

The logo for Mrs Buckét, featuring a stylized 'M' and 'B' in red, blue, and yellow colors.

Mrs Buckét

Facilitating a safe & hygienic return to school



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Introduction



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The past year has been like no other, and no more so than for pupils, parents and teachers. School closures were one of the most controversial measures introduced to help rein in the COVID-19 pandemic. From the initial shift to online home learning, to the multiple re-openings and closures that followed, schools and colleges have had to rapidly adapt to changing guidance and new restrictions.

Many of us will welcome the return to school, as it signals the first sign of the return to normality. Understandably, social distancing isn't always possible in the classroom, corridors and washrooms – particularly for younger pupils – so schools must rely on strict hygiene measures to keep everyone safe.

Education facilities must always be safe, hygienic environments for students and teachers to thrive in, but now, as made crystal clear by government guidance, schools must have enhanced cleaning procedures¹ in place to provide an added layer of protection. Pathogens and bacteria thrive in fast-paced, busy environments, particularly those with a large footfall.

For this reason, dealing with poor hygiene standards and cleaning providers' ineffective management of their services is one of the biggest challenges that school leaders face – and one they have little time to address. Standards can vary considerably between cleaning services providers, and choosing – or changing – cleaning partners can be a real headache for school leaders.

Maintaining high standards of hygiene and reducing the risk of sickness can be challenging but securing a contract with a specialist cleaning company can help you mitigate the risk. In addition, the visibility of cleaning staff can provide an additional level of reassurance for pupils, staff and parents, as well as provide school leaders with a go-to representative to approach regarding any concerns. Now, we must raise the bar, remain vigilant and continue to slow the spread of the virus.

In this whitepaper, we have outlined some practical advice for ensuring your school's hygiene is set to the highest standard, along with our recommendations on what you should look for in your cleaning cupboard.

Schools must rely on strict hygiene measures to keep everyone safe

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>

Why cleaning in schools is so important

Given the high volume of students, staff and visitors that typically enter the grounds each day, a school can rapidly become a breeding ground for harmful pathogens and bacteria. Pre-pandemic, this level of risk could be mitigated by cleaning the site a couple of times per day – though complete decontamination was very rarely, if ever, necessary. Now, constant vigilance is required.

The general consensus is that schools should now be focusing on specifically targeting coronavirus pathogens, as well as higher-risk areas such as communal washrooms and food preparation stations. COVID-19 pathogens do not necessarily pose a great risk to children, but there's a possibility that they could be passed on to others who are more vulnerable.

The past 12 months have opened people's eyes to a new standard of hygiene and cleanliness, and even once we've emerged from the pandemic, the bar will not be lowered. A clean environment is not only a pleasant one to work in, but one which will give visitors, including prospective pupils and their families, the right first impression about your school's high standards.

In addition, a hygienic environment is one that will also provide the necessary level of protection for children, teachers and visitors. Determining the school's current level of hygiene is not something that is possible to judge by eye, so this is where professional cleaning providers can offer valuable knowledge and support.





How to ensure your school's hygiene is up to scratch

While your classrooms, corridors and canteen may look clean, there's a clear difference between cleanliness and hygiene. Visually, you may be able to see the build-up of dust and dirt on a surface, but you won't see any traces of invisible pathogens and bacteria.

If you were to carry out a swab test on a seemingly clean door handle, computer mouse or photocopier, using a sterilised swab to transfer any bacteria into a petri dish, you may be alarmed to see the rate at which bacteria will breed over the course of the next five to seven days. It's this invisible threat, which is usually undetectable to the human eye, that could cause the most harm.

It's important to regularly check that your school has the right measures in place to tackle both dirt and pathogens. Here's some of our advice:

1. Think outside the box

By now, we're all used to being a little more cautious of touching door handles and stair rails – both of which should be disinfected at regular intervals throughout the school day. However, there are other touchpoints which are often overlooked. Pay special attention to those smaller areas such as light switches, paper towel dispensers and even shared whiteboard pens.

2. Don't forget devices

As digital nomads, pupils interact with digital devices before, during and after the school day. Touchscreen tablets, keyboards and computer mice harbour many bacteria, so these must all be disinfected after each use throughout the day. Encourage pupils to apply hand sanitiser regularly and use disinfectant wipes to clean their own devices at regular intervals throughout the day.

3. Washroom hygiene

Regular handwashing should always be encouraged, and communal washrooms need to be stocked with antiviral soap. Opt for one-touch toilet paper dispensers and disposable hand towels, minimising cross-contamination and ensuring that each sheet of tissue is only touched by one person – reducing the transfer of bacteria.

