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## Green cleaning team is a class act

**Planned Companies creates green cleaning teams that work with inner city schools**

By Liana Grey

In a classroom at Lafayette Street, the oldest continually-operated school in Newark, New Jersey, a janitor wiped the edges of a chalkboard with a rag. The cloth quickly became black with dust. Elsewhere in the four-story building, workers mopped floors, cleaned windowsills, and scrubbed pencil graffiti off desks — all with non-toxic, biodegradable chemicals.

The janitors, who work for **Planned Companies**, a Parsippany-based real estate services firm, were taking part in what has become an annual company tradition: the green cleaning of an inner city school. Last spring, 19 Planned employees spent a Saturday scrubbing the bathrooms and hallways of the Sussex Avenue School, an elementary school in central Newark serving about 500 pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students.

On a snowy day last month, when students were off from school and teachers were attending conferences, a crew tackled the classrooms, hallways, and stairwells. Built in 1848 in the heart of the Ironbound District, a predominantly Portuguese neighborhood near Newark Penn Station, the school boasts an original Tiffany's stained glass skylight in its auditorium.

"We would love to do a Newark School once every year," said Robert Francis, CEO of Planned Companies. "If we could do more, we would."

One hundred and twenty Planned Companies associates hail from Newark, and it was there that Francis' great-grandfather founded the company, 50 years after Lafayette Street was built. So by cleaning schools in the city, Planned is at once going back to its roots and looking towards the future by showcasing its recently-launched sustainability initiative, Go Green.



The company has begun replacing 95% of its current products with EPA-approved ones, and has helped landlords earn LEED points for environmentally conscious maintenance; under LEED guidelines for operating and maintaining existing buildings, developing a green cleaning policy is a pre-requisite for earning indoor environmental quality credit. Francis and two other company executives, including senior vice president Astrit Gorana, became LEED accredited professionals in 2008, opening doors to consulting opportunities.

Last spring, the company built a 2,000 s/f green maintenance training center in Parsippany, which will officially launch in May. After testing dozens of chemicals — most cleaning supply companies have a green line these days — Gorana, the company's resident product expert, settled on Envirox's H2Orange2: a disinfectant that, the manufacturer claims, can kill the flu virus five minutes after application without releasing asthma-aggravating fumes. Still, Gorana is constantly on the lookout for new-and-improved mixtures approved by Green Seal, an organization that develops standards for green cleaning.

"We might switch if we find something better," he said. Planned Companies also follows the suggestions of the EPA, which recommends products without ozone-depleting substances, and as few dyes, fragrances, flammable substances, skin irritants, and VOCs as possible. Another recommendation is reduced packaging.

"The products come concentrated," said Gorana. "We mix them on site."

At the Lafayette Street School, mixing took place in the first floor hallway. When classrooms were finished, floors sparkled and the air seemed fresh and dust-free. What was missing was the smell of harsh chemicals — a scent many Planned Companies clients have come to associate with a thorough cleaning, leaving them initially skeptical of non-toxic products. Some explaining is usually in order.

Before the janitors broke off into teams, Gorana, who attended the event along with Francis and other executives, walked teachers through the benefits of sustainable cleaning. Studies show that the use of eco-friendly chemicals reduces the frequency of sick days among employees and students, Gorana explained, and enhances overall quality of life.

"I started as a cleaner," Gorana said. "The stuff I would smell was hazardous. The staff needs to know how harmful [harsh chemicals] are."

The plan is for teachers to incorporate green cleaning into lessons on environmental protection. "It will be brought right into classrooms," said the school's principal, Maria Merlo. District policy now requires green maintenance, she added.

To pick up some pointers, Merlo's custodial staff worked side by side with Planned Companies' team members. Traditionally, school custodians tend to concentrate on common spaces and trash disposal, Gorana explained, and teachers are too busy working with students (there are 1,045 at Lafayette Street, spread across the main building and three annexes) to dust every nook and cranny in their classrooms. But taking time to clean overlooked spaces — around blackboards and windowsills, for instance — is key, particularly in a large, industrial city like Newark.

“Black soot comes in with drafts through the windows,” Gorana said.

Some Newark schools have begun outsourcing janitorial services, Francis said. Planned Companies may jump on the opportunity while continuing to expand their volunteer initiative. Already, the firm has been hired to clean a private school in Fairfield, New Jersey. “We’re continuing to add clients,” said Francis. “It’s such a worthy endeavor.”

*Photo: Astrit Gorana*