

# Healthy Legacy

Healthy people,  
a clean environment  
and a thriving economy

## Green Cleaning in Schools and Public Buildings

Green Cleaning, a 21st century approach to cleaning and building maintenance, reduces toxic chemical exposure to humans and the environment. Traditional approaches to cleaning and building maintenance use a myriad of products containing chemicals that are harmful to human health and the environment.

- Each year more than 6.2 billion pounds of chemicals are used by the cleaning industry in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>
- The U.S. EPA ranks indoor air pollution as one of the top five public health concerns.<sup>2</sup>
- One in every three cleaning products contains ingredients known to cause harm to human health and contaminants that negatively impact air and water quality.<sup>3</sup>

Schools and municipalities across the U.S. have adopted green cleaning practices by using safer alternatives that work just as well and are cost-competitive with traditional cleaning methods and products.

### Policy Recommendation

Healthy Legacy supports the adoption of green cleaning practices in schools and public buildings to protect the health of staff and students and to reduce environmental contamination.

- Require adoption of green cleaning practices in schools and public buildings by September 1, 2012, if determined to be cost-effective.
- Establish an "Environmentally Sensitive Product Task Force" to develop guidelines and specifications for environmentally sensitive products.

### Green Cleaning is Cost-Effective

- **Minneapolis, Minnesota:** The Low Environmental Impact Cleaning Policy, adopted in 2007, reported cost savings in its three-year pilot program using green cleaning products.<sup>4</sup>
- **Santa Monica, California:** The city reported spending 5 percent less on its cleaning products when it switched from conventional products to less toxic brands ten years ago.<sup>5</sup>
- **Several government procurement agencies** have reported that switching to safer cleaning products did **not** cost more.<sup>6</sup>



Switching to green cleaning improves health and productivity, including reduction in cleaning-related health problems and absenteeism; increased productivity and morale;<sup>7</sup> and improved student performance in math and science.<sup>8</sup>

Healthy Legacy promotes the production and use of everyday products without toxic chemicals.

## Children at Risk

Chemicals used in traditional cleaning products can cause short-term effects such as skin, eye and respiratory irritation, but also contribute to many chronic illnesses, including:

- **Asthma:** An estimated 20 million people in the U.S. have asthma, which accounts for over 14 million outpatient clinic visits and almost 2 million emergency room visits each year and is the leading cause of school absenteeism.<sup>9</sup> **Several studies link asthma symptoms with exposure to cleaning chemicals**, including persistent wheezing in young children;<sup>10</sup> increased likelihood of asthma;<sup>11</sup> and asthma and other respiratory symptoms in school age children.<sup>12</sup>
- **Reproductive harm: Several chemicals used in common cleaning products are hormone disrupters, associated with reproductive problems and birth defects.**
  - Studies of animals exposed to **glycol ethers** used in glass cleaners reported testicular damage, reduced fertility, maternal toxicity, early embryonic death, birth defects and delayed development.<sup>13</sup> Pregnant women exposed to this chemical at their workplace were more likely to have children with birth defects.<sup>14</sup> Long-term exposure to glycol ethers is associated with neurological and blood effects, fatigue, nausea, tremor and anemia.<sup>15</sup>
  - Exposure to **alkylphenol ethoxylates**, surfactants found in many cleaners, is associated with reproductive and developmental effects in animals.<sup>16</sup>
  - **Phthalates** used to bind fragrance in many products are linked with reduced sperm count and reproductive abnormalities in males.<sup>17</sup>

## Janitors at Risk

Based on data from Washington state, **6 out every 100 janitors are injured by cleaning chemicals every year**, costing \$750,000 a year in lost time and medical expenses. The cost across the U.S. would be \$75 million per year if extrapolated to the national level.<sup>18</sup>

- Over one-third of SEIU local 26 janitors surveyed reported that cleaning chemicals irritated their eyes or skin.<sup>19</sup>
- One study found that janitors had twice the rate of asthma compared to other occupations.<sup>20</sup>
- An estimated 12 percent of work-related asthma can be traced to cleaning products.<sup>21</sup>
- Long-term occupational exposure is associated with elevated risk of leukemia<sup>22</sup> and brain cancer.<sup>23</sup>



A full list of references for this factsheet can be found at [healthylegacy.org](http://healthylegacy.org).

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Preventing Harm  
MINNESOTA

## Who is Healthy Legacy?

Healthy Legacy is a public health coalition representing over one million Minnesotans that are dedicated to safe products, made safely. Our coalition is comprised of 32 diverse organizations that range from groups like the Minnesota Council of Churches, the Minnesota Parent Teacher Association, the Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota, Minnesota Nurses Association, the League of Women Voters and more. We educate consumers, work with leading businesses and promote protective policies.

Visit [healthylegacy.org](http://healthylegacy.org) for a complete list of our coalition partners.