

SCHOOL

Planning & Management

DON'T LET A PEST PROBLEM BE YOUR BIGGEST NEWS

What you should know about safely preventing pests so you don't end up like Chicago's public schools.

In January, Chicago Public Schools' officials ordered a \$4-million cleanup of all 600 of the district's school buildings. Schools were closed 100 at a time for a thorough scouring by inspectors expected to take months. Why all the fuss? Rodents.

The flap began last December with a rodent sighting in a Chicago high school parking lot. Inspectors uncovered more evidence of rodents in the school's cafeteria and promptly suspended food service operations. In the weeks that followed, food service operations at 12 more schools were shut down as inspections uncovered droppings from mice and sometimes rats in kitchens and classrooms.

Chicago Public Schools Chief Arne Duncan told the Chicago Tribune that he stepped in and ordered a cleanup of the whole system so schools could start again with a "clean slate." The first week's inspection results led investigators to believe that as many as 80 percent of the district's schools could have mouse problems.

The infestation and resulting cleanup has not only exacted a financial toll on Chicago's schools, but it has given them a black eye as well. Dozens of news stories in Chicago and even national media have spotlighted the school system's ongoing battle with rats and mice.

Needless to say, no school administrator wants to be in this situation. But no school is exempt from the possibility of a major pest infestation either, especially given the strict regulations on pesticide use often placed upon schools.

So how can you safely stop pests so you don't become the lead story on the six o'clock news? The first step is to understand which pests you most likely will encounter and why they are attracted to schools.

Every School a Magnet for Pests

Pests will infest any location where they can find food and moisture. The large food service operations, the bag lunches stowed in lockers and dumpsters full of half-eaten corn dogs make schools look like five-star restaurants to the average pest. At the same time, the heavy foot traffic in and out of numerous entrances gives many pests ample opportunity to cross the threshold. While geographic location will influence which pests will try to make a home of your school building, several pests are common to schools across the United States.

Rodents

Chicago's public schools are not alone when it comes to rodent problems. Rats and mice are a problem for school systems across the country, where they prompt periodic shut-downs of food service operations and cause expensive property damage by gnawing electrical wiring and burrowing into walls or other structures.

Cockroaches

Cockroaches thrive in many environments, so it's no surprise that they often infest schools. They are not only disgusting, but they also carry pathogens that can cause pneumonia, diarrhea and food poisoning. Their droppings can inflame allergic or asthmatic conditions, especially in young children.

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FACILITIES

Flies

The “common” fly is just as common in school buildings, if not more so, because of the frequent opening of numerous doors and windows. Because of their natural attraction to decaying material, flies are among the filthiest insects around, carrying more than 100 known pathogens. They slough off bacteria every time they land on a desk or a cafeteria plate, so prevention is a serious health issue.

Stinging Insects

One in 30 Americans is allergic to stinging insects’ venom and at least 40 to 100 die every year from such allergic reactions, according to the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease. The most common stinging insects on school grounds are yellow jackets and fire ants. Both insects deliver painful stings if provoked and can attack a child in swarms, increasing the chances of multiple stings and severe allergic reactions.

Birds

School buildings offer birds numerous ledges on which to roost, and school grounds provide plenty of food sources. While some people have a hard time thinking of birds as pests, birds can infect humans with up to 40 viruses and 60 transmutable diseases, including encephalitis or inflammation of the brain; salmonellosis, a form of food poisoning; and histoplasmosis, a potentially fatal respiratory infection. Bird droppings can also cause expensive damage to school buildings.

IPM — a Required Course

The fallout from Chicago’s rodent infestation is a banner for public concern about the health risks of pests in our schools, but the concern about pesticides and the environmental and health risks associated with them also

has intensified in recent years, especially when it comes to children. Young children are more likely to come into contact with pesticides, and their exposure can be greater relative to their body weight than adult exposure. For this reason, many state and local governments have made it mandatory for schools to employ an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategy to control pests with less pesticide. And, proposed legislation in Congress may eventually require all U.S. schools to adopt IPM programs. IPM stresses a combination of chemical and nonchemical methods to prevent pest infestations. The idea is to make certain environments unattractive to pests so they don’t infest in the first place.

Tightening Admissions Standards for Pests

If you’re thinking about establishing an IPM program to keep pests out of your school, or simply want to examine and update your existing program, you need to start with education and training. All school employees should clearly understand IPM principles and how to implement them in their daily routines. Your IPM program should focus on several critical areas.

- **Exterior Maintenance and Groundskeeping** — Check exhaust fan openings, screens, doors and exterior wall joints for potential entry points. Seal any openings, no matter how small. Mice can enter through holes no bigger than a dime, and roaches can squeeze through openings just 1/8-in. across. Trim groundcover and shrubbery so that it doesn’t touch the building. If possible, install a 30-in. gravel strip around the exterior of the building to discourage rodents and crawling pests. Consider running

microfilament line or netting along ledges to discourage bird roosting.

- **Food Service and Vending** — Inspect ice machines; beverage areas; and any cooking, heating and baking areas, and clean them daily. Insects thrive in moist environments with food waste.
- **Receiving** — Pests, especially roaches, can enter through shipments in cardboard boxes, where they eat the cardboard glue and lay eggs. Route all incoming supplies, especially in food service areas, to a holding area away from the kitchen for inspection.
- **Housekeeping** — Routinely check classrooms and break areas for leftover food. If staff and students often leave food out, establish a reward or demerit system that encourages proper waste disposal.
- **Existing Pests** — If you have an existing pest problem, accurate pest identification is the most important first step to starting an IPM program. You will be unable to treat it effectively or with least-toxic methods if you don’t know which species of insect or rodent is causing the problem. And, your IPM program won’t be as effective if you haven’t expelled the pests that already dwell in your buildings.

Need Help? How to Choose an IPM Partner

To leave a pest infestation unchecked as long as Chicago’s school system did is a costly mistake. But so is misapplying pesticides and risking regulatory infractions. That’s why many schools and school systems choose to outsource their pest management to trained IPM



professionals. In most cases, professional pest management providers have in-depth scientific knowledge about pest behavior and years of experience in IPM. You can narrow the field of potential pest management providers by asking around for tips on reputable companies. When examining your “long list” of candidates, ask questions that separate credible, experienced providers from the rest, like the following.

- Are the provider’s technicians well versed in IPM principles and aware of your school system’s special needs with regard to pest control?
- Is the provider a member of

national, state or local pest control associations?

- What kind of training do the technicians receive?
- What is the average response time to an emergency? Is there an extra charge for such emergency responses?
- Does the provider offer a money-back guarantee on its service?
- How long has the provider been in business? Once you have a “short list,” you can examine them a little more closely to choose the best fit.
- Insist that a technician tour your

school property before submitting a bid.

- Be sure to address which specific pests are included in the contract.
- Ask about additional charges when extra services are needed for a non-contracted pest.
- Be sure you are comparing “apples to apples” on competing bids. In many cases, the lowest priced service does not equate with other bids.
- Make the purchase decision based on total value, not just price.

Eliminate the Cause, Not the Symptom

With so many reasons for pests to be attracted to schools, a thorough and customized IPM plan designed to eliminate some of these attractants is the only way to protect a school long term. IPM does not happen overnight. Although the sanitation, pest monitoring and prevention efforts of a successful IPM program take time, they are more cost-effective through time than treating recurring infestations. By eliminating the causes of pest problems rather than the symptoms, you can reduce pesticide use, save money and keep pests from harming your students, staff and reputation.