

# CUSTODIANS OF SAFETY:

## A Health and Safety Tip Sheet for School Custodians



As custodians, you keep schools safe and clean for students and staff. When you take care of your own health and safety at work, you avoid disruptions in your life and at work, and can continue providing an important service to students.

A little planning will go a long way toward making your work environment safer. These three steps will help you get started:

1. Identify job hazards
2. Work towards solutions
3. Follow up and share your successes

### Step 1. Identify job hazards

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The chart on the following pages lists many of the common hazards that affect custodians. Use this chart to identify the hazards relevant to your work. Talk to your co-workers to find out if they have similar concerns. Report any hazards to your supervisor.

### Step 2. Work towards solutions

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The chart also offers tips for reducing hazards. Develop a plan to implement the changes that are needed. Some suggestions:

- Assess what changes you can make on your own, and what you need your employer or supervisor to do.
- When possible, work together with your school's site safety coordinator, union, and co-workers.
- Share your ideas with your supervisor.
- Workplace hazards can be reduced or eliminated by: (1) removing the hazard (preferable); (2) instituting policies and procedures that reduce the hazard; and/or (3) using personal protective equipment.
- Find out if there are laws that support the change you need.

### \* Did you know?

- School employees as a whole have a higher rate of work-related injuries and illnesses than do other California workers.
- Slips, trips, and falls are the leading causes of injuries among custodians.
- Exposure to hazardous cleaning chemicals can cause eye irritation, skin rashes, coughing, dizziness, and more serious illnesses. Many of these illnesses are never reported.



## Common Job Hazards and Safety Tips for School Custodians

### Slip and Fall Hazards

Slippery or uneven walking surfaces are the most common causes of slips and falls in schools. Here are some tips to prevent slips and falls:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean up spills immediately.</li> <li>• Use warning signs to keep people away from wet floors.</li> <li>• Use caution when stripping and waxing floors. Some chemicals make floors slippery.</li> <li>• Always use a ladder or footstool to reach for objects. Never stand on a box or cart.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When using a ladder, put the ladder on a stable, dry surface. Make sure it is fully open and locked. Do not stand on the top two rungs of the ladder. Ask for ladder safety training.</li> <li>• Make sure shelves and storage racks are stable and secured.</li> <li>• Wear shoes with non-skid soles.</li> </ul> |
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### Ergonomic Hazards

These are caused by poor job design that results in sprains, strains, and other wear and tear on the body. Ergonomic hazards include: lifting heavy objects, reaching for objects, mopping, or vacuuming.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request that your supervisor provide lightweight microfiber mops and long-handled scrubbers.</li> <li>• Place a step-up platform next to the dumpster, if possible.</li> <li>• Use a dolly or rolling cart to move heavy objects.</li> <li>• Drill holes into the bottom of garbage barrels. This makes it easier to lift garbage bags out of the barrel.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For tasks that require repetitive motions (such as mopping), alternate between the left and right hands.</li> <li>• For backpack vacuums, check proper fit, including use of the support harness. Empty the vacuum bag often to lighten the vacuum.</li> <li>• Obtain the SASH ergonomics fact sheet for additional practical tips.</li> </ul> |
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### Chemicals

