

Flagging Green Cleaning in State Schools

The number of states requiring green cleaning in schools grows at a steady clip

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When the concept of "going green" was first introduced more than a decade ago, industry representatives thought it would quickly dissipate as nothing but a fad. In reality, the green movement has exploded and in-house managers have embraced green cleaning, whether by choice or by law.

At its inception and for many years after, school custodial managers green cleaned as a way to reduce their mark on the environment. It was an ethical choice and an effort to preserve the Earth for future generations. But not all schools joined the bandwagon willingly.

Even after the green cleaning market continued to grow through improved product development, more competitive pricing and third-party approvals and certifications, convincing the masses has been challenging. Although in some respects, green cleaning in schools is still a choice. In others, the government has stepped in and made the decision on behalf of departments.

Reportedly, the first state to mandate green cleaning in K-12 schools was New York in 2005. Since that time, there has been a growing trend within state governments to improve the health within schools and minimize the harmful effects cleaning might have on the environment by requiring green cleaning practices.

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Early Adopters

In August 2005, then Governor George Pataki signed into law legislation that required the use of "environmentally sensitive cleaning products" in all public and private elementary and secondary schools in the state of New York. At the time, few states had legal requirements for cleaning — certainly not so specific as to require green cleaning or specifically targeting schools — but the initiative would soon become more commonplace.

"As with anything new, change can be difficult at first," says Heather Groll, spokesperson for [New York State Office of General Services \(OGS\)](#). "However, we have been told that our tutorials on how to implement a green cleaning program have been helpful. Additionally, once a program has been in place for a period of time, we often find enthusiasm based on how well the products work and how well the program fits into tight school budgets."

Adjusting to new techniques and often working within budget constraints can be a challenge for custodial managers. To accommodate and make for an easy transition, lawmakers built in a grace period that would become standard for legislation moving forward.

The New York law did not require the immediate switch to green cleaning supplies in 2005. Instead, custodial crews would be required to purchase green certified products only once their existing supply ran out, or by Sept. 1, 2006 — whichever came first.

Elaborating on New York's law, Illinois passed one of the more involved green cleaning legislations to date. Effective in August 2007, the [Green Cleaning Schools Act](#) requires all public and non-public elementary and secondary schools with 50 or more students to

"establish a green cleaning policy and exclusively purchase and use environmentally sensitive cleaning products."

When the legislation first came into effect, "our distributors really did a fantastic job in helping us make the switch to green," says Lenny Mack, custodial supervisor at [Arlington Heights School District 25](#), Ill. "We made a quick change with our hard floor cleaners and we've benefited from the implementation of microfiber. But, as with anything new, green cleaning is a continuous learning process and our department continues to evolve."

Legislation Explosion

It would be two more years before another state government mandated green cleaning in schools, but since 2009 legislation has increased substantially.

"This isn't a trend that is going away," says Steve Ashkin, president of [The Ashkin Group](#), Bloomington, Ind. "These laws are about creating best practices."

In July 2009 the Hawaii Green Cleaning for Schools legislation was enacted. The law requires the [Hawaii Department of Education](#) to, in turn, require all public school facilities to "give first preference, where feasible, to the purchase and use of environmentally sensitive cleaning and maintenance products that have been approved by the Green Seal program."

The Hawaii Department of Health is responsible for maintaining a list of products that have been approved by Green Seal for which public schools will use as a first-preference guideline when purchasing and using environmentally sensitive products.

Not far behind Hawaii, [Maryland](#) also enacted legislation for schools, effective since October 2009. All green products must be biodegradable, have low toxicity, low volatile organic compound (VOC) content, reduced packaging and low life cycle energy use.

Although state requirements were in place as early as 2007 for green cleaning in government facilities, it wasn't until 2009 that [Connecticut](#) legislation was signed requiring the same within schools. Effective in July 2011, all school buildings and facilities must implement green cleaning programs. Comparable to other state requirements, officials comment that adhering to the law will be a smooth transition for facilities.

Even at its inception, "the legislation is perceived as a good thing," says Jim Saisa, director of facilities at [Amity Regional School District No. 5](#) in Woodbridge, Conn. "It's forcing us to use less harsh chemicals, which make for safer schools. We have been green cleaning for over three years, so now it's about streamlining our training and working with our vendors to swap out essential products."

While the previously mentioned states have embraced a holistic approach to green cleaning legislation, that isn't the case nationwide. According to some industry experts, Nevada fell short when officials were forced to compromise in an effort to pass green cleaning legislation. Others are thankful the state is at least making headway. Effective July 2010, legislation will require the use of environmentally sensitive products, but only in the cleaning of floor surfaces.

