
Your Clean and Healthy School

On August 24, Governor Pataki signed legislation that, if implemented fully, would provide vital protection for the health of millions of children across New York. The new law requires all public and private schools in the state to switch by September 2006 to “environmentally sensitive” cleaning products to clean and maintain their facilities.

Through generous funding from Keyspan Long Island, INFORM is able to offer schools in Nassau and Suffolk Counties free technical assistance in implementing a “green” cleaning program that will help districts meet the new law’s requirements.

Commonly used cleaning products are hazardous to human health and the environment. These products affect human health through contact with skin and by giving off fumes that adversely affect the quality of the indoor air that people breathe.

Children are one of the groups at greatest risk from poor indoor air quality because they face greater exposure to the chemicals. Indoor air quality in schools is of particular concern because poor indoor air quality is commonly cited as a major contributor to asthma, which affects 7.9 percent of school-aged children and is the most common cause of school absenteeism.

INFORM’s research has documented that disinfectants and floor-care products often used in schools are asthmagens and rank among the most toxic products used in the cleaning industry. Aside from affecting indoor air quality, these cleaners contain toxic substances that can cause a host of short- and long-term health effects. The US Environmental Protection Agency has documented that poor indoor air quality poses serious health threats and costs the United States more than \$50 billion in healthcare, absenteeism, lost productivity, and lost revenue.

Insufficient knowledge about the economic, health, and environmental benefits of “environmentally sensitive” cleaning products has prevented many schools from making the switch to safer cleaners a priority. Therefore, educating schools about these issues and learning what they are doing to implement the law’s requirements will be important in the coming year.

By and large, the maintenance staff in school facilities are serious about their role in protecting the health and well-being of their buildings’ occupants. Still, the process of switching to less-toxic, and less-familiar, products can prove daunting, especially because building maintenance professionals have trusted the same chemicals for decades. However, we have seen that with a little guidance, positive change can come rapidly.

Through our Cleaning for Health program, INFORM has been assisting schools throughout the Northeast in developing and implementing “green” cleaning. We offer an eight-step, comprehensive technical assistance

program that explains how to develop a policy, bring together the necessary staff members, evaluate current products, design a pilot test to find products that will work for your facility, educate stakeholders (custodial staff, building occupants, teachers, school nurses, administrators, parents, etc.), phase in “green” products, monitor the project, and reward the staff for making the changeover happen.

In New York, the difficult task of defining which products will be considered “environmentally sensitive” has been assigned to the Office of General Services and the Department of Environmental Conservation. INFORM is working with the state to identify products that will perform to the high standards you expect, are cost effective, and are available from the same manufacturers, through the same distributors, your school district is currently working with.

We invite you to visit our website at www.informinc.org and browse our resources. You may find the section on New York State particularly helpful. You can access that directly at www.informinc.org/locationtbd.

If you would like further information or if you have any questions, feel free to contact Cameron S. Lory, Senior Associate, Chemical Hazards Prevention, Program Project Coordinator, at 212-361-2400, ext. 232, or lory@informinc.org. We look forward to working with you!

Since its founding in 1974, INFORM, a national, 30-year-old nonprofit environmental research organization, has been a leader in examining the impact of business practices, technologies, and products on our environment and human health. We have led the way in identifying practical solutions to some of this country’s most challenging environmental problems. “Cleaning for health” is a concept that INFORM has been researching for several years. Thousands of professionals across New York and the country have used our book, *Cleaning for Health*, to help them switch to “environmentally sensitive” cleaning products and practices.
