



How to Select the Right Floor Cleaning Equipment for Your School

Students learn best in clean environments. That's not just common sense; it's supported by research. A study conducted by APPA found that a lack of cleanliness is a distraction to learning and that most students (84%) want their learning environment to adhere to a high standard of cleanliness.

For facilities managers trying to manage tight budgets, achieving this standard can be a challenge. Fortunately, the right floor cleaning equipment can help you keep your facility spotless while also saving you money on labor.

Starting with Prevention

The old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is perhaps nowhere more true than when we talk about cleaning.

It's far less expensive to keep dirt and grime out of your facilities than it is to get it out after it's there. That's why you should always start your cleaning program where you get the most bang for your buck—outside.

Here are a few easy things you, your staff, and your students can do to prevent dirt and grime from getting through the door:

- Regularly clean your entrances
- Install matting at entryways
- Filter air to reduce airborne dust
- Encourage students and staff to pick up outdoor trash and litter when they see it

Tackling Floor Cleaning Challenges

Floors pose a cleaning challenge in any building, but especially in schools because of the sheer amount of foot traffic. Let's look at the two main cleaning challenges—carpets and hard floors—and the equipment that can help you solve these challenges efficiently and effectively.

Cleaning Carpets

When carpets aren't properly maintained, their appearance degrades and they wear out more quickly. In the APPA survey cited above, dull spots and matted carpets were signs that suggested a school's lack of cleanliness was at risk of becoming a distraction.

To keep carpets in top condition, you need to establish two cleaning routines: Daily cleaning and periodic, restorative cleaning.

Daily Cleaning

Vacuuming is the cornerstone of any daily cleaning routine. Effectively removing dirt from your carpets requires a high-quality commercial-grade vacuum cleaner.

What to look for in a vacuum cleaner

- **CRI Seal of Approval.** The Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) tests vacuum cleaners on various measures of effectiveness, such as surface appearance change (i.e., does the product leave the carpet minimally changed after multiple cleanings?). The CRI Seal of Approval guarantees that carpet cleaning equipment works so you know you're getting the most out of your investment.
- **Powerful dirt removal.** This sounds obvious, but it's amazing how many vacuums fall short of the power and performance needed to effectively remove dirt and debris from carpets. Soil removal efficiency is the most important performance measure and one of main tests required for the CRI Seal of Approval.
- **HEPA filtration.** As long as you're doing the work, don't stop at dust and dirt. HEPA filters help remove the viruses, bacteria, and allergens that lurk in carpets. And, more importantly, after the contaminants are removed, a HEPA filter prevents them from exiting the vacuum through exhaust air.
- **Effective edge cleaning.** Not all vacuums are equally good at edge cleaning. Ineffective vacuums will leave a gray, dusty edge along your walls.
- **The right style for your job.** Vacuums come in a lot of shapes and sizes. Do you buy an upright? A backpack? A canister? A wide area vac? Each is designed for a specific task, so make sure to select equipment that matches your application. In some cases, a vacuum might not be the best choice. For example,

if you have large, open areas, consider a commercial sweeper with dust control instead.

- **Simplicity.** Don't underestimate the value of a simple, easy-to-use machine. Look for a vacuum that's lightweight and easy to unplug.

Periodic, Restorative Cleaning

Depending on the location of your carpet, you will occasionally need to perform a restorative deep cleaning. For example, in places with a lot of snow, winters can wreak havoc on carpets. Periodic restoration may also be required in heavily trafficked areas, after special events, and to remove commonly spilled items, like oil, grease, soda, and coffee.

These heavy-duty jobs require a carpet extractor—a machine sprays water or a cleaning solution onto the carpet and then removes any foreign material. In short, an extractor removes everything a vacuum can't.

Carpet extractors come in two varieties: self-contained extractors and portable extractors (aka "box and wand extractors"). Like vacuums, both types of extractors should have the CRI Seal of Approval. For this equipment, a "machine-based CRI" is better than a "system-based CRI."

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Self-contained extractors

Self-contained extractors are simple machines that have been on the market for decades. They're the easiest equipment to use from a labor and training standpoint.