Requiring vs. Recommending

Although the number of states implementing legislation for green cleaning is growing, not all laws are created equal. Some states are slow to adopt the entire green approach and instead, opt for a more gradual push. In fact, they aren't requiring green cleaning at all.

Instead, current legislation in two states (Maine and Missouri) simply "recommend" facility executives adhere to green cleaning practices. The requirements stipulated with these legislations instead fall on the shoulders of state departments.

Since 2007, [Maine laws](#) require the State Department of Education to maintain a list of cleaning products that have been certified as meeting "health-based criteria for safety and efficacy" by a third party independent agency such as Green Seal or EcoLogo. A second list of acceptable disinfectants is also mandated.

Although the law does not require schools to implement a green cleaning policy or use green cleaning products, it is the responsibility of the Department to encourage schools to do so.

Similarly, in July 2008, [Missouri](#) posted legislation that the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education must establish green cleaning guidelines and specifications for schools. While the law makes it mandatory for the Department to issue the green cleaning guidelines, implementation by Missouri schools is voluntary.

Law Or No Law: Green Clean

With mandates on the rise, facilities where laws are yet to materialize should take note. Green cleaning might be just beyond the horizon.

According to state reports, green cleaning legislation for schools will be considered in California, Iowa, Massachusetts, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wisconsin sometime in 2010. Industry experts comment that legislation and green cleaning in schools will continue to grow as more players get involved in the issue.

"Learning from the experiences with New York and Illinois, we have built coalitions that have made passing legislations pretty powerful," says Ashkin. "Those coalitions — such as those through the Healthy Schools Campaign, associations such as ISSA, environmental groups and labor unions that become more involved — have made for a powerful approach that has a high rate of success for passing legislation."

Experts predict that the requirements for green cleaning in schools will continue to grow at a steady clip. Managers yet to jump on the green bandwagon should prepare their departments for future changes. Resistance to the inevitable push for green cleaning will open up departments to the increased threat of outsourcing, as contractors lie in wait to promote green cleaning to school administrators.

It is important also to remember that legislation requiring green cleaning is only a minimum standard, and facilities meeting just those requirements will continue to be threatened by contractors who might be willing to do more. Custodial departments should use these legal requirements as a stepping stone for their evolving green cleaning programs.

Regardless of legislation, Ashkin stresses that green is happening and managers in schools all over the country should take note.

"It isn't a political issue," he says. "It is simple recognition that we have the opportunity to make a difference. We can reduce exposures to kids in classrooms and the potential risk to custodians, while reducing the unnecessary and negative impacts cleaning has on the environment."

Steve Ashkin will be presenting, "Sustainability: The Next Step in Green" at the CleaningGreen Virtual Conference and Expo on May 11. For more information, visit, www.cleanlink.com/cleaninggreenexpo.

States Aid in Green Cleaning

Although no formal legislation is in place, some state governments are doing what they can to encourage schools to implement green cleaning products and procedures.

State officials in Minnesota have implemented recommendations for custodial departments

through the release of the [Environmental Preferable Purchasing Guide](#). Developed and maintained by state departments, the guide serves as a reference tool to assist school executives in the selection and use of environmentally preferable cleaning products.

Similarly, the state of Washington published the [Reference Guide for Environmentally Preferable Purchasing](#) to help custodial buyers outline environmentally preferable products.

Neither state requires the development or maintenance of these guides, nor do they require departments to follow the recommendations. Instead, the guides were developed to aid custodial departments in the promotion and purchasing of green cleaning tools.

"Deemed Not Feasible"

Most, if not all, legislations currently in place reference the statement "deemed not feasible." Where used, and in all cases, this verbiage offers an out or an exemption from green cleaning requirements.

This might be the case if departments see a significant increase in costs associated with a change to green certified products. Although the higher price point is a possibility, experts from the [Healthy Schools Campaign \(HSC\)](#) argue that managers need to look at the long-term financial benefits of green cleaning.

According to HSC officials, chemicals in traditional cleaning products can increase asthma, which is the leading cause of student absenteeism nationwide. This absence not only takes away from the child's education, but also loses the school money because the state pays the district per child per day of attendance.

To date, very few schools have opted out of the green cleaning mandates. In Illinois for instance, where there are nearly 900 districts, only four individual schools have requested

exemption for financial purposes.

HSC officials comment that this could be due to the official and public records required to opt out. In many cases, during the time it takes to approve such requests, green advocates have stepped in to help those schools adapt and create proper cleaning programs that are healthier for kids.