

MassCOSH

Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health

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The Healthy Boston Schools Project

The **Healthy Boston Schools (HBS) Project**, is an environmental health action project initiated by MassCOSH and the Boston Urban Asthma Coalition (BUAC) that partners with the Boston School Custodial Union, the Boston Public Schools and Boston Public Health Commission in an effort to reduce the use of toxic cleaning chemicals in the schools and to promote environmental safety and health policies and procedures in Boston schools and across the state. Boston has 130 school buildings and 59,000 students. The project resulted in the School Department implementing a green cleaner policy for all of its schools for neutral cleaners, glass cleaners, and general purpose cleaners along with a commitment to expand green purchasing in the future.

In 2003, **HBS Project** MassCOSH and BUAC (www.BUAC.org) provided training and support to custodians, school staff and parents to raise awareness about opportunities to reduce the use of toxic cleaning chemicals. The project introduced custodians and parents to environmental committees, a school-based approach to surveying environmental and indoor air quality conditions which then get prioritized into an action plan. HBS reviewed 19 conventional cleaning products used in the schools and determined that safer alternatives should be selected for at least nine products. It also established a Safer Cleaners Committee with the project partners to build agreement on the criteria and steps needed to introduce “green” cleaning products. A pilot project was created for school year 2004-2005, in which four schools with high asthma rates, used 2 different Green Seal certified product lines.

During the "pilot" year, MassCOSH continued its partnership with the Boston Urban Asthma Coalition (**BUAC**), the Boston Public Health Commission, the Boston Public Schools and the School Custodial Union to achieve the following:

- Successfully piloted “green cleaners” in four schools (Trotter Elementary, Quincy Elementary, Roger and Lewenberg Middle schools) using a participatory monitoring and evaluation process.
- Developed a *Safer Cleaners Policy* that resulted in the use of green cleaners in all Boston Public Schools.
- Organized a forum for key stakeholders with the Massachusetts Healthy Schools Network to promote green cleaners and environmental policies in the schools throughout Massachusetts and to share the challenges and opportunities from the Boston “green cleaning” model.

Lessons Learned and Tips:

- **A broad partnership that includes non-school based stakeholders** (MassCOSH, BUAC) **can bring additional resources** to an overburdened school department. It can also provide needed technical assistance and build public awareness and pressure to create the impetus for change. MassCOSH and BUAC received a small community grant from the University of Massachusetts Lowell-Toxics use Reduction Institute to fund this project.
- **Maintain a clear message about the health benefits** as your goal for a toxics use reduction approach to chemicals in the school environment.
- **Switching to green cleaners should be part of a comprehensive environmental safety and health program.** Using safer cleaners is just one of the ways to eliminate asthma triggers and improve school environments.
- **Build commitment from the partners to work on the project beyond the “pilot year” by establishing a Health and Safety Committee.** One year is generally too short a period to gain consensus, develop a plan, implement, evaluate and institutionalize it. By working with a broad coalition, HBS partners were committed over the long haul. The Boston Healthy Schools Taskforce established a committee on green cleaners that continues to meet.
- **It’s okay to acknowledge differences in the cleaning performance** of the green cleaners if your long term goal has been established to move toward safer cleaning practices. There are many products available that meet safe, environmentally preferable criteria. See: www.mass.gov/osd/epp or www.greenseal.org
- **Involve all stakeholders in the school community.**
 - a. A green cleaner policy should include all of the departments and programs in a school district. All departments and programs need to be surveyed to determine what cleaners are being used and how they are managed. Part way through the year, the HBS project discovered that the food service department was administered separately from custodial services. Therefore they ordered their own cleaning products which were causing health problems for some of the cafeteria workers.
 - b. Having parents involved as partners on the Healthy Schools Taskforce increased parental involvement on issues concerning school health and other environmental issues.
 - c. Involvement of the custodians and teachers was critical in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the products and to know what obstacles to address such as preconceived ideas about what is a clean smell or the association of the color of a conventional product with cleanliness.
 - d. Training custodians about the new products and communication with parents and school staff must be part of any transition to using green cleaners.