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Cleaning schools the green way



Noxious chemicals get heave-ho in many districts



STAFF PHOTOS BY PETER MONSEES

Bob Aromando working at Lenape Meadows School in Mahwah. The district has traded in its conventional cleansers for green products, top.

By **ADRIENNE LU**
STAFF WRITER

Harsh scrubbing powders, caustic cleaning fluids and pungent disinfectant sprays may be headed the way of the chalkboard in classrooms, as more and more schools trade conventional cleaning products for less toxic and more environmentally friendly alternatives.

Even though New Jersey has yet to require "green cleaning" in schools, many school districts are switching on their own, citing health and environmental reasons.

Tenafly schools switched to green cleaning products about two years ago, according to Vincent Benenati, supervisor of

buildings and grounds.

"The days of using bleach and ammonia — those days are long gone in school cleaning," Benenati said.

"We did it really with the children in mind first, but then we found out that even for the custodians and the maintenance men, it was a lot less offensive odors and easier on the skin," Benenati added. "It's a win-win situation. I've found no downside at all going to green cleaning products."

Scot Van Demark, supervisor of buildings and grounds for the Mahwah schools, said his district also switched to green cleaning products about two years ago. Now most of the cleaning products

See **GREEN** Page A-6

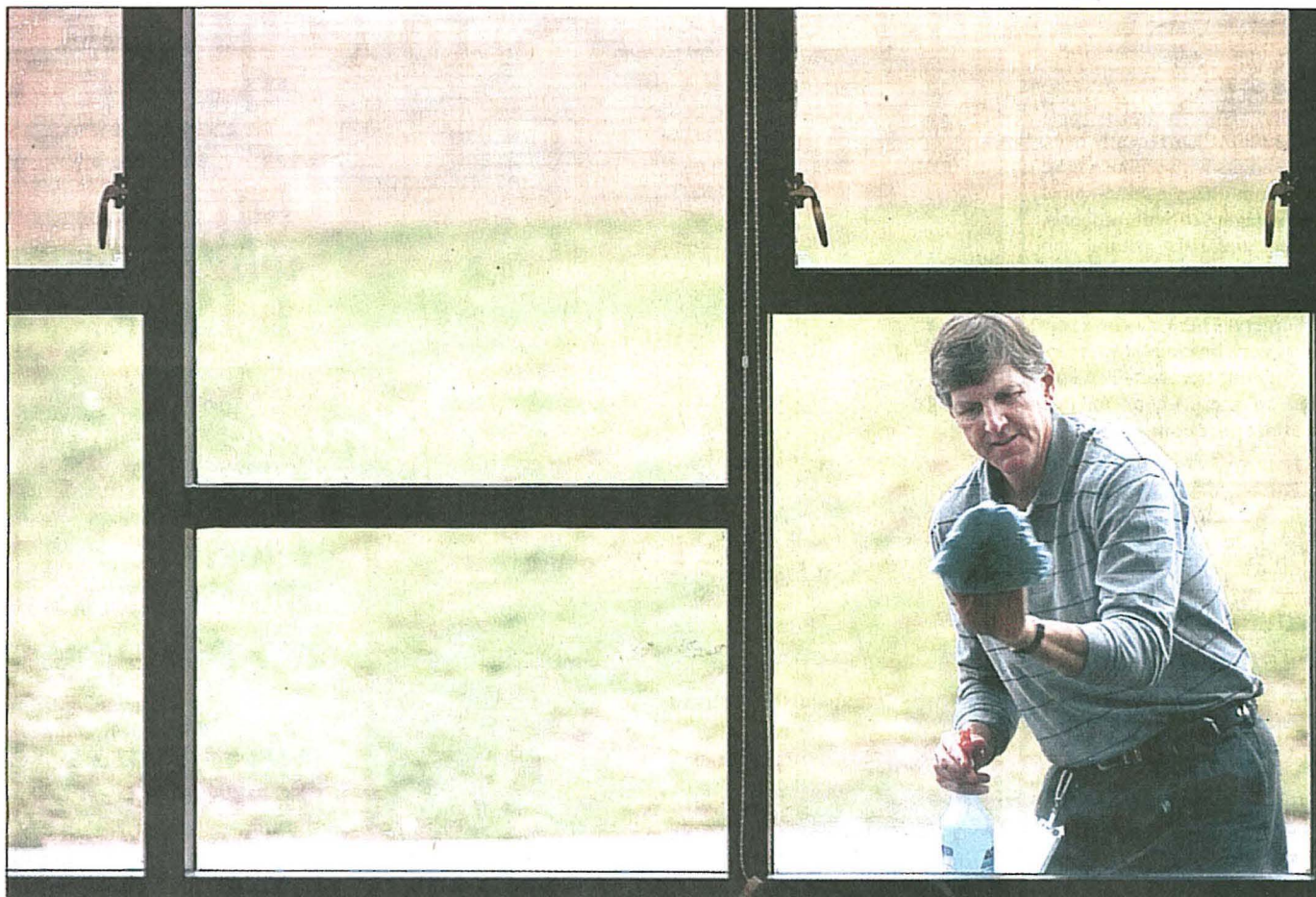
Safe cleaning tips

■ Use only as much of the product as needed and follow the manufacturer's instructions. (For example, when a product calls for two capfuls in a bucket of water, don't use 10.)

