

Custodial Issues: Workload, Work Hours, Work Schedules

As school districts face continuing pressures to cut costs, custodial and maintenance work has come under increasing scrutiny. While some cost-cutting has been accomplished through genuine improvements in efficiency, there have been many short-sighted efforts to save money - approaches to cost-cutting which are harmful to the school districts' physical plants, to students' education, and to the employees involved. According to American School and University Magazine's 27th annual Maintenance and Operations cost study, "...decades of deferred maintenance, insufficient building upkeep procedures, and years of siphoning dollars from maintenance budgets have significantly contributed to the current condition of our nation's schools."

TEAM CLEANING

Team cleaning is a method in which specialists are trained for specific parts of the cleaning process - restroom cleaning, vacuuming, etc. School districts around the country have been turning to team cleaning in an attempt to cut custodial costs. But team cleaning is a technique that was developed for use in empty office buildings. A article in Cleaning and Maintenance Magazine (October 1997) points out that team cleaning is less effective in other kinds of settings, like schools.

The basic problem is that schools are very different than office buildings, and the responsibilities of school custodians are very different than those of office cleaners. **Privatizing Public Schools - A Closer Look**, a recent report issued by the Michigan Education Association, found that if the Lansing, Michigan high school custodians performed the entire set of duties of a group of contract cleaners in the Lansing Sears store, they would only be doing 41.7% of their jobs!

The bottom line - take a very hard look at team cleaning in school settings. Often it is merely a way of disguising a speed-up that makes it hard for custodians to perform the full variety of duties that are needed to maintain a quality learning environment in schools.

WORKLOAD (SQUARE FOOTAGE)

Some school districts encourage the idea that there is a national square footage standard which applies to school custodians - a standard amount of floor space that a custodian should be responsible for on an 8-hour shift. Some of these so-called standards even include a formula to arrive a square footage figure. But most square footage guidelines come from the duties involved in cleaning commercial office spaces, which are very different that those of a school custodian.

In fact, there is no national square footage standard for school custodians. Not only is there a tremendous difference between schools and commercial cleaning, but there are great variations in conditions and duties from one school to another. Any standard which tried to take this into account would involve so many variables that it would probably be unworkable.

FULL-TIME VS. PART-TIME

Some school districts try to save money by replacing full-time custodial positions with part time jobs that offer reduced or no fringe benefits. Districts can certainly save money in the short term by not paying for health insurance and other benefits. But in the long term this practice hurts more than the custodians involved. Part-time employees are more likely to be newer employees. They are less likely to know the students and staff they work with, and have less of a commitment to the schools they work in.

PRIVATIZATION

Custodial and maintenance employees are among the likeliest targets for privatization in school districts. We believe that privatization, including the privatization of school support jobs, is a threat to public education because privatization undermines the school-community link. There is less, not more, accountability to the residents of the school district and their elected representatives. If that work is being done by private contractors there is less, not

more, oversight. We feel that privatization is a serious enough threat to public education to merit its own section in this Web site. For more information see the [Privatization](#) section of this Web site.

SHIFT ABUSES AND WAGE AND HOUR LAW

Public school employees fall under the provisions of the Federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), but many school districts do not fully understand or comply with FLSA requirements. For instance, in general the FLSA requires public school employers to pay at least one and one-half times the employees' regular rates of pay for all hours worked over 40 in the workweek. (Under certain conditions they may receive compensatory time off at a rate of not less than one and one-half hours for each overtime hour worked, instead of cash overtime pay, and may accumulate up to 240 hours of compensatory time.) The law can be complicated, but general guidance is available on the Web. (Specific questions should be referred to Association staff, or to the nearest U.S. Dept. of Labor Wage and Hour Division office.) For more information go to the U.S. Department of Labor's [FLSA Advisor](#).

School districts sometimes switch custodians' shifts and work schedules, even in mid-week, to avoid having to pay overtime. Constantly changing schedules are both a great personal inconvenience and a health hazard, and this issue should be addressed through bargaining.