout the school. Wet wiping will help suppress dust. Dry sweeping and dry dusting puts the dust back into the room air and should be banned. If vacuums are used, they must be properly operated and maintained and should have high efficiency vacuum bags.

CLEANING PRODUCTS

Least toxic, low-odor cleaning products are available and should be purchased and used. Staff can request Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) on each cleaning product. These product sheets describe the chemical product and contain information about the health effects of exposure, the flammability and safe storage of the product, and other useful information. By law, custodians must be trained in the safe use of chemical products. Unfortunately, many districts have cut back on custodial staff, making it impossible to keep the school clean. Families can find out how many custodians are on staff in the school. It requires at least one full-time person per 15,000 square feet of school to be able to keep the school clean. There should be adequate custodial staff to clean the school.

GREEN CLEANING

Cleaning should not harm staff or students. Until recently, a wide variety of hazardous products were routinely used in schools. These products included ammonia, acids, chlorine, phenol, caustics and solvents. Custodial staff and students are also exposed

to the residues in the air, on desks, cafeteria tables, floors, carpets, doorknobs and toilet seats. Families can encourage school districts to choose products that are safe to use.

WHAT FAMILIES CAN LOOK FOR

Families have opportunities to see how clean the school is whenever they are in the school building. Families can look for:

- Poorly cleaned areas and surfaces.
- Dirt that collects on air supply and return vents.
- Stains on carpets.
- Walk off mats at entrances and exits.
- Overflowing trash cans.

Remember that it takes an adequate number of custodians per square foot to keep the school clean.

LAWS THAT APPLY

The Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) Sanitation Standard (1910.141) can be used by staff for general housekeeping issues. It covers general sanitation, toilet facilities, lunchrooms, pests, waste disposal and food storage. This standard can only be utilized by school employees, not families, so families should work through school staff and their unions to see if they want to involve PEOSH. Families should call the Healthy Schools Now Coalition phone number listed below for direct help with housekeeping concerns and any other health and safety organizing issues.

This factsheet is one of a series prepared for the Healthy Schools Now Coalition by the New Jersey Work Environment Council, 7 Dunmore Ave., First Floor East, Ewing, NJ 08618 (609) 882-6100. Website at: <http://www.njwec.org/healthyschoolsnow.cfm>. Funded in part by the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey.

Healthy Schools Now is a coalition of parents, educators, students and public school advocates dedicated to ensuring that all New Jersey children and school employees learn and work in safe, modern school buildings.

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