■ Ventilate. If you don't have windows open, the chemicals won't have anywhere to go, so you're going to be breathing them.

■ Get rid of paper towels and rags that are wet with cleaning products. Put them in a garbage pail outside, or, if you reuse them, wash them right away. Otherwise, it's like leaving out a bottle of a product with the cap off.

Source: Charles Weschler, professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey's Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and expert on indoor air quality



PETER MONSEES/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Scot Van Demark, supervisor of buildings and grounds for Mahwah schools, says his workers are happier and healthier using green cleansers.

Green

From Page A-1

are water-based and none contains ammonia.

"My guys like using these products because we know there's no risk of any kind of contamination, our hands won't be all dried out, our eyes won't be watery, and we can breathe," Van Demark said.

Just a few years ago, custodial staff often would hold their breath while using certain products to avoid inhaling fumes, Van Demark said. Sometimes, janitors would accidentally dip their hands into a cleaning product and their skin would turn white and chap.

That doesn't happen with the new cleaning products, Van Demark said. Many of the green cleaners are just as effective as, if not better than, their conventional counterparts, he said, though a few do require a bit more elbow grease.

In New York, all public and private schools must switch to green cleaning this school year, which means that all-purpose cleaners, cleaning products for window, carpets and bathrooms and even hand soaps must comply with detailed guidelines developed by the state's Office of General Services. The state is believed to be the first to require green cleaning in all its schools.

Former New Jersey Gov. Richard Codey signed an executive order a year ago requiring state agencies to use environmentally friendly cleaning products, but the ruling does not apply to schools. The state Department of Education currently has no plans to require green cleaning in schools, a spokesman said.

Michael Eisenberg, senior vice president of Guardian Service Industries, a janitorial services company that has switched to green cleaning and now serves Harrington Park schools, said that

Cleaners and their dangers

Common ingredients in conventional glass cleaners and their possible health effects:

■ Isopropyl alcohol

Acute health effects: Can irritate skin, eyes, nose and throat. Over-exposure can cause headache, drowsiness, confusion, loss of coordination, unconsciousness.

Chronic health effects: Repeated skin exposure can lead to itching, redness, rash, drying and cracking

■ 2-butoxyethanol

Acute health effects: Can cause headache, dizziness, lightheadedness, confusion and irritation to the eyes, nose, throat and mouth.

Chronic health effects: Can damage the developing fetus and testes. Other possible effects include liver and kidney damage.

■ Ammonia

Acute health effects: Can irritate and burn skin and eyes; can irritate nose, throat and lungs, causing coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. Higher exposures may cause buildup of fluid in lungs. May cause headaches, loss of sense of smell, nausea and vomiting.

■ Ethylene glycol

Acute health effects: Can irritate eyes, nose and throat.

Chronic health effects: May cause birth defects. Repeated or high exposure may affect kidneys and brain.

Source: The Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology

beyond the health and environmental benefits, green cleaners are also easier on the facilities.

"We extend the useful life of carpets and floors in the building because we're not using these harsh bleaches or chemicals on them," Eisenberg said.

In New Jersey, Deirdre Imus — wife of radio show host Don Imus — has been at the forefront of the green cleaning movement. In 2001, she started the "Greening the Cleaning" program at Hackensack University Medical Center, replacing conventional cleaners with her own line of non-toxic products. Today, the non-profit product line has expanded to include retail products for household use.

The Imuses have raised millions of dollars for the hospital over the years; Deirdre Imus created a center at the hospital to study carcinogens and their effects on children.

Staff, doctors and patients embraced the program, which yielded savings of about 15 percent (many green cleaning products

cost less than the conventional versions), and has since spread to other institutions, including Newark Liberty International Airport.

Imus said that many of the chemicals found in conventional cleaners can trigger allergies and rashes and may even contain carcinogens and neurotoxins.

"It's extremely fundamental in protecting our children's health," Imus said, noting that children spend a large portion of their days at school.

How much of a threat do traditional cleaning products really pose? It's a question scientists are still trying to answer. Some cleaning products contain chemicals that have not been independently tested or approved.

Charles Weschler, a professor at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and an expert in the field, said some conventional cleaning products may indeed pose either chronic or acute health risks to people, meaning anything from

What it means to be green

Some of the requirements of the Greening the Cleaning product line:

- Must be free of known human carcinogens, mutagens, teratogens or endocrine disruptors.
- Must not contain compounds or substances that contribute to atmospheric greenhouse gases, smog or ozone depletion.
- Must not be corrosive to skin or inanimate surfaces.
- Must not be a severe skin or eye irritant.
- Must not contain toxic dyes.
- Must not be delivered in aerosol cans.
- Must not contain petroleum-derived or petrochemical-blended fragrances.
- Must not contain heavy metals that are toxic to humans, animal life or the environment.
- Should be readily biodegradable at greater than 90 percent in 30 days without being run through a municipal effluent treatment process.
- Should be made of replenishable natural (plant) sources when possible.

asthma attacks to cancer.

So-called green cleaning products may or may not be any better, Weschler warned. "Green is such an ill-defined word right now when it comes to cleaning products," he said.

For some schools, the decision to go green was simple. George Connelly, superintendent of Glen Rock schools, said Glen Rock is simply trying to do its part by green cleaning.

"If we can clean our floors, clean our walls and at the same time use products that are environmentally friendly, then I think that there's no doubt that that's what we want to do."

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