Products like floor strippers or cleaning solutions can be very toxic.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find out what chemicals you use in your work.</li> <li>• Ask your supervisor to provide less toxic chemicals when possible.</li> <li>• Open windows and doors, if possible.</li> <li>• Make sure all chemicals you use are labeled and that you have a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS)* for each product. If you put chemicals into a different container, label the new container.</li> <li>• Dilute chemicals (such as disinfectant or floor stripper) according to manufacturer's directions.</li> <li>• Do not mix chemicals unless instructed to by the manufacturer. Never mix bleach and ammonia.</li> <li>• Close all containers, especially spray bottles, when not in use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep floors clean to reduce the need for floor strippers. Use floor mats at all entry ways to catch dirt.</li> <li>• Ask your supervisor for chemicals training, including how to use gloves, respirators or other protective gear, as indicated by the MSDS. Be familiar with the emergency plan in case of a chemical accident.</li> <li>• Call maintenance if you think there is a possibility of lead or asbestos exposure. Lead can be found on painted surfaces and can be disturbed during repairs. Asbestos could be found in spray-on insulation, ceiling tiles, flooring or pipe insulation and is only a hazard if it is disturbed.</li> <li>• Bring clean clothes and shoes to change into at the end of the work shift so you do not bring any chemicals home. Wash your work clothes separately from other clothes.</li> </ul>
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**\*What is an MSDS?** An MSDS is a Material Safety Data Sheet prepared by the manufacturer of a chemical or product. It provides detailed information about a chemical, such as how to protect yourself (including the use of gloves, respirators, or other protective gear), how to store the chemical, and what to do in an emergency. Your supervisor must provide the MSDS on request.

### Electrical Hazards

Working with electrical equipment (such as vacuum cleaners) can expose you to electrical current, which can cause shock, injury, and sometimes death.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep electrical equipment away from water.</li> <li>• Dry your hands before touching electrical equipment.</li> <li>• Make sure equipment is in the "Power off" position before plugging it into an outlet</li> <li>• Disconnect an electrical plug by pulling on the plug, not the cord.</li> <li>• Report any damaged equipment, such as frayed electrical cords</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediately turn off the power if you smell burning plastic or smoke, see sparks, or feel tingling or a shock. Do not use the equipment. Report the problem immediately.</li> <li>• Follow steps for proper lock out/tag out when servicing equipment. Turn off and disconnect the equipment. Make sure the source of power has a lock or a tag.</li> </ul>
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## A HEALTH AND SAFETY TIP SHEET FOR SCHOOL CUSTODIANS



### Infectious Diseases

Handling garbage bags or trash, such as soiled tissues and sanitary napkins, could put you in contact with infectious materials. You could be exposed to many different viruses and bacteria, such as the common cold, flu, HIV, and Hepatitis B.

- Wash your hands frequently.
- If you may come into contact with blood or other bodily fluids:
  - wear disposable gloves;
  - wash your hands with soap and water; and
  - disinfect any equipment or work areas that are affected.



### Violence and Aggressive Student Behavior

About three-quarters of all public schools experience one or more violent incidents of crime every year; almost half report thefts. Custodians working alone, at night, or during early morning hours face a higher risk of robberies and assaults.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report to maintenance staff any locks and alarms that are not working.</li> <li>• Work in pairs when possible.</li> <li>• Set up a communication system if you're working alone at night or when school is out</li> <li>• Check with administration on the reporting process for violent incidents and threats.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put your personal belongings in a secure place.</li> <li>• Advocate for workplace violence training for all school staff.</li> <li>• Obtain the SASH emergencies fact sheet for additional practical tips.</li> </ul> |
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Adapted from: Small Business Resources: Janitorial Services, Worker Occupational Safety and Health Training and Education Program, Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation, 2009.



### Step 3. Follow up and share your successes

Once you've identified the hazards and solutions, follow up to make sure the changes are implemented. Contact your district's or school's safety coordinator for help or suggestions. Share your successes with your co-workers and your supervisor.

#### School Site Safety Coordinator

The person in charge of health and safety at your **school** is:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

#### District Resource

The person in charge of health and safety at your **district** is:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Reporting Injuries and Illnesses

It is important to report work-related injuries and illnesses. You cannot be discriminated against or punished for doing so. If you have a work-related injury or illness, contact:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

### \* Safety Pays

Although resources are limited in school districts, some solutions do not require extra money.

Preventing injuries can actually **SAVE** lives and **SAVE** money by:

- reducing workers' compensation claims;
- avoiding loss in productivity when injuries occur; and
- improving employee morale!