

Green Cleaning in Schools FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

More than 1 in 5 Californians – including more than 6 million children – spend their day in a school. Cleaning products used in schools contain a wide variety of hazardous chemicals that can cause asthma, cancer, reproductive harm, and damage to the body's nervous system and internal organs, as well as smog production, global warming, water pollution and aquatic toxicity.

Why switch to environmentally preferable cleaners?

More than 6 billion pounds of chemicals are used by the cleaning industry in the U.S. annually. Switching to environmentally preferable or “green” cleaners has enormous benefits. Schools can prevent pollution and reduce exposures of staff and students to hazardous chemicals. Improving indoor air quality by using “green” cleaners can increase attendance and academic achievement, and improve teacher retention and productivity. Using safer cleaners helps protect custodians and reduces workplace injuries and worker compensation claims. Using less-toxic cleaners can reduce the emission of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which will help reduce smog, as well as reduce the discharge of pollutants to waterways that adversely affect plant and animal life. Finally, switching to safer, less-toxic cleaners can save schools money (see more below).

What are environmentally preferable cleaners?

We define environmentally preferable cleaning products as those that meet independent, third-party certification criteria for lesser or reduced effects on human health and the environment, as established by a legitimate nationally recognized program that further meets a set of 13 criteria for a robust certification program. Green Seal, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization (www.greenseal.org), or EcoLogo, a Canadian program (www.ecologo.org/en), are two examples of third-party certifiers that could meet this definition. Such independent programs prevent the manufacturers of cleaning products from making vague, unsubstantiated, or misleading “greenwashing” claims that their cleaning products are safer for workers, children, and the environment. Certification also makes it easy for schools to find low-toxicity cleaning products because they just have to look for the eco-label rather than having to evaluate the chemical ingredients of each product themselves.

What human health and environmental impacts do these standards address?

The Green Seal (GS-37) and EcoLogo (CCD-146) standards for cleaning products address a broad range of human health and environmental concerns. GS-37, for example, prohibits carcinogens, reproductive toxins, mutagens, and asthmagens; as well as some specific chemicals of concern such as dyes (unless food grade), phthalates (emulsifiers that can disrupt the body's hormone system), 2-butoxyethanol (a common cleaning solvent that can easily soak through the skin and poison internal organs) and alkyl phenol ethoxylates (APEs, detergents that are highly toxic to fish and can break down into chemical by-products that are suspected endocrine disruptors, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). In addition, Green Seal will not certify any cleaning products that are corrosive or sensitizing to the skin, that are severely irritating to the eyes, that can be readily absorbed through the skin, that are acutely toxic or fail chronic inhalation toxicity testing, or that can bioaccumulate in the food chain, damage the ozone layer, or contribute to poor indoor air quality due to the presence of volatile organic compounds above 1% in the diluted product. Green Seal does not make a distinction between “active” and “inert” ingredients – everything in the product must be evaluated against the criteria in the standard.

Green Seal's GS-37 institutional cleaners standard can be found at

www.greenseal.org/certification/standards/GS-37_Industrial_Cleaner_Standard.pdf and the EcoLogo CCD-146 standard for hard surface cleaners is available at www.ecologo.org/common/assets/criterias/CCD-146.pdf.



It is important to note that AB821 does not pre-empt the actions of any school districts that want to include additional health and environmental screening criteria to their bid solicitations for cleaning products.

How are Green Seal and EcoLogo standards developed?

Green Seal and EcoLogo standards are unique because they are not created solely by product manufacturers. Instead, they are developed in a process in which environmental and health organizations, state and local governments, academics, and other stakeholders actively participate along with product manufacturers and

distributors. These standard-setting processes are transparent, so all comments and the final standards are available to the public. In addition, both Green Seal and EcoLogo not only require manufacturers to fully disclose their ingredients to them and submit test data demonstrating compliance with their standard, they also conduct their own tests on the products as well as site visits of the manufacturing plants where these products are made.

What types of cleaning products are certified by Green Seal and EcoLogo?

Green Seal's GS-37 standard for institutional cleaners covers the following product categories: Multi-purpose Surface Cleaners, Floor and Damp Mop Cleaners, Bathroom, Toilet Bowl, Tub & Tile Cleaners (excluding Disinfectants), Glass Cleaners, Carpet (and Upholstery) Cleaners, and Heavy Duty Cleaners and Degreasers. Separate Green Seal standards apply to institutional floor polish and strippers, and hand soaps. EcoLogo's standards cover all of these and other product types, including laundry and dish detergents, disinfectants, graffiti removers, deodorizing products and more. (Note: Disinfectants and sanitizers, which are registered pesticides, are not currently allowed by the U.S. EPA to make green claims or receive certification as having lesser health impacts; therefore AB821 expressly excludes them.)

Are certified cleaning products readily available to school districts?

Yes, there are hundreds of certified less-toxic cleaning products school districts can choose from. Most major manufacturers and distributors of institutional cleaning products offer at least one line of environmentally preferable cleaners. Consequently, school districts often do not need to change the manufacturers or distributors they have come to rely on in order to transition to less-toxic cleaners. In addition to buying certified cleaning products from local suppliers, school districts can order them (at discounted prices) using at least one State of California contract (with Grainger) or the multi-state janitorial supplies contract (with Waxie and other vendors) that was recently negotiated by the Western States Contracting Alliance (WSCA); see www.aboutwsca.org/contract.cfm/contract/w20-2007.

A full list of Green Seal-certified products can be found at www.greenseal.org/findaproduct/index.cfm and EcoLogo's certified cleaners are listed at www.ecologo.org/en/seeourcriteria/details.asp?ccd_id=371.

Do environmentally preferable cleaners perform well?

Yes, Green Seal- and EcoLogo-certified cleaners must also pass performance tests in order to become certified. Many school districts – such as Fairfield-Suisun, San Francisco and Novato – have conducted successful pilot tests of less-toxic cleaners and found brands that work well in their facilities without requiring additional elbow grease. Nevertheless, school districts are advised to test a variety of environmentally preferable cleaning products to find brands that meet their needs and performance requirements. An important benefit of choosing certified cleaning products is that training is included. For example, the Green Seal standard requires product manufacturers, distributors, or third parties to offer training or training materials on the proper use of the product. Vendors supplying products on the WSCA contract must provide free training and will even help schools secure “green building” credits associated with the use of certified cleaning products.

Do environmentally preferable cleaners cost more than conventional products?

Not usually. Although “green” cleaners may sometimes appear more expensive than conventional products, they can often cost the same – or less – to use. Many school districts (as well as local and state agencies) that have switched to environmentally preferable cleaners have saved money by replacing a “ready to use” conventional product with a highly concentrated “green” cleaner. (All institutional cleaning products certified by Green Seal and EcoLogo are concentrates.) The cost savings are even more dramatic when institutions start using automatic dilution equipment, which reduces the unnecessary, expensive and potentially hazardous over-concentration of cleaning products when diluted manually. Moreover, many schools that have embarked on a green cleaning program have saved money by reducing the number of cleaning products they need to stock – often eliminating duplicative and unnecessary products. Some school districts, like Novato, have been able to negotiate comparable prices for green cleaners from their vendors or through cooperative purchasing initiatives.

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