

# Schools and Cleaning Products

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Some areas of your school may be off-limits without permission from your teacher or principal, and some projects should be done with at least one partner. Check with your teacher before beginning any activities or projects related to this fact sheet.

## Why It Matters

Many cleaning products—especially the strong versions used in schools—contain harmful chemicals.

Lots of people use schools. That means lots of dirt and lots of germs, so of course it also means lots of cleaning. Schools have to be kept clean to help kids (and teachers and school staff) stay healthy. And clean schools have fewer problems with bugs, mice and other pests. But cleaning products can also contain chemicals that can be bad for people's health and the environment.

You may have noticed the strong smells of cleaning products in your school. This is because they often release fumes that can stay in the air for hours or even days. Ingredients of some cleaning supplies can irritate your eyes or throat. They can cause vomiting, cramps and diarrhea if you breathe a lot of the vapors or if you accidentally swallow any. Some cleaning chemicals can make it hard to breathe or cause coughing, especially if you have asthma. Over the long term, some of the strong ingredients in cleaning products could damage the liver, lungs or kidney. Some of them have been linked to cancer.

These ingredients also contaminate rivers, lakes and oceans. For instance, bleach can be poisonous to fish. Phosphates, which are added to some cleaners to make them work better, make algae grow fast. The algae then consumes oxygen in the water, killing other forms of life.

Some cleaning products are used for just that: cleaning. Like wiping down desks, polishing metal handles, mopping floors, and making windows sparkle. Others are called "sanitizers" and "disinfectants" and these are used for more heavy-duty cleaning, for instance around areas where food is prepared.

Sometimes schools need strong cleaning products. For example, teachers may use a diluted bleach solution to wipe up when a student has a bloody nose. These products should be used carefully. They should be diluted properly so they leave less chemical residue on walls and surfaces and don't give off as many fumes. And areas where chemical cleaners are used should be aired out well afterward.

But not all cleaning jobs call for such strong cleaners. Products made without harmful chemicals work just fine for most cleaning jobs.



## What Kids Can Do

It's your school's responsibility to use cleaning products correctly and to buy the healthiest, safest products for different cleaning jobs. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook. You should understand safe cleaning practices (which are described in the next section) so you'll know whether they're being followed at your school. If they're not, tell your teacher, the principal or your parents.

Being a watchdog is important, but it's not all you have to do. Here are some steps you can take yourself to help make cleaning a safer process at your school.

- **Keep your school clean:** Do your part to keep your school clean. Be especially careful about food. Crumbs and spills are a big problem, so try to avoid creating them. And don't forget: Food attracts bugs and mice.
- **Cut the clutter:** Don't let your classroom get messy—it's very hard to clean a cluttered room properly.



## What Your School Can Do

- **Keep dirt out:** Simple steps can reduce the amount of dirt that gets into your school in the first place. For instance, keeping walks and parking areas clean and shoveled will keep shoes clean. Large mats near the entrances can also keep out dirt. And if garbage cans and recycling bins are conveniently located, fewer messes will build up.
- **Use safer cleaning products:** Except when sanitizers and disinfectants are required for health reasons, cleaning products should be nontoxic and biodegradable (able to break down quickly in the environment). They should contain few or no volatile organic compounds (chemicals that evaporate into the air and often make people sick). School officials and maintenance staff can get help choosing the least harmful products from The Healthy Schools Network, which offers a guide to sanitizers and disinfectants (see the Healthy Schools Network's [http://www.healthyschool.org/guides\\_materials.html](http://www.healthyschool.org/guides_materials.html) for an order form, or contact them by email at [info@healthyschools.org](mailto:info@healthyschools.org)) and from <http://www.greenseal.org/>
- **Use cleaning products correctly:** Concentrated products should be diluted properly. Kids should not be in the area when heavy-duty cleaners are used, and they shouldn't come back in the area until it's had time to air out completely.

Check out the Project Ideas fact sheet for examples of activities that you can do in your school. All of these projects can go toward earning the Green Flag Award at your school.

The Green Squad is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council, in collaboration with the Healthy Schools Network. <http://www.nrdc.org/greensquad/> © Natural Resources Defense Council

