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## Stretching Resources

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Bob Robinson Sr.*

School administrators are caught in a squeeze when it comes to the appearance and safety of their school buildings. The demand for clean, healthy school buildings has never been greater. The public is growing more sensitive by the day about the threat of germs, including hepatitis C, HIV, toxic mold and E. coli, at school. School buildings are being used more frequently for extracurricular purposes such as aerobics classes, senior gatherings and club meetings.

Yet, building maintenance and cleaning budgets have been slashed significantly over the last 10 to 15 years. Schools are facing significantly greater cleaning challenges with substantially fewer resources.

What was once a concern only of building and grounds managers now has been elevated to a concern of administrators. The public's perception of how well a school system is run is tied to the appearance of its schools. Unclean schools create a negative impression on parents, teachers, staff and visitors, and may inhibit student learning.



This situation has trapped many school systems in a vicious cycle. They begin the school year in great shape, but deteriorate rapidly after the very first week. The rest of the year is spent playing an expensive game of catch-up. Once behind, a school may find it impossible to recover until summer break. Meanwhile, teachers, students and visitors complain about dirty restrooms, smelly locker rooms, and unclean classrooms, kitchens and cafeterias.

The good news is that over the last several years commercial cleaning products and methods have been developed that can help schools break free of this cycle. These innovations are being adopted by school districts to clean their buildings more effectively and keep them consistently clean throughout the year — without breaking their existing cleaning and maintenance budgets.

### How did we get here?

Several factors have contributed to the problem:

- **Budget and labor cuts**

As the cost of education has risen, the stress on a district's budget has, too. An easy place to cut costs has been in the cleaning and maintenance areas. As a result, building maintenance and cleaning budgets have been slashed on the average by 25 to 30 percent over the last 10 to 15 years. Today's typical school custodian is responsible for cleaning 25,000 square feet of space a night. Is there any wonder that custodians are constantly trying to catch up?

- **Misdirected purchasing policies**

Many school systems have tried to squeeze every last penny out of equipment and supplies. While this may appear to be sensible, more often than not it results in the ineffective use of a school's greatest investment — people. The typical school cleaning budget is allocated across two general categories: 7 percent is applied to products and 93 percent toward labor. In an effort to stretch their budgets, most schools focused on the

smallest part of the budget, without regard to its effect on labor. As a result, they often end up with an assortment of supplies and equipment from multiple vendors that are not compatible.

Getting a good price is important, but administrators would benefit by looking at the bigger picture. When building an effective cleaning program, other factors are important too, such as training, solution integration, efficiency and future direction. Schools do not change textbooks every year just because they found a cheaper one. Given the potential affect on the learning environment, the same consideration should be given to the components of a school's cleaning program.

- **Outdated tools and procedures**

Antiquated cleaning approaches are no longer adequate for today's challenges. The tools that most school custodians use, such as wipers, buckets and mop heads, have been around for most of the last century.

Most mop buckets contain dirty, contaminated water, which mops and wipers simply spread around without penetrating tight spaces and grimy crevices. Only a small portion of the soil is ever removed. This creates an unhealthy breeding ground for germs and odor-causing bacteria. Worse, workers sometimes must wipe contaminated surfaces by hand and even crawl around filthy restrooms on their hands and knees. Then, the same dirty mop water and mop head that was used in the restroom is now being pushed to the classroom, and later on, to the kitchen.

These tools are ineffective for cleaning, are painfully slow and often result in fatigue, injury and workers' compensation claims.

- **Insufficient training**

Piecemeal and shortsighted purchasing practices have contributed to a training crisis. In the search for rock-bottom pricing, top-quality suppliers with systematic approaches to cleaning, including value-added training often are eliminated. Moreover, since equipment and supplies come from multiple suppliers, workers must fit the pieces of the puzzle together themselves. As a result, most custodians are not using new methodologies that have been developed based on best practices. The cycle is then perpetuated by the fact that new suppliers and supplies more than likely will be introduced the following year, leaving no consistency for training.

### **Some solutions**

Just as cleaning problems result from multiple contributing factors, the solution can be complex — but it does not have to be. As elementary as it sounds, the key to achieving healthier buildings is simply deeper, more thorough cleaning capability. Equipping custodial workers with new tools that clean more thoroughly will deliver quantum leaps in productivity. In addition, start taking a whole-system approach to cleaning and maintenance.

Over the last several years, new developments in cleaning technology and methods have arrived that are revolutionizing the cleaning industry. These innovations not only deliver much better cleaning results, but also improve productivity. This allows the custodial staff to stay on top of the problem throughout the year. Plus, they can reduce chemical usage, sometimes by as much as 80 to 90 percent. These tools generate a rapid return on the school's investment and usually pay for themselves within a year.

One recent innovation is the use of microfibers. Old-fashioned cotton fiber mops push soil around, leaving surfaces dirty and wet. Microfiber pads, on the other hand, lift and trap up to seven times their weight in dirt and moisture. They can be used wet or dry to clean walls, floors, chalkboards, desktops and any other hard surface. They combine multiple cleaning steps while eliminating the need for specialized tools. When the microfiber pad becomes dirty, they are exchanged for clean ones. Several models are equipped with reservoirs so that custodians use only fresh, clean solution. Changing to a clean microfiber pad eliminates any threat of cross-contamination.

Many of these next-generation cleaning tools also are ergonomically engineered. This is important as it enhances worker safety, productivity and satisfaction while reducing the district's workers' compensation liability.

### **The big picture**

It takes an integrated system to clean a school district efficiently, including a compatible mix of equipment, chemicals, methods, training and documentation. Saving a few dollars on equipment and supplies here and there may cost dearly in terms of lost productivity and cleaning effectiveness. Ultimately, it often results in higher equipment and supply costs because of lost efficiency benefits.

A good, reputable distributor that specializes in schools can be a tremendous advantage in developing a strategic cleaning plan for your district. They can help perform an in-depth, districtwide analysis of your cleaning program. They can help you identify potential areas of improvement along with the optimum mix of equipment and supplies, as well as identify underutilized or redundant equipment.

To meet the demands for cleanliness placed on school districts, it is important for them to get the most out of their stretched resources. The tools are available today to help school districts maintain clean, healthy buildings while staying within their existing budgets. To make this happen, however, often requires involvement of school administration or business management. Considering the potential impact on the learning environment and the public's perception, it is well worth the effort.

*Robinson is founder and president of Kaivac, Inc., a manufacturer of industrial cleaning equipment and chemicals based in Hamilton, Ohio.*

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## **NOTABLE**

Factors contributing to the problem of poor maintenance in schools:

### **•BUDGET & LABOR CUTS**

Custodians are caught trying to catch up with duties.

### **•MISDIRECTED PURCHASING POLICIES**

Every last penny is squeezed out of equipment & supplies.

### **•OUTDATED TOOLS & PROCEDURES**

Most tools used by today's custodians have been around for decades.

### **•INSUFFICIENT TRAINING**

Products from multiple suppliers leave no clear training system.

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