

Repositioning the Role of Custodial Services

As school buildings open, providing a safe, clean, healthy learning environment will be utmost on everyone’s minds.

By Daniel Wagner

Is it practical to reopen school buildings this fall and, if so, what safety measures need to be adopted? Ranging from how to enforce social distancing to the possibility of staggered attendance to what PPE might be required and how to address the challenges of transportation, the issues are complex and can seem overwhelming. A prime concern is the question of how to clean, sanitize, and disinfect schools to ensure the health and safety of students, staff, and guests.

Developing and implementing a plan to respond to the custodial challenge requires recognition of a new reality, a general understanding of basic cleaning principles, and a new approach that balances budgetary and

labor limitations with the undeniable need to provide a healthy, clean environment.

Heightened Expectations

Acknowledging the importance of a clean indoor environment is certainly not new. Studies during the past decade have shown the positive and measurable impact cleaning has on everything from student attendance and performance to teacher health, substitute teacher costs, and overall parent/guardian satisfaction—not to mention that people simply feel more comfortable in a clean and well-maintained school building.



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The pandemic has simply magnified this understanding and appreciation. Many staff members, parents, and even students will be hesitant to return to school, understandably fearful of COVID-19. Expectations will be heightened for a clean, safe, and healthy environment, and school management will be expected to do everything possible to protect against COVID-19. It will be up to the schools to instill a sense of confidence that all cleaning and sanitation steps have been taken to break the chain of transmission and protect the health of all stakeholders.

The Budgeting and Labor Conundrum

Even as expectations increase, schools are bracing for reduced funding and shrinking budgets. Considering that we have yet to discover how to grow a money tree, how can schools implement a robust, comprehensive cleaning and disinfection program without additional dollars for labor and supplies that the increased frequency of cleaning will require?

Labor is where the real issue lies. Yes, districts likely will need to purchase more hand sanitizer, disinfectants, wipes, and other cleaning products, but it is labor that truly moves the budgetary needle, generally representing between 88% and 93% of total custodial costs. As a result, district leaders must rethink custodial operations and recognize it will be everyone's responsibility to work to ensure a clean indoor facility.

A new approach, "collaborative cleaning," is based on the premise that everyone, including students, teachers, and other staff members, must play an active role in cleaning.

Starting with the Basics

An effective custodial program starts with an understanding of the basics. Many people use the terms "cleaning," "disinfecting," and "sanitizing" interchangeably, but they are very different activities.

Cleaning is the physical removal of soil, grime, and other unwanted contaminants; *sanitizing* and *disinfecting* refer to the killing of germs. The difference between the latter two activities is simply that disinfecting kills more germs.

A surface or item must always be cleaned before it is sanitized or disinfected; effective sanitation/disinfection is possible only when there is no dirt or grime to interfere with the chemicals' work. Some products can clean and disinfect in a single step, but it is important to choose a product that is intended to be used for both functions.

Simply spraying a sanitizer or disinfectant and then wiping it without allowing the chemical to do its work renders the cleaning activity ineffective and worthless.

Choose a product that is effective against the pathogens you wish to kill, and comply with the product's specific "dwell time" or the time the surface/item must remain "wet" for the product to work effectively. Dwell time cannot be overstressed. Simply spraying a sanitizer or disinfectant and then wiping it without allowing the chemical to do its work renders the cleaning activity ineffective and worthless.

Fortunately, COVID-19 is a fairly easy virus to kill, and there are a multitude of products included on the EPA "N List" (Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-COV-2). Work with your district's cleaning products distributor to identify the products that will work best given your unique needs.

Setting Standards and Establishing Protocols

Implementing a robust, comprehensive custodial program focused on the concept of "cleaning for health" involves three key steps:

- Establish for Protection
- Educate for Protection
- Inspect for Protection

1. Establish for Protection. This means making a commitment to a heightened level of cleanliness and establishing protocols to ensure the standard can be met. During this step, outline the specific cleaning and disinfection tasks that will be performed, how frequently they will be performed, and which specific individual(s) will perform them. The goal is to arm the school with a fully comprehensive plan.

Specifying the tasks to be performed requires going through the various rooms in each building and identifying the items, surfaces, and areas that will need to be serviced, highlighting the high-touch and high-risk items/surfaces. This enables custodians to set priorities in terms of which items, surfaces, and areas require more frequent attention. . Examples of high-touch surfaces/ items include light switches, doorknobs and handles, handrails, shared desks, toilet and sink handles, and water fountain buttons.

Once the specific items and surfaces have been identified, establish how often they will be cleaned, sanitized, and/or disinfected and by whom. High-touch points will likely need to be serviced multiple times per day, possibly even after each use. This is where the concept of collaborative cleaning plays such a huge role. It is not practical to expect districts to hire additional teams of new custodians or cleaning service professionals; however, operating under a “we all must take responsibility and work together” philosophy will help ensure that the work is completed.

2. Educate for Protection. The district must ensure its custodians or cleaning service professionals, teachers, staff, and students are in the best position to succeed. Everyone must be educated and trained on their specific responsibilities to provide a healthy school environment, including an understanding of why the task is so important, how to perform the task, and what safety measures need to be taken.

A myriad of training and education programs is available, so ensure the program chosen is specific to the products that will be used and the activities that will be performed. Once again, the cleaning products distributor/ partner should be able to provide the training and the expertise necessary to ensure all aspects are covered.

3. Inspect for Protection. In this step, districts must ensure they have established a quality assurance plan that outlines an assessment schedule.

Fortunately, a variety of inspection tools make the job easy. Many companies offer inspection software that allows monitoring via a phone or tablet and, of course, there are always good old-fashioned paper checklists. The key is to make sure inspections are customized to the exact program appropriate to gathering the most useful data and information. Suppliers may be able to offer a custom solution.

Inspections and monitoring also serve as effective accountability tools. Although there are practical reasons for documenting worker performance, monitoring to provide a clean and healthy school environment is the most important one at this time. Further, it is critical to hold third-party cleaning service providers accountable to their contract.

Finally, keep in mind that the exclusive goal of inspections should not be to catch poor performance and instill discipline; on the positive side consider them as a great way to identify outstanding performance; remember to highlight and celebrate that success.

Shout It Out Loud!

Step three also provides the information necessary to report on successes (or failures). Districts should not be shy about boasting about what they have done. While displaying heightened expectations, districts also need to instill confidence. What better way than to let school stakeholders know what you are doing to protect their health and safety?

To emphasize the “cleaning for health” programs being implemented, let parents, teachers, staff, and students know about them through posted signage. Make sure everyone knows you are doing whatever it takes to provide a clean and healthy learning and teaching environment! And don’t forget to honor the hard-working cleaning professionals.

Moving into the Future

We all wish things would go back to the way they were before COVID-19, but we also recognize that things have changed in a profound way that demands new approaches and new ways of thinking. No longer can cleaning and custodial services be treated as a cost to be minimized; they have become an integral part of providing a school environment that maximizes success.

Success demands expertise, and working with a cleaning products distributor/partner that is fully committed to school cleanliness, health, and safety can help districts succeed in all aspects of the new program. Demand they provide the necessary tools. Ask them to assist in setting up your scope of work. Rely on them for assistance with education, training, monitoring, and communications.

The impact of COVID-19 on the school environment will last long after the coronavirus is in our rear-view mirror. We have faced numerous public health threats on a regular basis: seasonal flu, Norovirus, MRSA, and others. Who knows what may be lurking around the corner? Implementing a robust and comprehensive cleaning program that recognizes the positive and measurable impact effective custodial service has on outcomes and focuses on cleaning for health has become a necessity.

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