



Going green to clean schools

Earth-friendly cleaners now a mandate

By Mick Zawislak | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 5/4/2008 12:03 AM

The environmentally friendly glass cleaner used in Northwest Suburban District 214 has been leaving streaks.

There's an easy fix -- some simple adjustments in how a new "green" formula is used.

Requiring such cleaners is part of a move to reduce toxic chemicals in schools across Illinois and in turn improve indoor air quality.

"You would think, 'What's the big deal about cleaning glass?' Well, it's a big deal in schools," said Seymour Schwartz, who oversees 2.5 million square feet as director of buildings and grounds.

Finding a better non-streak formula is the type of challenge that soon will face all Illinois public and private elementary and secondary schools with 50 or more students.

It is not like a switch will be flipped, as many schools already are riding the green wave. But on Friday, 5,659 schools will have to comply with the requirements of the Green Cleaning Schools Act.

That means schools will have to use environmentally sensitive products in six categories covering the bulk of day-to-day cleaning tasks. They can use up any traditional supplies on hand. After that only "pre-qualified" products are acceptable.

The intent is to promote a healthier environment for students, staff, visitors and cleaning crews. Ingredients such as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, contained in some traditional products can cause breathing and other problems, supporters contend.

"The schools use them in very large quantities, and the scent and fumes are incredibly strong. This is very damaging for kids who have susceptible lungs," said Lilliana De Santiago, manager of community education for the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.

The association helped develop the requirements and recommendations.

Indoor air is typically two to five times worse than outdoor air and can be up to 100 times more polluted, according to the Healthy Schools Campaign, a not-for-profit group that pushed for the law.

Many traditional cleaning products contain harmful chemicals that contribute to the pollution, the group says, and half of all schools have an indoor air quality problem.

Green cleaning can improve that environment and keep students healthy and in school, it says.

It appears to work, at least anecdotally, in Gurnee Elementary District 56, which has been aggressively moving to green cleaning products for the past year.

At Viking Middle School, nurse Joan Brumm says she has seen a 50 percent reduction in both illness and asthma attacks.

"We've had good results," she said.

Part of the reduction in illnesses may have been a result of an intensive cleaning effort and general awareness of infections like MRSA but wouldn't have affected the reports of asthma, she said.

And while educators agree green cleaning is a good idea, there are some concerns with the law, including availability, price and effectiveness of required products.

How it works

Glass, carpet and general purpose cleaners, for example, must be chosen from a list certified by one of two eco-labeling organizations or the Environmental Protection Agency. Supplies not on the list can be used if an accredited lab determines they meet the criteria of at least one of the labeling groups' standards. Schools would pay testing costs.

Generally, environmentally sensitive cleaning products feature no or low VOCs, are biodegradable, have low-toxicity or are noncorrosive.

Bill Balek of ISSA, formerly known as the International Sanitary Supply Association, was the co-chairman of a task force committee studying the products.

"We purposely wanted to select the product categories for which we knew there was a robust supply," Balek said.

The Lincolnwood-based trade association represents manufacturers, distributors and contractors in the cleaning industry.

The law makes recommendations for several other uses, including disinfectants and floor strippers. But green products for those uses are not required because of questions about availability, cost or effectiveness.

And there is ample room for schools to maneuver. The law contains no provisions for inspections or penalties for those who don't comply.

So to start, schools will be on the honor system.

"You can't punish a school for doing something wrong. You want to encourage a system for schools to do better," said Mark Bishop, deputy director of the Healthy Schools Campaign.

Five years ago, green products either cost more or didn't work, said Steve Ashkin, a green consultant based in Bloomington, Ind., who was part of the Illinois process.

But the market has changed and awareness has risen. Requiring the use of green products isn't an indictment of traditional cleaning supplies, he said, but a logical next step to improve the environment.

"Green cleaning is at the point it's relatively easy to do," he said.

"This is just being smart."

Most green cleaning products are low in volatile compounds, and the odor and fumes are less damaging to the lungs, De Santiago said.

"I've seen evidence at some schools that the attendance rates have increased when green cleaning policies are implemented," said Kate Tomford, senior policy adviser for Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn.

"I've heard from a lot of districts that are excited about it. Some people call and are just not sure how to start."

Quinn's office oversees the program through the Illinois Green Governments Coordinating Council. The

measure, which makes Illinois the second state in the country to enact such regulations behind New York, was signed into law in August 2007.

The ensuing time was spent finalizing requirements and recommendations, an extensive process involving representatives of school districts, environmental groups, health professionals, chemical manufacturers and distributors, cleaning professionals and other interested parties.

The guidelines will be reviewed each year and revised as necessary, Tomford said.

Concerns

Along with broad support came some concerns.

"We strongly opposed the bill as it was introduced and worked against it," said Ben Schwarm, assistant executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards, which claims nearly all the state's 869 public school districts as members.

The intentions are good, he admits, but thinks the school districts themselves are capable of making the decisions and doing the "responsible thing."

"It's a good thing to do but there was probably a better way to do it," agreed Zach Wichmann, who oversees 510 schools as associate director of education for the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

"Nowadays, it seems, for anything to matter it has to pass in legislation. It's obviously a good idea."

Schwarm said there were other questions.

"Are these products available? Are they priced near the same as the other ones? Are they going to work?" he asked. "We're not going to know until down the line."

One of those concerns is answered in the final requirements. Individual schools that find green products to be more expensive than what they had been using can opt out simply by getting price comparisons and submitting a form.

"It doesn't require approval on our end, assuming the information they provide is accurate," Tomford said.

But that shouldn't be of great concern because green products are cost-competitive and work, Bishop says.

"Five or 10 years ago, if you made the argument this would be more expensive and wouldn't work as well, I could buy that," he said.

"All of a sudden, we have vendors and distributors interested and ready to capture a whole new market."

Cabay & Co. Inc. of McHenry distributes cleaning supplies to about a dozen school districts, including Gurnee District 56. The 29-year-old firm specializes in green products.

Owner Scott Cabay estimated that up to 40 percent of the green products provide a savings over traditional products. About 30 percent cost the same, and about 30 percent are more expensive.

Glass cleaner is an example of a cheaper alternative. District 56 now pays about 48 cents a quart for a green glass cleaner, compared with about \$2 or so for a quart of traditional cleaner.

"It's a big difference," says Julie Cerone, the district's custodial supervisor.

Bishop says costs also can drop because fewer products are needed to clean a school.

Some school officials say they have been contacted by several companies during the past year.

"It's the No. 1 trend in our industry," said Balek of ISSA, which did not oppose the law. "To a large extent, an

important factor is the industry responding to a change in consumer demand. Industry gets it."

Indoor air can be five to 100 times more polluted than outdoor air, with chemicals found in every day cleaning supplies contributing.

That problem -- and its impact on schools -- is what state Rep. Karen May wanted to tackle in February 2007 when she proposed the Green Cleaning Schools Act.

It was signed into law in August 2007, but the cleaning guidelines and specifications take effect Friday. May, a Highland Park Democrat, wants to take it a step further by applying it to all state-owned buildings.

"People spend long hours in state buildings, working, touring and seeking services, and people should expect the state to provide a clean and healthy environment," she said.

Her proposal has passed the House and awaits action in the Senate.