

CASE STUDY

Green cleaning: Big rewards with little investment required

The experience of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) in incorporating green cleaning products into their procedures — and ultimately their policies — demonstrates that green cleaning is affordable and entirely do-able. While Boston Public Schools is a large, urban system, their lessons in switching to safer cleaning products and practices are applicable to any school district.

BPS established a Healthy Schools Task Force in 2004, made up of representatives of the school district, the Boston Public Health Commission, parents, and other community partners. Their charge was to monitor environmental conditions and support the implementations of asthma and environmentally-friendly policies and practices to improve health and learning. In 2005, the Task Force identified the removal of products with known asthmagens from schools as a policy goal. The Healthy Schools Task Force worked closely with one of their stakeholders —the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, which provided the technical assistance for the process of adopting green cleaning products — and school systems across Massachusetts can tap into state resources to make green cleaning easy to achieve.

In order to make the move to green cleaning, BPS first reviewed their current inventory of cleaning products. Some schools have a centralized purchasing system and therefore know for the most part what products are being used within their walls. Determining how cleaning products are purchased may be a first step for some schools. Whether purchasing is centralized or not, stakeholders should conduct a school-wide walk-through to uncover all the products used or stored in the building, and should review existing school cleaning practices.

The products and practices that were identified in Boston schools then needed to be assessed for asthma-friendliness. Using the safety data sheets that are required by law for each product, the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH) reviewed each for health and environmental impacts. They then recommended certified green cleaning products that met green cleaning criteria established by the Commonwealth's Environmentally Preferred Products (EPP) purchasing program.

Next, BPS determined how they'd get the non-green cleaning products out of the buildings. This was done through consolidation, disposal, or using up the product before switching to the new green cleaning products, ensuring that no "non-approved" products were left behind for use. BPS then went through a trial period, working with different vendors and the lead custodian at four school sites, to test products for a month. BPS interviewed key staff members and reached consensus on the products that would be adopted across the district. Ultimately, BPS did not spend more money on their green cleaning products. The statewide EPP program makes it possible for any school district in the state to reap the benefits of a large program with purchasing power.

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By demonstrating the cost effectiveness and benefits of green cleaning, the Healthy Schools Taskforce was able to formalize the new green cleaning practices by turning it into a BPS policy. In 2013, the BPS Wellness Policy was revised and now includes “healthy school environments” as one of its pillars. BPS updates this policy every year and makes all facilities management policy documents easily accessible online. The green cleaners policy clearly notes who is responsible for implementation of the policy, and includes a contact person for those needing more information or assistance.

BPS learned that training and communication are key to successfully moving to green cleaning practices, which are ideally formalized through a district policy. Staff in all roles, from facilities to administration to teachers and parents, should understand both the benefits and requirements of green cleaning. For example, it can take some time for people to adjust to cleaning products that don’t come with the strong fragrance or the bright colors of conventional products. Consistent communication that green cleaning has several benefits – for the environment, for the employees, and for children with asthma – helped BPS gain buy-in from their staff.

Finally, the work of green cleaning is never done. Returning to assess and troubleshoot any problems or new conditions that arise is key to maintaining an asthma-friendly school environment. For example, as the Boston Public Schools’ curriculum and programs have evolved, new conditions have required revisions to cleaning practices. BPS now has many more early education classrooms and out-of-school-time programs, for which regulations related to cleaning differ. Schools are also providing more meals to students, so there is more food and more places where food is served – and therefore additional cleaning needs. Some of that cleaning requires the use of sanitizers and disinfectants. The Healthy Schools Task Force has been working with BPS to move away from bleach to more asthma-friendly sanitizers such as hydrogen peroxide-based products. While not considered “green,” such products have a less asthmagenic (asthma symptom-producing) effect while still meeting EPA requirements for disinfection. Keeping vigilant over these changes provides the opportunity to adapt green cleaning practices and ensure that the school environment stays clean, healthy, and asthma-friendly.

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Related resources

Cleaning for health: Creating asthma-friendly schools presentation https://chris-whyte-wzs5.squarespace.com/s/Cleaning-for-Health-Creating-Asthma-Friendly-Schools_508.pptx:

PowerPoint slides with basic green cleaning information, including the difference between cleaning equipment, chemical dilution systems, and policy tips; can be presented to teachers, administrators, parents, and other school staff.

Environmentally Preferable Products (EPP) Procurement Program, MA Executive Office for administration and Finance

<http://www.mass.gov/anf/budget-taxes-and-procurement/procurement-info-and-res/procurement-prog-and-serv/epp-procurement-prog/green-products-and-serv/specific-epp-statewide-contracts/green-cleaning-products.html>: Green products and services, guidance for procurement, and other resources.

Promoting Healthy School Environments: Resource Toolkit for Schools, Boston Public Schools and MassCOSH

<http://bostongreenschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Healthy-Schools-Resource-Toolkit1.pdf>: A healthy schools plan, actions steps for key stakeholders, and tips and best practices for a healthy school environment.

Boston Public Schools' Green Cleaning Policy

https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B5XW_RQDmW_0ROVNZUY2ZHzyb0U&usp=sharing&tid=0B5XW_RQDmW_0eFFZTEtERVlzbVU#: Boston Public Schools' green cleaner policy.

Green Cleaning for Healthy Schools Toolkit

<http://www.cleaningforhealthyschools.org/>: Free PowerPoint presentations for general audiences and custodial staff new to green cleaning; tips sheets for parents, teachers, and vendors; and flyers/posters.

Informed Green Solutions

<http://www.informedgreensolutions.org/?q=about>: Cleaning for health factsheets and resources.