4. Provide hand sanitiser

Prevent pathogens and bacteria from transferring on to disinfected surfaces by placing hand sanitiser stations in entry points, playgrounds and communal areas such as stair wells. Having hand sanitiser available as staff, pupils and parents approach and enter the school gates is equally as important as having it readily available indoors. Ideally choose a contact-free automatic dispenser.

5. Streamline waste disposal

Replace individual bins with bin pods, which are more hygienic and reduce the need to come into contact with several touchpoints while using or emptying the bin. Having one central location, with separate compartments for general waste and recycling, reduces the spread of bacteria and increases the chances of keeping any pathogens under control.



Did you know?

On average, students may come into contact with an estimated 152,300 potentially harmful microorganisms during the school day.

Source: UPMC Pediatrics, 2014.



6. Opt for disposables

Where possible, use disposable cloths or disinfectant wipes in order to eliminate the spread of the pathogen and other bacteria. Where these can't be used, reusable microfibre cloths should be colour coded for use in particular places only and washed at least 60 degrees immediately after use. Microfibres attach themselves to even the smallest, most microscopic dirt particles, allowing the cloth to attract pathogens and dirt particles for more thorough cleaning.

7. Know when to decontaminate

Cleaning and disinfecting are two different processes. Ask yourself, does your cleaning provider allow enough time to do both thoroughly? Cleaners typically follow a set routine of tasks, but some schools still adhere to outdated cleaning schedules which fall short of a proper deep clean – something that's vital while fighting a pandemic.



8. Utilise signage

Having clear signage will help remind staff and pupils to wash their hands thoroughly, avoid sharing stationery or following different walkways. Signs provide an element of reassurance, assuring pupils that you're taking the situation seriously.

9. Prevention is better than cure

Antimicrobial coatings, such as those offered by Nordic Chem, offer long-term protection against harmful pathogens and bacteria – inhibiting the growth of microorganisms for up to 30 days after application. This is extremely effective in both high and low traffic areas, effectively reducing sickness for extended periods of time. Regardless of how old pupils are, it is imperative that all cleaning chemicals are stored well out of reach, behind a locked door.

10. Embrace innovation

New, automated technologies are allowing cleaners to reach even higher standards of cleanliness and hygiene. Robotic scrubber dryers, for example, can carry out tasks much faster and more effectively than one person using a traditional floor mop. When combined with the visible presence and expertise of an experienced cleaning team, the results are unparalleled – and combinations such as these are undoubtedly the future of cleaning.

Putting proper protection into practice

Government guidance makes it clear that schools must adopt enhanced cleaning regimes to minimise the spread of COVID-19, and across the UK, schools have introduced unique and creative solutions.

The Huntington School, based in York, converted its sports hall into a large hand-washing zone², while others, such as Southend High School for Boys, opted to only serve takeaway food and doubled the length of lessons to maximise the time spent in each classroom³. Almost all schools are continuing to operate in 'bubbles', with staggered forward-facing seating where possible.

Importantly, it's vital that schools and education facilities look to professionals to help them uphold high standards of cleanliness and hygiene. We've worked with Olchfa, one of Wales' largest schools with over 1800 students aged between 11 and 18, since 2018. At the beginning of 2020, we immediately leapt into action to overcome the challenge of keeping staff and students safe in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. But in practice, what did this look like?

We introduced strict new measures into the school's cleaning regime, with our state-of-the-art ride-on sanitisers, electrostatic cleaners and EN14476-approved chemical ensuring all areas were disinfected and deep cleaned. In addition, we formed a two-way partnership with the school's staff to regularly update them on our methods and processes, giving them peace of mind during such a difficult time.

Both our on-site cleaners and our senior team were visible throughout the whole contract, establishing an honest, open and trusting working relationship. In doing so, this quickly eased any of the client's initial concerns and ensured that the school's senior leadership team could see exactly what cleaning products and methods were being used by our team, as well as provided a key point of contact.



² <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/long-read-how-are-schools-preparing-to-reopen/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/29/world/europe/britain-schools-reopen-cornavirus.html>

Five cleaning cupboard essentials

One of the very first things we do when auditing a new site is assess the client's existing cleaning cupboard. Once you know what to look for, assessing the products and equipment that are being used by the current cleaning provider can give you a huge amount of insight into the level of cleanliness and the standards of hygiene across the rest of the school.

Some cleaning providers use their own products, whereas others use those supplied by the school. Either way, the equipment and chemicals used must be suitable for the job. We use specialist chemicals that meet the European standard for testing and evaluating viricidal activity in the medical area. More specifically, we use EN14476, a chemical that has been approved by Public Health England for the prevention of COVID-19.

