

# Reducing Pest Problems in Schools by Reducing Clutter

## Pests and Clutter

Schools and day care centers by their nature are prone to accumulating clutter. Boxes, papers, posters, books, and a myriad of items must be utilized by teachers to create effective learning. Effective use of multiple materials for learning is to be applauded, not discouraged. However, if these materials are not managed carefully on a daily basis, and are allowed to accumulate over time within classrooms and storage areas, a condition of clutter will result which can create pest issues. Stored materials that are left undisturbed for long periods of time are of particular concern.

Clutter and pest problems go hand in hand. Consider the following consequences of clutter:

- Pests gravitate towards cluttered areas because clutter enables pests to hide and reproduce undisturbed from predators and people.
- Some cockroaches, ants, and silverfish prefer the various types of crevices layered clutter (e.g., stacks of paper) provide.
- Clutter can be dangerous. The brown recluse spider (*Loxosceles reclusa*) prefers to hide among layered papers and within forgotten boxes of cluttered corners, and similar areas. Brown recluse spiders and other pests have bitten children and teachers reaching into clutter piles to retrieve papers or other items.
- Rodents also take advantage of clutter. It is not uncommon for 2-3 families of mice (15-20 mice) to share the base of one cardboard box in a classroom's cluttered closet
- Pest control efforts are impossible in cluttered areas. Should mice, spiders, cockroaches, etc., be embedded among boxes, paper piles, and junk, there is very little a pest management professional can do to eliminate the pests. There are no magic sprays, bug bombs, or mouse baits that will penetrate cluttered closets or rooms and eliminate hiding pests.
- Custodial cleaning efforts are diluted or impossible in cluttered classrooms.

## Clutter Management Recommendations

### 1. Reducing clutter makes you feel good

Reducing clutter has psychological benefits. Facing clutter each time you enter a classroom, an office, look upon a cluttered desktop, or open a cluttered closet can be psychologically burdensome. Clutter presents feelings of being overwhelmed by work before you even start to work. Facing an organized area on the other hand helps to promote quick work starts, and facilitates efficient use of work time. And once an area is organized, it is easier to keep it this way.

## 2. Reduce clutter in bite-size pieces

Sometimes, the clutter is so overwhelming, we realize it will take hours and hours of work to organize, and thus we procrastinate starting. We tend to think in terms of "when things slow down, I'll clean up this mess". But in these busy times, "cleanup days" have become rare events indeed. It is far more realistic to allocate 30 minutes 3-4 days each week, and reduce the clutter in bits and pieces. After a just a week or two, cluttered areas will amazingly look organized again.

## 3. Utilize modern storage boxes

For items that must remain in storage in the classroom or office, modern plastic see-thru boxes exist in nearly every size, shape and color for storage needs. Utilize such boxes to eliminate clutter. Questionable and long term items can be stored in inexpensive banker's boxes in off-site storage rooms or areas until they are needed.

## 4. Allocate specific storage spaces

Teachers should allocate certain areas of the classroom for organized storage. Schools should allocate certain rooms for organized group storage rooms. In older schools, storage areas may be virtually nonexistent. However, pre-assembled, storage sheds of all sizes are now economically available, and can be installed on school grounds. During the planning stages of new schools enough extra space or storage buildings should be considered to foresee for future storage needs of the staff.

## 5. Organize a Clutter Reduction Effort

When clutter for the entire school or daycare center has become severe, clutter reduction teams should be organized. The fear of staff members of losing valuable items can be overcome by placing their items into banker boxes clearly marked with their names, the date, and contents.

## 6. Clutter Management Efforts Must Have Administrative Support

School principals and daycare managers should request from their custodial staff on a quarterly basis a list of those classrooms or areas where the clutter is inhibiting proper cleaning or pest management inspections. Reminder notes should then be sent to personnel, requesting their immediate cooperation. Brief stop-by visits two weeks later by the administrator is necessary to convey the message that clutter management is important.

## 7. Store items properly to prevent pest infestations

To discourage pest infestations into stored items and storage rooms, all boxes, should be stored off the floor by a minimum of 8 inches and preferably 12 inches. This space will allow for necessary access by brooms and mops. This space will also discourage any insects and rodents from hiding beneath the first shelf.

It is important to avoid using storage shelves that enclose the bottom shelf close to the floor. It is common for school maintenance shops to assemble such storage shelves using 2x4 stud lumber and plywood, and beginning the first shelf with the 4-inch side of the stud. With these types of shelves, the bottom shelf is enclosed and basically creates a pest cave in which mice and insects will hide and thrive.

In situations where boxes or other items are placed directly on the floor, an empty space of about 12-16 inches between the boxes and the walls is necessary. This storage-free zone also allows for inspection, cleaning, and the application of pest monitors and pest traps if needed.

#### 8. Be considerate of custodians

Building custodians, just like teachers, administrators, kitchen staff, and the parents, have a vital role to play in maintaining the overall quality and health of our schools. Please don't make the custodian's job more difficult by rendering your own work area hard to clean due to an abundance of clutter.

Remember: In School or daycare center IPM programs it is the responsibility of everyone to work together to reduce both pests and pesticide threats to our students (and to ourselves).

Adapted from: Corrigan, R.M. 2001 Bugs and Clutterbugs: Reducing Pest Problems in Schools by Reducing Clutter. Pest Control Magazine. 2001. Robert M. Corrigan, Ph.D, is an Urban IPM Specialist with RMC Pest Management Consulting, Richmond, IN.