

# Custodial & Maintenance Staffing Issues



Fact Sheet No. 13-11

September 2013

## Introduction

Custodial and maintenance professionals help keep our New York schools clean and safe for students, staff and community.

Along with heavy cleaning and groundskeeping, these workers perform many other duties to keep schools running smoothly and maintain a safe and healthy environment. These include ensuring uniform temperatures and proper ventilation, snow clearing, electrical and plumbing repairs, painting, boiler maintenance, emergency clean ups, room set up and take down and moving heavy equipment. One of their most important responsibilities is to ensure proper indoor air quality.

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## Custodial/Maintenance Staffing Issues

Over the years, custodial/maintenance staff have faced several problems that have led to doing more with less:

- Downsizing: shrinking school budgets and academic pressures have resulted in layoffs and shrinking building maintenance budgets.
- Building additions, without staff additions: many schools have added new wings/classrooms, creating thousands of square feet of additional building space without adding staff.
- Years of deferred maintenance: many districts have not kept up with needed structural and system maintenance in large part because the state reimbursement process only gives significant monies for replacement of systems or buildings, not for minor maintenance. Additionally, communities are not approving large capital projects as they did in the past and now there is tremendous need to fix what's broken without the staff to do it.

- Reductions of trades titles: Over the last two decades, districts have eliminated trades titles like plumbers, masons and electricians. Remaining in-house custodial and general maintenance workers may not be able to do as much as those with specific qualifications/licenses.

As school districts seek to cut expenses and staffing, custodial workloads increase to the detriment of the schools. Cleaning cannot be done as thoroughly with fewer workers. It also poses a safety risk to the workers as they try to keep the same level of cleanliness with fewer workers. Short staffing can result in taking shortcuts on safety precautions because of the pressure to get the job done. Custodians already face significant job hazards like musculoskeletal injuries from heavy lifting, mopping, wiping surfaces, scrubbing and chemical exposures from cleaning and maintenance products.

Custodial and maintenance professionals' top concern is contracting-out of their jobs. 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. **NYSUT believes that privatization of these jobs is a threat to public education because privatization undermines the school-community link. There is less accountability to the residents of the school district and their elected representatives. If work is being done by private contractors there is less oversight. As soon as there is any suspicion of privatizing, be sure to contact your local president who, in turn, will connect with their NYSUT labor relations specialist.**

## Finding Solutions

Addressing staffing issues is challenging. Several documents play a part in researching solutions.

- **Contract:** Your contract is the first document to check to see if it speaks to staffing, health & safety issues, required training, professional development, labor/management meetings, and expedited grievance procedures for safety & health issues.
- **School Board Policies:** Your school board policy manual may also address expectations for building maintenance and cleaning and/or staffing.
- **Surveys:** Surveying your members is an effective tool to find out their concerns. A survey can give you concrete examples and ideas that you will need to move forward. The NYSUT Research Department has resources to help with the process of surveying your members.

- **Professional Standards Recommendations:** 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 at a square footage figure. But most square footage guidelines come from the duties involved in cleaning commercial office spaces, which are very different than those of a school custodian.
- **New York State Standards:** New York state does not have any set staffing levels/square footage or cleaning level formulas to use as a guide for helping solve workload problems. 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 in determining square footage per shift. Variables include the type of flooring, wall covers, number of windows, and type of room (classroom, science lab, computer room, etc.).
- **Type of Cleaning Approach:** Another consideration is the type of cleaning to be used: area cleaning or team cleaning. Area cleaning is the traditional approach to custodial work, where a single custodian is responsible for all aspects of cleaning (vacuuming, dusting, trash removal, etc.) in a specific area. Team cleaning is performed by a team of specialists where one uses the vacuum, another a dust mop, and yet another empties wastebaskets or cleans the chalk boards. To reduce risk of injury, tasks should be rotated regularly.

## Bargaining in the Public Sector

Public employee unions are covered by the Public Employees' Fair Employment Act (Taylor Law). Section 200 of the law (Statement of Policy) states:

“. . . it is the public policy of the state and the purpose of the act to promote harmonious and cooperative relationships between government and its employees and to protect the public by assuring, at all times, the orderly and uninterrupted operations and functions of government.”

The Taylor law guarantees public employees the “right of organization and representation.”

NYSUT assists local unions with both of these rights – organization and representation – through the Department of Regional Services. The work of the local is supported by a NYSUT labor relations specialist (LRS) and other regional and headquarters staff as needed.

### ***The Local Contract***

A local contract is an important and necessary document for the members of the union. In addition to delineating the employee's wages and benefits, the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) can be used to set procedures for discipline and termination, establish safety and health procedures – including an expedited grievance procedure for violations, rights of the union, days and hours of work, evaluation procedures, etc. These non-wage/benefit issues may be just as, or more important than the wages and benefits that are negotiated.

It is important to understand that under the provisions of the Taylor Law there are “mandatory” and “non-mandatory” subjects of bargaining. Local leaders should discuss bargaining demands and contract enforcement with their LRS.

