Green Laundry

Specialized Green Cleaning Guides

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Laundry care is a crucial, yet often unnoticed, component of a school's overall green cleaning program.

Textiles ranging from athletic jerseys to kitchen cleaning rags require regular laundering. And that job falls to the school's custodial staff. The good news is that laundry care is the perfect opportunity for schools to reduce energy, water consumption and chemical contamination.

As always, check to ensure all cleaning procedure changes are consistent with local health regulations before enacting. You'll also want to be sure to follow the usage directions set out on individual products.

Choose Greener Laundry Care Products

Professional-Grade Products

Professional-grade laundry detergents are certified by EcoLogo, Green Seal as well as recognized by the EPA's Design for the Environment Program (DfE). These recognized third party certifications are the best way to identify the greenest laundry detergents on the market.

Unfortunately, green certified professional-grade detergent options are still somewhat limited. If your distributor does not have a certified product that's compatible with your system, check the ingredients of each product before making a choice. Avoid products with phosphates, chlorine, phenols such as nonylphenol ethoxylates (NPE) or alkylphenol ethoxylates (APEOs). You may want to avoid systems that require alkalines and acids to complete the cleaning cycle. Near-neutral pH detergents (with a pH balance closer to 7) should work fine and don't have the safety concerns associated with storing and handling caustic or acidic solutions.

Residential Products

Many schools use residential washers and dryers. Try to choose household laundry products that are labeled by the EPA's DfE program and avoid the same ingredients that you would if purchasing professional grade detergents. Residential washers are either top load or front load machines, and front load machines require high efficiency (HE) formulas.

If your school relies on household laundry care detergents for its limited laundry operations, be wary of green claims that say "natural," "organic," "green" or "biodegradable." These terms are unregulated and can be misleading.

Most retail products, both powder and liquid, are now highly compacted and can do the same number of loads as non-compacted products but require much less packaging and fewer chemicals. Select based on the number of loads the product can do, not on the visual size of the bottle or carton.

Also consider cold water wash formulas. Ninety percent of the energy used for washing clothes in a conventional top-load washer is consumed to heat the water. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, a cold water formula can save both energy and money.

Other Product Considerations

How to Think About Softeners

Consider using softeners. Adding them is an extra step, but softeners can extend fabric life by scavenging excess chlorine and cleaners from the wash cycle. They also control static and lift out hair and lint, which can reduce the need for rewashing and improve overall appearance. Softeners are generally non-toxic and pH-neutral.

Laundry and Fragrances

Individuals may be sensitive to fragrances, even to the point of allergic reaction. Fragrances don't offer

any additional benefits when it comes to cleaning. They can also mask chemical odors. It's best to look for fragrance-free products.

Choose Greener Laundry Equipment
Well-functioning laundry equipment can save staff time by eliminating extra loads. Professionally maintained equipment can also reduce environmental impact by saving electricity and water. Proper equipment maintenance includes checking that drains are working correctly and motors and bearings are oiled. Your chemical vendor can program equipment to use chemicals, water and time as efficiently as possible.

Industrial Washers and Dryers
Closed Loop Systems
We recommend controlled dispensing and monitoring systems, also called closed loop systems, to track efficient product usage. These machines can be programmed for water use, cycle time and water temperature. Large scale commercial washers and dryers are set up to run multiple large loads of laundry per day. Detergent (and, depending on the system you choose, bleach and fabric softener) may be delivered automatically based on selected programs via a pump system connected to the machine.

Set the Right Program
To reduce energy and water use, get the right dose for the right wash. This prevents poor cleaning and the need for rewashing. Worker training is key— most of the time the errors in the laundry process result from the operator, not the equipment.

Monitor Water and Energy Use
Have a practical way to monitor the laundry system's energy and water use and make sure it gets regular maintenance. This ensures your system is working properly and has both environmental and operational benefits. If you find sudden spikes in your usage, contact your service technician.

Household Washers and Dryers
Sometimes laundry equipment is donated from a parent in the community. If this is the case, it's important to have a technician check whether the equipment functions properly.

If a school can purchase new residential washing equipment, check for front-loading, ENERGY STAR-certified machines. These will use 50 percent less water and energy. ENERGY STAR, a program run jointly by the EPA and the Department of Energy, does not certify drying equipment. New drying machines with moisture sensors are preferable since they will automatically shut off once linens are dry.

Adopt Green Laundry Procedures
One easy way to reduce environmental impact is to reduce your overall number of laundry loads. Encourage students and staff to use uniforms and shower towels multiple times, only sending these linens to the washer when they are dirty. Post a fact sheet or placard in key areas, such as a locker room, reminding everyone how much energy and water can be saved if towels are reused. Placards should include instructions on where to leave reusable linens and where to put linens that should be laundered.

Always try to wash and dry full loads and be sure not to overuse detergents, especially if you switch to concentrates.

Make sure that the detergent will work on the intended cloth. Whites and colors can be cleaned together on a low temperature cycle, especially if the whites are not going to be worn or displayed visibly. Most clothes can be cleaned with cold water, which reduces the impact on the environment.

When drying, clean out the lint trap after each load and try to dry all clothes in succession so residual heat will be saved between loads. You can also capture residual heat by using the cool-down cycle

at the end of the drying period. To save electricity, the Department of Energy suggests drying towels and heavier cottons in separate loads from lighter-weight clothes.

Contaminated Laundry
Handling Requirements
Schools should follow OSHA guidelines on bloodborne pathogens when laundering linens contaminated with blood or other human stains.

· Contaminated laundry shall be handled as little as possible and should be bagged at the location where it was used and shall not be sorted or rinsed in the location of use.

· Contaminated laundry shall be placed and transported in bags or containers that are labeled or color-coded.

· Use bags that won't leak or soak through if laundry is wet.

· Employees who have contact with contaminated laundry should wear protective gloves and other appropriate personal protective equipment.

Sanitizing Laundry
According to the Center for Disease Control, the risk of actual disease transmission from contaminated laundry is negligible. It's appropriate to separate the contaminated laundry and wash according the manufacturer directions, but the addition of a chemical sanitizer is not necessary. Normal laundry procedure will make your linens clean and safe to wear and touch. Adding bleach or hydrogen peroxide is not necessary to "sanitize" should be avoided in a green cleaning program.