

Cleaning for Health in the Classroom Project – Spring 2015

Many schools districts are working hard to make sure their custodial departments are using asthma-safer healthy cleaning practices. Along with that effort, specific outreach supporting teachers who may choose to clean in their classrooms beyond custodial routines is needed.

To highlight safe and effective classroom cleaning for teachers, members of The Collaborative on Health and the Environment – Washington developed a *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* guide, along with a classroom cleaning kit. The guidance emphasizes that teachers can rely on basic cleaning with soap and water or a third-party certified all-purpose cleaner to remove dirt and germs in the classroom.

A main objective is to reduce exposures to children from overuse of disinfecting chemicals in the classroom. Particularly in elementary schools, it's common for teachers to rely on disinfecting wipes, brought from home or from parents, for classroom cleaning routines. However, these products often contain asthmagens and other irritants, and disinfecting chemicals are not necessary for regular classroom cleaning. In some classrooms students help with cleaning, underlining the importance that supplies are nontoxic and used appropriately.

Along with the guide, a classroom cleaning kit was developed to give teachers a sample of affordable, widely available supplies that can be used to safely and effectively clean a classroom.

Contents include:

- Dish liquid (fragrance-free, dye-free, and not antibacterial)
- Spray bottle, labeled with how to make Classroom All-Purpose Cleaner using dish liquid
- Microfiber cloths
- Fragrance-free baby wipes

CHE-WA encourages children's health advocates in other schools and districts to promote *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom*, using or adapting these materials.



Funding from the Washington State Department of Ecology enabled CHE-WA to introduce the *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* guide and cleaning kits in the Seattle School District. The outreach had two methods, one targeting the district's school nurses, and a second reaching teachers at several elementary schools.

Nurse promotion model: A *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* presentation was given to all Seattle Public School nurses at their district-wide meeting, and each nurse received a sample cleaning kit. Nurses were encouraged to promote *Cleaning for Health* at their schools. Many of the nurses made commitments in a follow up survey to discuss the topic at a staff meeting, and to encourage teachers who make classroom supply lists to consider *Cleaning for Health*

guidance, thereby reducing purchase of disinfecting wipes for classroom use. A nurse advocate is important to the success of this messaging at a school; teachers and parents are concerned about germs and having the nurse endorse safer cleaning as effective infection control is key.

Many school districts do not have specific guidance for the periodic cleaning that a teacher might choose to do in a classroom. As a result of the presentation to Seattle School District nurses, they requested this guidance come directly from the district to teachers. District staff agreed to support and approve the guidance, and distributed the information to all principals with a request to forward to their teaching staff.

Feedback from nurses:

"I found the presentation very helpful. I work in a high school, and I plan on sharing information with my students to consider what their family uses at home."

"The message was clear (and clean!) that the products we use can have impact on those with respiratory compromised health."

"It would be wonderful to see these cleaning changes made in all Seattle Public Schools!"

Elementary school staff outreach model: Outreach to teaching staff at several elementary schools involved a 10-minute *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* kick-off presentation at a staff meeting. Classroom cleaning kits were provided for teachers at the meeting. The majority of teachers who responded to a follow up survey said they would use the *Cleaning for Health* guidance and no longer use disinfecting wipes in the classroom.

Feedback from teachers:

"Love it. The all purpose cleaner works fine, but what I like best about it is that since it is non-toxic I can have the kids help out. I teach students who have significant disabilities, so learning adaptive skills like cleaning are important but I haven't been able to let them use the toxic cleaner that used to be our only option. I even bought baby wipes to use in my house!"

"Parents very kindly clean the room for me. I haven't heard anything negative and a few have commented that they are glad to not use chemicals."

"Love the microfiber cloths! The all purpose cleaner does a good job cleaning."

Interested in promoting *Cleaning for Health in the Classroom* at your school or district? Contact Rachel Koller, environmental health consultant and CHE-WA member, with any questions at rachel.s.koller@gmail.com.