### ***Need to be Vigilant***

It is imperative that local members and leaders are vigilant to any unilateral changes that the employer attempts to make to the working conditions of the employees in the bargaining unit. Such changes may come without any warning, while others may be made by the employer after consultation, but without agreement on how the changes should be implemented.

### **Public Sector Employees and Civil Service**

Many of the positions (titles) that are held by custodial and/or maintenance employees are covered by civil service regulations – state, county, or local.

Locals need to consider how and when to use the civil service regulations to their advantage to support the CBA.

### ***Bottom Line***

Local leaders need to be in constant contact with their LRS. Together, they should evaluate the needs of the members and local; determine how to go about reaching the established goals, and educating the members about changes and the role of the union in protecting members' rights.

### **Professional Development**

Meaningful professional development is critical to maintaining a confident and highly skilled staff. Districts that do a good job in training show respect for their school buildings and the workers who care for them.

Training should include some of the following elements from the list below. Training on many of these topics can be accessed through NYSUT, NEA and AFT, the approved websites are listed at the end of the fact sheet in the resources section.

- Asbestos training, including information about state and federal regulations pertaining to the handling and removal of such material.

- Bloodborne pathogen training, including the potential risks of blood and human waste cleanups. This should include information about the Bloodborne Pathogen Standard drafted by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
- Use of equipment, including its safe operation.
- Hazardous chemicals, including extensive training in the use of cleaning chemicals to reduce injuries.
- Ergonomics, including how to avoid back injury and information about new cleaning tools and products that can minimize body strain.
- Time management, including how workers can prioritize their tasks so they can accomplish them efficiently and effectively.
- Building security, including neighborhood watch programs.
- Supervision, so workers who are promoted have skills to fairly and effectively deal with their staff.

## Other Strategies

Coalition building is a great strategy to help others in the school community to understand the issues faced by our custodial and maintenance workers. Partnering with parent organizations, other union locals in your district and encouraging cooperation from students will go a long way. Your NYSUT labor relations specialist can help you with training on effective coalition building.

NYSUT also offers another program called, “SRPs Make a Difference.” This is a public relations campaign where NYSUT staff helps locals create a one page personalized flyer about the local to show the importance of the work the members do, and how invested members are in the community. Concrete ideas are provided in order to use this flyer to the local’s maximum benefit. The ‘SRPs Make a Difference’ information and materials are available on the NYSUT website at [www.nysut.org](http://www.nysut.org).

## Examples from Other States of Custodial & Maintenance Staffing Guidelines

The three documents listed below are included as examples from different states that discuss facility maintenance and operations. These include formulas and rationalization of staffing needs as well as other topics of interest.

- Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Facilities Maintenance & Operations Classified Adequacy Staffing Report (Washington):  
<http://www.k12.wa.us/Compensation/pubdocs/ClassifiedReportCompilation.pdf>
- Arkansas Division of Public School Academic Facilities & Transportation Public School Facilities, Maintenance, Repair and Renovation manual – see Appendix C pages 42-45:  
[http://arkansasfacilities.arkansas.gov/public/userfiles/documents/facilities\\_manuals/Fac\\_Manual\\_Other\\_Sections/Section\\_3\\_-\\_Custodial\\_Maintenance\\_Manual\\_-\\_Sept\\_2009.pdf](http://arkansasfacilities.arkansas.gov/public/userfiles/documents/facilities_manuals/Fac_Manual_Other_Sections/Section_3_-_Custodial_Maintenance_Manual_-_Sept_2009.pdf)

- Planning Guide for Maintaining School Facilities: Sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics. (Washington, D.C.) – page 82 shows a chart for establishing expectations for custodial efforts:

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003347.pdf>

## Resources

### **NYSUT:**

[www.nysut.org](http://www.nysut.org)

### **AFT:**

[www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)

### **NEA:**

<http://www.nea.org/home/30347.htm>

### **National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities:**

[www.ncef.org](http://www.ncef.org)

### **OSHA:**

<https://www.osha.gov/dcsp/products/topics/cleaningindustry/standards.html>

### **California Department of Industrial Relations:**

[https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh\\_publications/Janitors.pdf](https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh_publications/Janitors.pdf)

### **Healthy Schools Network**

<http://www.healthyschools.org/>

### **Management Developed Cleaning Standards:**

The management supported Cleaning Industry Research Institute (CIRI) and the ISSA: “The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association” are currently in the process of developing standards for measuring the effectiveness of cleaning in K-12 schools. Below is the most recent version of the industry “draft standards”:

[http://www.issa.com/data/File/regulatory/DRAFT%207\\_CLEAN%20STANDARD\\_July%202%202013.pdf](http://www.issa.com/data/File/regulatory/DRAFT%207_CLEAN%20STANDARD_July%202%202013.pdf)

[http://www.issa.com/?id=clean\\_standard](http://www.issa.com/?id=clean_standard)

<http://www.issa.com/>

<http://www.ciriscience.org/>

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*Several sources have been used in the creation of this document.  
They include: the AFT, NEA, NYSUT, State Department of Civil Service and the above web sites.*