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If the products used do not conform to health and safety standards – particularly those for COVID-19 – then it will not only be a wasted effort, but a great risk to the health and safety of those who believe they are being protected. As with all strong chemicals, there must be adequate ventilation while the product is in use, and regardless of the pupils' age, they should be stored in a locked cupboard.

Aside from the basics such as mops, buckets and brooms, what should schools be stocking up on in preparation for pupils' return?





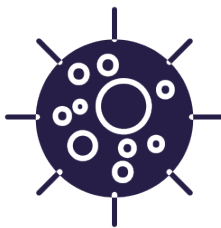
Washroom supplies

Cleaners typically take responsibility for restocking washrooms with the appropriate soap, disposable paper hand towels and toilet rolls. Given how many times pupils and staff members will be washing their hands – and the number of schools who have installed additional sinks in school corridors and sports halls – you will need a greater supply than usual. As mentioned, wherever possible, opt for one-touch toilet paper dispensers.



Waste management

Unless an individual has shown symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19, waste does not need to be segregated⁴. All waste should be disposed of as usual, though removing individual bins and replacing them with more hygienic bin pods can reduce the spread of bacteria, boost efficiency and allow for more sustainable waste management.



Suitable cleaning cloths

In order to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 pathogens and other bacteria, your cleaning provider should be using single-use, disposable cloths – the most hygienic option. If this isn't possible, they should ensure that reusable microfibre cloths, the best choice for attracting and trapping dirt, pathogens and bacteria, are colour coded for use in particular places only – preventing cross contamination.



Cautionary signage

Wet floors are not only a slipping hazard, but a legal liability. Cleaning and disinfecting are two processes which are going to be taking place much more often, and not just outside of school hours. We recommend i-mop floor scrubber dryers, which clean floors up to 70 per cent faster than conventional wet mopping, minimising the risk of slipping on wet floors. However, while cleaning is in progress, distinctive wet floor signs should always be used to minimise the risk of accidents and injury.



Machinery

We use ride-on machinery for large, open spaces such as corridors and halls, burnishing the floor to achieve the maximum shine. In smaller areas, we use i-mops which allow us to reach right to the very edges of compact or partially obstructed spaces. Instead of spreading dirt, like a traditional mop does, machinery enables dirt, pathogens and bacteria to be removed from the surface entirely.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

What's next?

Around the world, other countries have proven that a safe, hygienic return to school is possible – and sustainable too. In France, for example, schools remain open, with additional COVID-19 testing in place⁵ and an estimated 12 million schoolchildren continuing to learn in the classroom⁶. French schoolchildren aged six and up are required to wear face coverings, and so are their teachers. Overall, just 15 per cent of their schools are closed⁷ – but France's education ministers and medical advisors have not reported a resulting outbreak of cases.

Other countries, such as Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands, have been hesitant to allow all pupils to return to school, partially because remote learning has been working so well for them⁸. These countries are leaders in digitalisation and their respective governments have made huge investments into the hardware needed to deliver digital education. However, other European countries have not, and instead have reported major computer shortages and issues with crashing servers – notably in Italy, Greece and some parts of the UK.



Here in the UK, we are admittedly not world-leaders in remote education, and despite teachers' outstanding resilience and efforts to adapt to teaching via remote learning platforms, the classroom remains the best learning environment for students of all ages. Facilitating a safe and reassuringly hygienic environment for pupils, teachers and non-teaching staff to return to is now a number one priority.

Now, school leaders must reassess the measures they currently have in place and determine whether their cleaning providers are consistently meeting the school's high standards or falling short. There is no margin for error, and no time for mistakes. Partnering with a professional cleaning provider offers the expert knowledge that is only gained through many years of hands-on experience and heavy research and investment into the latest innovation and technology. If we are to allow our country's youngest generation to return to a healthy, hygienic environment where they can truly thrive, we must take action now.

If you would like to discuss the solutions that we can offer – whether that be hygiene audits, daily school cleaning, deep cleaning or our disinfection and decontamination services – then please get in touch with us today.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-53640249>

² <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-will-french-schools-stay-open/a-56330811>

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-will-french-schools-stay-open/a-56330811>

⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/covid-germany-schools-lockdown-digitalization/a-56147857>

Get in touch

We understand that your school requires a certain level of expertise and quality to maintain health, safety and hygiene standards to protect staff and students from cross-contamination, and to safeguard your facilities. If your school is in need of decontamination, or if you simply want to have a chat about your cleaning needs and service provision, then please get in touch.

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