

Rooting Out Restroom Vandalism

A two-pronged approach to decrease graffiti and damage in schools.

By: Jolynn Kennedy

Grffiti, along with other forms of vandalism, is almost as old as mankind itself.

Inscriptions, drawings, graphics and comments — some flattering and some less so — have been found on buildings, statues, walls and floors since ancient times.

Grffiti and vandalism also tend to be recurrent problems in many educational settings, a fact of which school administrators and the cleaning professionals that provide services and products to schools and school districts are well aware.

To address the problem, some schools have limited the number of students who may use the restroom at one time, as well as the amount of time students may spend there.

Others have removed restroom items that students might use for mischievous purposes.

Some schools have removed the doors from their toilet stalls, while others have even closed their restrooms entirely out of desperation when they could not stop graffiti/vandalism and/or no longer had the funds to clean and repair restrooms.

While there is no easy solution to the restroom graffiti/vandalism problem in schools, some school districts have experienced success using a two-pronged approach to the problem.

The first prong focuses on fostering pride among students concerning the physical appearance of their school — and most specifically, in its restrooms.

The second prong emphasizes making restroom cleaning and maintenance a higher priority.

The Pride Factor

Dr. Tom Keating, founder of projectCLEAN (Citizens, Learners and Educators Against

Neglect), has more than 15 years of experience working on improving the safety, cleanliness and hygiene of school restrooms.

He believes that in order to dispel apathy about graffiti/vandalism issues in school restrooms — which is all-too-prevalent among students, teachers and school administrators — caring adults need to discuss these problems with students with the goal of instilling pride in their school, including its restrooms and their appearance.

“There are always going to be some [graffiti/vandalism] problems,” Keating notes realistically. “[But] you’re not looking for perfection, just turning down the problem.”

The Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, has had some success in reducing vandalism using Keating’s suggestions.

The school’s principal, Darryl Williams, and other school administrators reached out to the school’s Student Government Association and other student leadership organizations, asking them to play a leadership role in encouraging students to have more respect for their school, as well as to emphasize the positive things about both the school facility itself and its students.

“I always go to the students; they are our best cheerleaders [for the school],” Williams says. “In spite of the few who do things we do not stand for, this approach has helped instill pride in our students and reduced [the graffiti/vandalism problems] in our restrooms.”

‘Graffiti Never Sleeps Here’

When it comes to cleaning graffiti and repairing restroom vandalism, one of the

more important strategies that school custodial services should implement is launching a cleaning “attack” as soon as possible after the incident.

Keating refers to this as the “Graffiti Never Sleeps Here” tactic, suggesting that once graffiti has been found, custodial workers should not go home until it has been removed.

According to Keating, this prevents future attacks and tells the vandals, “We beat you.”

Efforts to enhance the overall cleanliness and appearance of school restrooms have also proven to reduce vandalism.

This typically starts with the floors, since they are the largest single surface in the restroom.

One strategy many school custodial departments implement is to have tile and grout floors “deep scrubbed” during the summer months, often using cylindrical brush technology that can remove soils and grime lodged in grout areas.

After this deep cleaning, custodians should apply a sealer to help protect the floors and prevent soil from building up in grout areas.

But this is not the end of the cleaning program.

Keeping restroom floors clean and well maintained throughout the school year improves hygiene and safety, and can have a major impact on enhancing school pride — the ultimate key to reducing or eliminating graffiti and vandalism problems. *CM*

Jolynn Kennedy is the marketing director at Tornado Industries and developer of the company’s Facebook Like and Learn Campaign.