Clean Schools, Safe Kids: Striving for Safer Pest Control in North Carolina Public Schools

Executive Summary

Children spend 30 to 50% of their waking hours in school nine months of the year. Schools are publicly funded institutions dedicated to educating children and ensuring their successful futures. Schools should be physically safe and free from health hazards, including unnecessary toxic chemicals. In recent years, several issues have drawn greater attention to the role schools play in promoting a healthy environment for children, ranging from indoor air quality to school violence. Pest control is an important component of school environmental quality which, unlike many other health and safety issues, is within the power of school officials to improve, and can even result in cost savings to the school district if implemented well.

Exposure to pesticides in childhood can have serious impacts on long-term health. Schools can also bear a great deal of liability for immediate injuries to students, faculty, or other staff resulting from improper management of toxic chemicals such as pesticides. Schools can reduce or even eliminate those risks using simple, low-cost methods such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM). With proper training, planning, and effective communication among affected parties, IPM can prevent pest problems, reduce the need for pesticide applications, and greatly improve the quality of the school environment.

Several school districts in North Carolina are already using IPM to lower the frequency of pest infestations as well as the cost of pest control. During the summer of 2003, the Agricultural Resources Center & Pesticide Education Project (ARC/PESTed) surveyed the facilities departments at all of North Carolina's 117 public school districts regarding their pest management practices. 60 districts responded, representing more than half of NC school districts and 1.3 million students in grades K through 12. The survey found that many schools still use high-risk pest control practices such as fogging buildings with pesticides or using pesticides regularly as "prevention." Schools with least-toxic or IPM programs consistently spent less than the statewide average on pest control, and tended to be more satisfied with their pest management programs overall. Stories from some of these schools, as well as cost comparisons, are included in this report.

Some of the survey's most interesting findings include:

- On average, North Carolina school districts spend $1.77 per student per year on pest control. Districts with least-toxic pest control programs (such as IPM) spend $1.49 per student per year.
- 43% of school districts report using pesticides regularly in classrooms.
- 17% of school districts fog buildings with pesticides.
- Only 3 school districts reported notifying parents when pesticides are used at school.
- 65% of districts report consciously selecting least-toxic pesticide product formulations.
- Large, urban districts as well as small, rural districts in North Carolina report success with IPM programs.

Reducing toxic pollution has cost benefits to the public that can sometimes be difficult to quantify. However, we have found that reducing the use of pesticides in schools and switching to an IPM system can benefit schools directly through reduced cost and improved quality of pest control. Fewer pesticide applications are also likely to result in qualitative benefits to student and staff health.

Resources for more information and action, as well as our recommendations, are included in the report. Parents, teachers, administrators and others are encouraged to contact ARC/PESTed for a more detailed analysis of your school district's pest control practices.

Clean Schools, Safe Kids is a 2003 report by the Agricultural Resources Center and Pesticide Education Project. To obtain a copy of the report, visit our website at www.PESTed.org, or call (919) 833-1123.

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