

Breaking the Cycle of Restroom Neglect - One School's Story

by Tom Morrison

When your child comes home from school, most likely you ask, "How was school today?" However, it might be wise to start asking, "How were the school restrooms today?" Chances are, the responses will range from "fine" to "nasty," "disgusting," or "gross."



Breaking the Cycle of Restroom Neglect -

For several years now, we have been hearing quite a bit about dirty and unsanitary school restrooms. And the problem has intensified as school district after school district wrestles with the same dilemma: budget cuts that often target school cleaning and maintenance departments in greater proportion than other school sectors.

As a result of these cuts, many school lavatories are in a state of disarray, lacking the essentials of good hygiene, including soap, toilet tissue, and paper towels. Doors or partitions have been removed, walls and ceilings are covered with graffiti, and toilets and urinals are broken or clogged (see sidebar). And because of cutbacks, reduced cleaning crews simply cannot devote the time necessary to adequately clean the restrooms and also tackle the many other cleaning needs of the school.

Why Students Might Avoid Using School Restrooms

Foul odors	62 percent
Clogged toilets	30 percent
No doors on the stalls	23 percent
"They are scary and dangerous"	15 percent

Source: Opinion Research Corporation, Princeton, NJ.

These problems are not found only in poor or inner-city school districts, as some might expect. Schools in rural areas as well as suburbs are plagued with restroom maintenance problems. In fact, in the Los Angeles area, a local television news program investigating restroom cleaning and maintenance in public schools found significant problems in some of the area's most upscale neighborhoods, such as Malibu and Newport Beach.

The Problems Dirty Restrooms Create

The problems that ill-kept and unsanitary restrooms create are many. First, they send a signal to teachers and students that they are not important enough to have clean, well-maintained restrooms, which can be demoralizing. The image of an entire school also can be affected by the condition of its restrooms: clean, well-maintained restrooms indicate a healthy learning environment; dirty restrooms often suggest danger, lack of discipline and adult supervision, and an otherwise un-

healthy learning environment.

Most dangerous of all is the fact that unkempt school restrooms also present serious health and safety issues. Pathogenic microorganisms, blood, and other bodily fluids are often found on poorly maintained restroom fixtures, doors, and counters. These germs can easily be spread because of inadequate hand washing. This is a health hazard not only for students and teachers but for those cleaning the facilities as well.



In addition, slip, trip, and fall accidents tend to be more common in poorly maintained restrooms, which can create financial liabilities for schools. Indeed, in the past decade, several lawsuits have been filed against various educational fa-

ilities regarding their inability to maintain safe and sanitary restrooms.

One more problem with unhealthy, unsanitary restrooms is that dirty school restrooms attract even more dirt. A former police officer who now heads the custodial department of a major Southeastern university compares the problem to a broken window. From his police work, he knows that a broken window becomes an invitation for burglars to break into a home, office, or school. Similarly, poorly cleaned and maintained restrooms invite abuse and less care.

Breaking News

Interestingly, local television news crews have uncovered many of the most neglected restrooms in U.S. public schools. And often, these reports have resulted in action. For instance, because of the Los Angeles news report mentioned earlier, the state and local school dis-

districts have enacted laws and regulations regarding the upkeep and cleanliness of school restrooms.

In Arizona, the restrooms in three of the state's more upscale school districts were investigated for cleanliness by a local television news crew. A variety of restroom surfaces were swabbed while the schools were in session. The swabs were then taken to a local laboratory for evaluation.

The investigation found that in two of the school districts, there was evidence of urine on virtually every restroom surface, including floors, door handles, flushing handles, faucets, hand dryers, and soap and paper dispensers. According to William Humble of the Arizona Department of Health Services, "Finding urine on so many surfaces is an indication that bacteria and viruses travel. This has the potential of spreading E. coli, hepatitis A, and other diseases and has even more serious implications for children with asthma or weakened immune systems."

Humble added that his office inspects all of the state's schools twice per year and that finding urine on several surfaces is common. He says that contrary to what some parents may think, elementary schools usually fare better in these inspections. The bulk of the problems are found in junior and high schools because these students are less likely to wash their hands after using the restroom. This spreads the urine, germs, and bacteria throughout the restroom and ultimately the rest of the school, he explains.

In the third district, Paradise Valley Unified School District, five different restroom surfaces were tested. Urine was found on only two—around the toilet floor and on the inside of a door handle. Even more impressive was that fact that the tests at this district were conducted in the afternoon—rather than in the morning, as in the

other two districts—allowing more time for the restrooms to be used during the course of the day.

Why the High Score?

The vast difference in the test results led the local news team to investigate why Paradise Valley's restrooms scored so much higher than the others. After all, the schools tested were all about the same age, they all had custodial crews cleaning the facilities on similar frequencies, and demographically, the districts and their neighborhoods were quite comparable.

