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A greener way to clean schools

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Project to study products' impact

June 11, 2008

Rob Faulkner

The Hamilton Spectator

(Jun 11, 2008)

Ontario's Ministry of Education wants to develop a plan to get non-green cleaners out of schools to improve the "indoor ecosystem."

The Green Clean project is only at the request for proposal stage, with bids due June 9. A pilot would run from December to April 2009 in selected schools.

It will study products, methods and the business case and create a tool kit to help schools go green. It will be voluntary for boards.

While some boards already have green cleaning, programs aren't consistent provincially. The new project would create a template.

"It's about time Ontario did this," said Mike Sawchuk, vice-president of Peterborough-based green cleaner manufacturer Enviro-Solutions Ltd. His firm doesn't develop programs, so it is not a bidder.

He said it's impossible to ignore mounting evidence that traditional chemicals can cause health problems with direct contact, leave residues and affect indoor air quality.

Sawchuk said three U.S. states have laws requiring green cleaners in schools but Canada lacks similar laws. So, boards often move faster than provincial actions.

Ministry spokesperson Patricia MacNeil said the idea came to the ministry through a council of senior board administrative staff.

"This is not something they will be required to do, because school boards are legal entities and have their own decision-making ability. But this will give them a tool to do it and help them through some of the challenges," she said.

"It will result in better learning environments, for students, and healthy workplaces for teachers, administrators and other staff."

Dan Duszczyzyn, a superintendent at the Wellington Catholic District School Board, co-chairs the Council of Senior Business Officials, which told the ministry that green cleaning and greener school design were worth pursuing.

"We thought we should do the research, and source the providers of services that would facilitate it in schools," he said, noting there was some skepticism on whether green cleaners work. He says they do.

Arch Walker, president of CUPE Local 4153 representing caretakers in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, said the HWDSB has been greening its cleaners for years via a chemical review committee created in collective bargaining. The committee approves products, does testing at sites, and will not allow untested chemicals into schools, he said.

"We were having an increasing number of people with illnesses, respiratory problems, skin rashes," he said, crediting the HWDSB for helping to green its school cleaning and not quibbling about costs.

Green cleaners are certified using the Canadian EcoLogo seal created by Environment Canada in 1988, or using the Green Seal created in the U.S. in 1989. They also test products to ensure they actually work.

Delta high school caretaker John Tompa said his green day-to-day cleaning products, from Rochester Midland, are doled out in the right concentration by a dispenser unit.

"There's a little bit more elbow grease involved because you are not using solvent-based chemicals, but for day-to-day stuff, it works well," Tompa said.

Ontario's Green Clean would review cleaners such as glass cleaner, floor care products, disinfectants, degreasers and specialty products such as those to get rid of graffiti.

It will also study how they clean compared with conventional chemicals and the environmental impact of packaging and transportation, as well as compare costs.

Ontario schools are not required by law to reveal to the public the chemicals they use.

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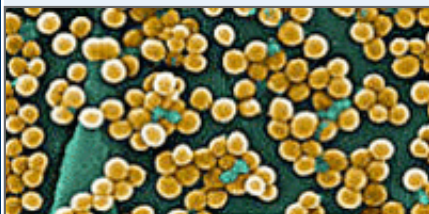
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