

Do New Jersey's Schools Pass the Greening Test?



BY DEIRDRE IMUS

THE DEIRDRE IMUS ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER FOR PEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY®

GREENING OUR SCHOOLS IS NOT JUST good for the environment, it's good for us and vital for the health and future of our children. Exposures to toxic chemicals and airborne irritants can lead to school absenteeism, learning disabilities, asthma and other chronic health issues. In fact, one of the primary causes of school absenteeism is asthma-related illness, which affects one out of every 13 school-aged children, and results in 14.7 million missed school days per year, according to the U.S. EPA.

The mission of The Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology® is to identify, control and ultimately prevent exposures to environmental factors that may cause adult and especially pediatric cancer, as well as other health problems with our children. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental threats, because pound for pound of body weight, they take in more air, water and food than adults. They also play closer to the ground, where contaminants may settle, and often have frequent hand-to-mouth activity.

Through our national "Greening Your Schools" program, recently featured in *USA Today*, we are helping schools adopt healthier and more eco-friendly practices. Greening encompasses all aspects of the school environment, from classrooms to lunchrooms, from high school soccer fields to pre-school playgrounds. It includes the use of green building materials, healthier food choices, and alternatives to toxic lawn, pest and cleaning products.

1. The Case for Green Building

Ideally, greening starts from the ground up with Green Building principles. Beyond energy efficiency and air handling systems, that means incorporating more readily biodegradable and renewable materials, taking environmental precautions during construction and renovations, and teaching staff about greening. Schools are constantly painting and upgrading their facilities. This is a great opportunity to think "green". Using no or low-

growing up green!

VOLUME TWO
In the Bestselling *Green This!* Series

baby and child care



deirdre imus

On April 15th, the second volume in the *New York Times* best-selling *Green This!* series from Deirdre Imus will make its debut. *Green This! Growing Up Green, Baby and Child Care* is a parent-friendly guide to raising a healthy child in an increasingly toxic environment.

VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) paints is an easy way to improve indoor air quality.

Greening is not just a destination, but a mindset. What somebody thought was green yesterday, may not be the best green choice today. We help schools understand that mindset, start putting it into practice and keep striving to improve. That includes continuous improvement in reuse, recycling and disposal efforts. We focus on cleaning products first, because they touch surfaces in every classroom, and often contain ammonia, bleach and other toxic chemicals. Students and all who work in the school can benefit from improvements to indoor air. Beyond asthma, about 34 percent of American children under 18 suffer from allergies every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

2. Elimination of Toxic Cleaning Products

Our award-winning Greening the Cleaning® program makes it easy for schools to take greening to a higher level. Greening the Cleaning® means eliminating—to the greatest extent possible—all cleaning agents containing hazardous ingredients and replacing these with products that use naturally-derived ingredients with the

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lowest levels of toxicity. The Center assists in the transition, assessing current cleaning practices and educating staff about the new mindset.

Hundreds of hospitals, government authorities, businesses and schools have adopted the program since 2001. The Environmental Center is part of Hackensack University Medical Center (HUMC), a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. HUMC, which served as the launch pad for the program, has noted a marked drop in annual work-related injuries after switching and saved approximately 15 percent in product costs. Schools can save money, too.

Unlike other cleaning products, we print all ingredients right on the label, and purchases help benefit children. One hundred percent of all profits from the insti-



The Planet Protector Club from Willard Elementary School in Ridgewood, N.J., enjoyed a special lesson recently on how to “green” their home and school from Deirdre Imus, president and founder of The Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology®.

tutional products go to the Environmental Center for supporting education and research to identify, control and ultimately prevent exposures to environmental factors that may cause adult, and especially pediatric cancer, as well as other health problems with our children.

3. Integrated Pest Management

Toxic agricultural chemicals used in the ‘70s turned up in one Paramus, New Jersey elementary school last year. This is just another example of how chemicals can persist in the environment, and how close children can be to exposure. But what about the lawn and pest chemicals schools use now? Notifying parents before hazardous pesticides and rodenticides are applied is now a state requirement. However, doesn't it make more sense to switch to natural alternatives—both at home and at school? Natural, low-impact alternatives do exist. (See www.BeyondPesticides.org, for example.)

4. Healthy Lunch and Nutrition Education

Food fuels our minds as well as our bodies, so it only makes sense to serve children the best fuels possible in lunch programs and vending machines. According to the National Institutes of Health, a poor diet and lack of

exercise have contributed to an epidemic in childhood obesity. According to the CDC, one in every six children in the United States between the ages of six and 19 is considered overweight.

In addition to teaching good nutrition, schools can add organic foods and soy-based vegetarian dishes to the menu. They can make sure they use milk free of growth hormones, and help children experience how good fruits and vegetables free of pesticides taste. Cafeterias can also cut back on fatty foods and replace hydrogenated cooking oils with polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated ones. Caffeinated and sugar-filled teas and sodas can be replaced by fruit juices. Potato chips can be replaced by fresh organic pears and apples. With some training, children will choose healthier alternatives.

5. Promotion of Exercise and Stress Reduction

Health teachers have an opportunity to instill a lifelong love of exercise in all their students. Beyond building stronger bodies, they can build a stronger outlook for a whole new generation. They can teach stress reduction techniques and the “natural high” of endorphins. They can create a supportive culture in their classes, one that encourages others, and gives extra encouragement to those who are less athletic and those with health issues.

6. Champions Wanted

Our Environmental Center is reaching out to get “Greening Your Schools” growing faster in the Garden State through live presentations and special mailings. Every school needs at least one champion for Greening. It could be a principal or school administrator, a member of the school board or maintenance staff. Anybody can spark it—a parent, the PTA, a student or club—or that special science teacher. Maybe it's you. Please visit the Center's Web site, www.dienviro.com, to learn “How to Start Greening a School Near You.” ■

Deirdre Imus is president and founder of The Deirdre Imus Environmental Center for Pediatric Oncology® at Hackensack University Medical Center.

The Top 5 Signs of a Healthy School

According to the U.S. EPA, one in five people in America spend their days in schools as students, teachers, administrators or staff. Here are the top five indicators of a healthy school:

1. Green Building Principles
2. Elimination of Toxic Cleaning Products
3. Use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
4. Healthy Lunch and Nutrition Education
5. Promotion of Exercise and Stress Reduction

For more information, visit www.dienviro.com.