The news team's investigation found that the major difference was in the way the restrooms were cleaned. At the two problem districts, traditional restroom cleaning systems were in place. Custodians would spray toilets, urinals, sinks, and counters with cleaners and disinfectants and then wipe them with cleaning cloths. Floors were swept and then mopped.

"One of the problems with this older system is that it is often hard to see urine and other contaminants on surfaces," says Wayne Moffet with American Building Maintenance (ABM), the company that now cleans 27 of the 49 schools in the Paradise Valley district.

"If the custodian can't see it, the area may not be cleaned and restroom maintenance suffers."

Moffet indicates that many of the Paradise Valley schools his company cleans were in need of a thorough cleaning when ABM took over the maintenance contract, long before the tests were conducted. "Our first plan of attack," he says, "was to use the Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning™ system in all of the restrooms."

With the No-Touch system, cleaning agents are applied



to all restroom surfaces—fixtures, partitions, walls, and floors. The same areas are then rinsed, blasting away germs, soil, and debris. Then areas are vacuumed using the machine's built-in wet/dry vac, which facilitates drying and further removes contaminants.

According to Moffet, after two or three cleanings with the Kaivac machines, most of the grime in the restrooms was removed and odors were eliminated. Tile and grout areas that had become soiled over the years before the tests were now clean, and students, teachers, and staff commented that they noticed a rather dramatic difference in the cleanliness and appearance of the restrooms almost from the start.

The machines were equally and immediately popular with the cleaning staff as well. "Our cleaning crews like the Kaivac machines because they don't have to get down on their hands and knees to clean," says Moffet. "And it's much faster. On a daily basis, I bet we save up to 50 percent on time and labor cleaning the high school restrooms and as much as 70 percent cleaning the gym locker rooms. In the kindergarten through eighth-grade schools, where the Kaivac machines are used just once per week, our time and labor are reduced about 20 percent as compared to traditional cleaning methods. This allows cleaners to spend more time cleaning areas of the school other than the restrooms."

Moffet adds that using the Kaivac machine has also helped him bid more competitively. And the system can help contractors lower workers' compensation claims, reduce labor costs, and produce higher-quality results, all of which translates into more business and profits. "I am a huge advocate of the No-Touch Cleaning system,

and I mention its features and benefits when marketing our services to all types of facilities," says Moffet.

Kids Have Respect for Restrooms Now

According to Tim Kelly, supervisor of custodial and grounds maintenance for the Paradise Valley school district, the district not only switched cleaning contractors but invested more than \$2 million to bring many of the school restrooms up to par.

This included installing all-new nonporous tiles to cover the walls and floors, making them easier to clean and maintain. Vandal-proof partitions were installed, as were new dispensers for soap and paper towels that can better withstand the rigorous restroom use found in a school environment.

Even with the improvements, Kelly believes the No-Touch system plays a major role in getting and keeping the restrooms clean. "I knew little about the Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning system before ABM introduced me to the machine," says Kelly. "It's an excellent product, and now I'm sold on it."

Kelly adds that it once was common to receive complaints from students and teachers about the school restrooms—especially that they had unpleasant odors or the fixtures were not cleaned thoroughly. Now he says he rarely hears a complaint. "What's more, we have seen a real difference in the way our students treat the restrooms," says Kelly. "Our kids have a lot more respect for them—now that they are nice and clean."

Tom Morrison is vice president of marketing for Kaivac, Inc., Hamilton, OH.



Kaivac was founded with two goals in mind: to develop a more productive and efficient way to clean restrooms and to improve the morale and image of custodial workers.

Created by industry visionary Bob Robinson Sr., the Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning system combines pressure washer, chemical injection, wet vacuum, and other cleaning technologies onto a single easy-to-use platform. In just five years, this worker-friendly approach has revolutionized restroom cleaning with thousands of No-Touch systems in daily operation around the world today.

A variety of studies have indicated that the Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning system helps cut cleaning time by more than two-thirds. This dramatic increase in productivity was recently reemphasized in the latest version of The Official ISSA 447 Cleaning Times, published by the International Sanitary and Supply Association, Inc. (ISSA).

The Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning system also has been found to deep clean more thoroughly than more traditional forms of cleaning. Also, because it does not require custodians to touch fixtures, they are no longer forced to come in direct contact with soiled, contaminated surfaces in order to clean them.

Originally produced as a restroom maintenance tool, the Kaivac No-Touch Cleaning system is now being used to clean a variety of areas including floors, walls, carpets, classrooms, stairwells, kitchens, hallways, and more. Many of these new uses have been developed by enthusiastic Kaivac customers.

For more information about Kaivac and its products, visit www.kaivac.com.