Besides the motor, a self-contained extractor contains a solution tank, a recovery tank, a brush for agitating the carpet fibers, and a vacuum shoe to recover the dirt, soil, stains, and so on that have been removed from the carpet.

What to look for in a self-contained extractor

- **A high-quality brush.** The brush does the cleaning, so it's a top priority. Pump pressure is less important.
- **Low water usage.** Getting good results with less water allows you to clean longer without emptying and refilling your tank. It also results in shorter dry times.
- **A well-designed vacuum shoe.** The vacuum shoe may be the most important component of the machine. To minimize drying time, it needs to have continuous contact with the carpet and provide even suction across its entire width.
- **A single spray jet.** Extractor water jets can get clogged, and single jets clog less. Plus, they provide more consistent coverage.
- **Dual mode cleaning.** Dual mode extractors are versatile machines that can provide both restoration and maintenance cleaning. The high flow rate setting provides heavy-duty soil removal, while the low flow rate setting uses less water/chemical for faster dry times.
- **Easy-to-remove recovery tanks and easy-to-clean shoes.** You want it to be easy for your staff to dispose of grime.
- **Additional functionality.** Finally, to get the most from your extractor investment, look for a machine that can also clean hard floors, get at hard-to-reach areas (with a wand), remove spots, and alternate between deep cleaning and interim extraction.

Portable Extractors (aka Box and Wand Extractors)

Portable extractors are easily recognized by their shape: a tank on wheels that has a solution and recovery area, a pressure pump, a vacuum, a long hose, a wand, and sometimes an inline heater.

What to look for in a portable extractor

- **A powerful, easy-to-use wand.** The wand is where the cleaning action takes place. Wands made of stainless steel are powerful, but they're heavy. A lighter weight wand with an ergonomic handle and a Teflon head will improve the productivity and efficiency of your cleaning staff.
- **Pressure and heat.** Heat helps release the oils and soils that stick to carpet fibers. And since there are no brushes, you need pressure to knock the debris off the fibers. Ideally, you want both, but if you have to choose, pick heat over pressure for better cleaning. (Note: wool-containing carpets should not be exposed to heat above 212°F.)
- **A high-performance, high-power vacuum.** This is required for pulling the water and soil out of your carpet.
- **Transportability.** Despite their name, portable extractors can be difficult to transport. Make sure you get one that's easy to move to your cleaning areas.

4 tips for deep cleaning your carpets

1. Always vacuum first.
2. Use a carpet spotter for areas with significant soilage.
3. Don't assume you need chemicals. Water alone can often get the job done.
4. Dry your carpets as fast as possible to avoid mold.



