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## Meeting the Floor Care Challenges of Educational Facilities in 2011

Gary Pelphrey

It is likely that 2011 will be a very difficult year for many schools, colleges, and scores of other public facilities dependent on state and federal aid. In many cases, available funds are in very short supply. And, without question, this is going to impact specific segments of the professional cleaning industry, most especially facility service providers that maintain these locations. They are going to have to come up with new and unique ways to keep their cash-starved customers' facilities clean and healthy.

One area that will likely see cuts is hard-surface floor care. It may seem hard to believe but, at one time, floors in public facilities such as schools were refinished two or three times per year, sometimes more. Unfortunately, this has been scaled back dramatically mainly to cut costs, but also for environmental reasons. Don't be surprised if some school facilities eliminate floor refinishing altogether in 2011.

Before discussing "new and unique" ways to keep floors clean and healthy, it's important that we have an idea where the money goes when it comes to maintaining hard surface floors. Although the cost of the chemicals—strippers, polishes, sealers, finishes, etc.—is relatively small at about US\$2 billion annually, this is just 2 to 3 percent of the total amount spent on floor care. The bulk of the costs, as much as 90 percent, is for labor.

For this reason, finding ways to reduce the amount of labor that goes into floor care can result in the biggest savings. However, are there ways to do this without simply eliminating proper floor care maintenance? After all, a well-maintained, high-gloss shine can have a major positive impact on building occupants and, most specifically, students and staff in an educational facility. The following suggestions should help in reducing labor costs.

### No More Calendars

Earlier, we mentioned that schools used to strip and refinish their floors several times per year. Typically, this followed a school year calendar schedule. Major refinishing projects were conducted during the summer months when schools were closed, with smaller projects carried out during other school breaks—at Christmas, Easter, etc., on a section-by-section basis throughout the facility.

Floor refinishing scheduling based on the school's calendar is the first thing that has to go. It's far more practical and cost effective to refinish floors based on their appearance and the need for refinishing than on the school calendar.

### Preventive Measures

Although it is second nature to most cleaning professionals by now, it never ceases to amaze me how many educational facilities still do not have adequate walk off matting systems in place. Soil that stops at the door stays at the door and never has a chance to dirty or erode the floors inside. As to the length of mats, most experts agree that 15 feet of matting inside and outside key entries is necessary.

Even with an effective matting system in place, a routine "wet service" program should be established to remove wet and dry soils before they have a chance to damage floors. Spot mopping may be all that is required during the course of the school day, but an aggressive mopping program that applies cleaning solution, allows adequate dwell time, and then rinses floors with fresh water can extend the time between floor scrubbing and



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adequate dwell time, and finishes floors with fresh water can extend the time between floor scrubbing and refinishing.

## The Equipment Component

The most significant savings in floor care procedures is usually derived from automating floor care maintenance. Unfortunately, because so many educational facilities may be shopping with empty wallets in 2011, it may be hard for them to realize automating floor care—selecting an automatic scrubber, for example—is more of an investment in cost savings than an expenditure.

Depending on floor size, frequency of use, current labor rates, and other factors, a walk-behind or ride-on scrubber will typically pay for itself in less than a year. In some cases, the return on investment may only be a few months. Much depends on selecting the right sized machine. For instance, a standard 17-inch buffer can clean 1,000 square feet in about 31 minutes; a 21-inch walk-behind automatic scrubber does the same area in about four minutes. Furthermore, new green automatic scrubbers not only have more efficient moisture recovery systems, but they are also designed to use less water and chemical. This also produces a cost savings.

## What Not To Cut

What often happens once cleaning professionals begin examining floor care costs and looking for ways to reduce them is that selecting less costly floor care chemicals is considered as an option. This often can be "penny wise/pound foolish." Because the cost of floor care chemicals like strippers and finishes is relatively minor, as discussed earlier, it usually is a better strategy to select higher quality chemicals—even if they cost more. The reason is simple: In most cases, they will last longer and be easier to maintain. In other words, they will more than pay for themselves in the long run.

*Gary Pelphrey is general manager of [Powr-Flite Direct](#), a leading manufacturer of floor care equipment and other professional cleaning tools.*

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