



*Published: February 7, 2024*

## **4 steps for achieving cleaner and healthier classrooms**

Concrete steps school administrators can take to help protect students.



Over 6.5 million children in the United States (about 13%) miss more than 15 days of school each year, which can put them at risk for poor school performance and have negative impacts on their long-term health, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).<sup>1</sup> This concerning trend can be linked to asthma and acute illnesses, two of the leading causes of school absences that are often directly linked with how schools are cleaned.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states that good physical conditions in schools can reduce absenteeism, improve test scores, and can also improve teacher retention rates.<sup>3</sup> Here are 4 steps a school can take to help maintain a cleaner environment that enhances student well-being, boosts teacher satisfaction, and improves attendance.

### **How can you maintain cleaner, healthier classrooms?**

#### **1. Indoor air quality**

Poor air quality in school environments may cause respiratory problems and exposure to various pollutants in school buildings may cause damage to students' health, according to recent studies.<sup>4</sup> Airborne dust mites, pollen, and mold spores can set off asthma in children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), maintaining a safer and healthier school environment is important for reducing asthma triggers, as an estimated 3 out of every 30 children in a class are prone to asthma.<sup>5</sup>



It's important that heating, air conditioning, and ventilation systems are regularly serviced and meet all code requirements. Building-wide filtration can be improved by upgrading to MERV-13 (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value) filters. Additional steps include opening windows and using portable air cleaners to improve air quality inside a building. See the selection of [portable air purifiers](#) and [wall-mounted air purifiers](#) at ODP.

## 2. Train teachers and staff in good cleaning practices

The CDC recommends developing policies to protect and train workers in cleaning practices before assigning cleaning and disinfection tasks.<sup>6</sup> Teachers and custodians should understand the importance of regular cleaning and how to use cleaning products safely. These recommendations extend to the importance of the cleaning agents themselves. Too many schools rely on harsh disinfectants for routine cleaning, when common cleaners would be sufficient, according to the National Education Association (NEA).<sup>7</sup> See the selection of [furniture cleaners](#), [floor cleaners](#), [bathroom cleaners](#), [disinfectant wipes](#), [glass cleaners](#), [screen cleaners](#), [rubber gloves](#), [sanitizing sprays](#), [dusters](#), and [mildew remover](#) at ODP.

The CDC also recommends [specific protocols and products](#) for disinfecting spaces occupied by someone who is sick or has tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>



### 3. Clean high-contact surfaces more often

Cleaning surfaces that are touched frequently is an effective way of combating illness in the classroom. The CDC states that cleaning regularly is enough to stop bacteria or viruses in most situations and that high-contact surfaces like desktops, doorknobs, bathroom fixtures, stair rails, pens, keyboards, and toys should be cleaned more regularly.<sup>9</sup> In a 2022 study by the journal *Nature*, an enhanced cleaning protocol that included bi-weekly cleaning of desks resulted in a “significantly lower level of biocontamination on desktops,” with a lower probability of absence due to gastrointestinal illness.<sup>10</sup> See the selection of [bathroom cleaners](#), [disinfectant wipes](#), and [sanitizing sprays](#) at ODP.

### 4. Encourage students to practice good hand-hygiene habits

Washing hands is one of the most effective ways to combat germs and, thereby, can help reduce classroom absences. The *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* states that children who wash their hands regularly (4 times a day) suffer 24% fewer sick days because of respiratory illness and 51% fewer sick days because of gastrointestinal diseases.<sup>11</sup>

The CDC recommends washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds and encourages schools to integrate hand-hygiene lessons in K-12 schools and Early Care and Education (ECE) program curricula to regularly remind children of the importance of keeping hands clean.<sup>12</sup> See the selection of [hand sanitizers](#), [hand soaps](#), and [soap dispensers](#) at ODP.

#### Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/143/2/e20183648/37326/The-Link-Between-School-Attendance-and-Good-Health?autologincheck=redirected>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://healthyschoolscampaign.org/blog/how-a-school-is-cleaned-might-be-affecting-attendance/#>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools/evidence-scientific-literature-about-improved-academic-performance>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352710222009202>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/asthma/index.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/hygiene/cleaning/facility.html>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/ensuring-safe-and-just-schools-cleaning-and-disinfection>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/about-list-n-disinfectants-coronavirus-covid-19-0>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/hygiene/cleaning/facility.html>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41370-022-00427-8>
- <sup>11</sup> [https://journals.lww.com/jfmpc/fulltext/2021/10020/impact\\_of\\_hand\\_hygiene\\_intervention\\_on\\_hand.9.aspx#](https://journals.lww.com/jfmpc/fulltext/2021/10020/impact_of_hand_hygiene_intervention_on_hand.9.aspx#)
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/handwashing-school.html#>