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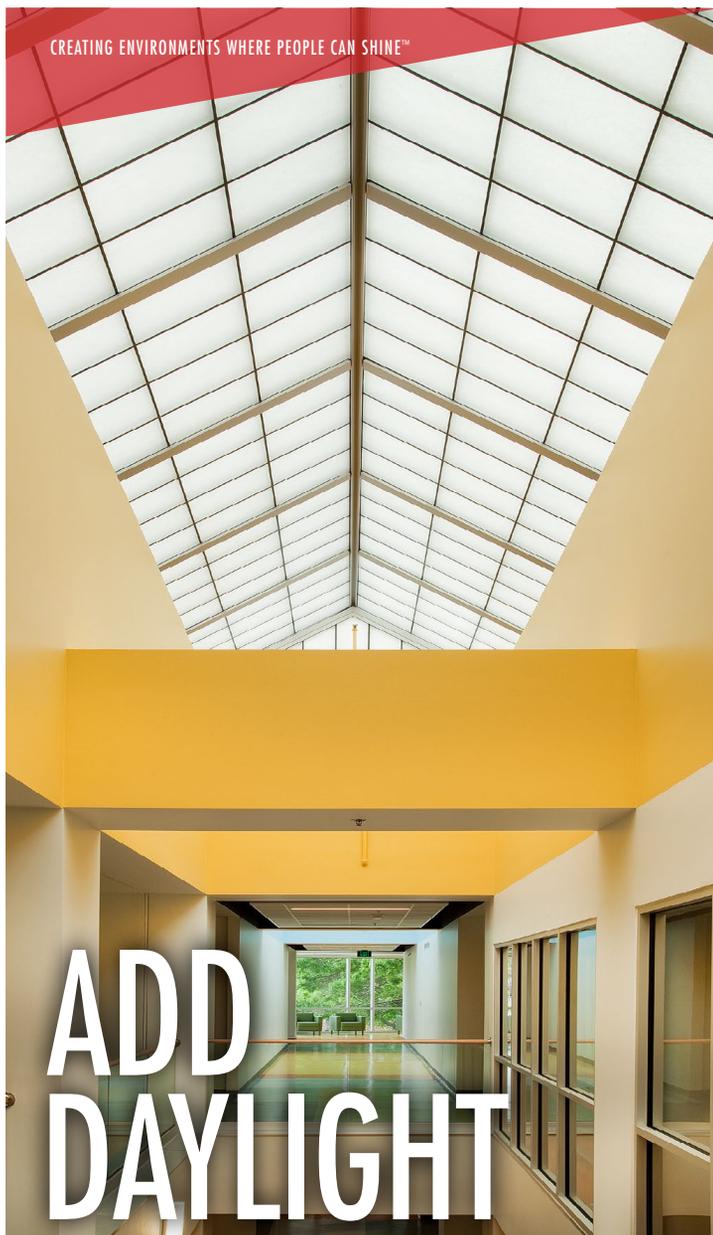
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Cleaning Hard Floors

Hard flooring is the other major cleaning challenge, and it's amplified by the fact that many schools still use mops and buckets. Mopping is messy and inefficient, it makes floors dangerously slippery, and often it simply doesn't do a very good job—it spreads dirt around rather than picking it up. The motion of mopping can also cause back and strain injuries.

Automatic Scrubbers

Automatic scrubbers clean faster and more effectively. An automatic scrubber is a machine that puts down a cleaning solution from an onboard tank, agitates it with a brush or pad, and then sucks up the used solution with a squeegee/vacuum system.

What to look for in an automatic scrubber

- **A scrubbing deck that matches the needs of your application.** Automatic scrubbers come in different types and sizes to tackle specific cleaning situations.

Disc scrubbers are the most common and also typically the lowest cost scrubbers available. They use either pads or brushes and provide aggressive cleaning to remove even stubborn, stuck-on soils.

Cylindrical scrubbers use two cylindrical brushes and are able to pick up debris during scrubbing, which eliminates the need to sweep. These scrubbers are especially effective on rough or grouted surfaces. One thing to consider is that cylindrical machines are less versatile because they can only be equipped with brushes and can't be used for conventional stripping.

Random orbital scrubbers are the newest scrubbing technology. They use pads and are able to provide highly efficient cleaning action that removes debris from all sides, including right up against walls. These scrubbers are also the most environmentally friendly choice as they use water and chemical extremely efficiently and provide chemical-free floor finish removal.

- **A large tank opening.** A large opening makes cleaning the tank faster and easier. Also make sure the tank can drain completely.
- **Single-pass functionality.** A machine that can scrub and dry floors in a single pass boosts productivity and safety.
- **An easy-to-use interface with an onboard chemical system.** The interface should be intuitive and allow the operator to change settings easily and quickly. For example, the chemical system should allow for on-the-fly adjustments to the amount of chemical, pressure, and water.
- **A comfortable seat and ergonomic design (rider scrubbers).** These help keep your staff safe and healthy. Many facilities are moving from walk-behind scrubbers to rider scrubbers because they provide higher productivity, improved safety, and greater operator satisfaction.

When it comes to floor cleaning, your equipment makes all of the difference. The right tools will help you provide students with a cleaner, more effective learning environment while also keeping your staff happy and your costs down.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Simmons has worked in global product development and design for Nilfisk for more than 15 years. He specializes in solving difficult cleaning challenges by conceptualizing and bringing to market hard and soft floor care cleaning equipment.

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