

The carpet conundrum in schools

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Feature

Schools are once again the battleground in the carpet vs. hard floors debate.

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Carpet vs. VCT?

This question has been argued by the best of us, but despite the varied opinions, the trend of the industry seems to be the main motivation on which direction we go.

And, over the past two decades, that trend has been towards carpeting.

At least until recently.

Now indoor air quality (IAQ) specialists, mold remediators and even elected officials are entering the fray.

Legislators in legislation and regulation that would mandate carpet removal in some cases and forbid its use in new, as well as renovation school construction projects.

Some IAQ experts claim carpeting is the great polluter, even leading to the increasing asthma rates among children.

Others, though, contend just the opposite, that carpeting filters out mold and other impurities.

The science isn't exact and the debate rages on. One thing is certain, though, school custodial supervisors and facility managers must be given a voice in the issue.

The great cover-up

Part of the motivation that drove schools to install carpeting in the 1980s was the need to rid schools of the hazards of asbestos composite tile. Instead of removing the tile, some schools opted to carpet over it.

Carpet hid the problem tile, stopped the constant wear from traffic and encapsulated the problem.

Other advantages arose:

- The clatter of students in hallways was quieted
- Slip and fall problems were minimized
- It offers a warmer, less institutionalized atmosphere.

The carpet, of course, meant substantial investment in carpet maintenance equipment for schools.

But, with all of those benefits and the movement towards more durable carpeting answering some early problems, carpets remained a popular choice.

Changes in the air

Slowly, though, a new concern reared its head — indoor air quality.

With reports of students and others falling ill for no explainable reason at work and school and researchers linking carpeting to the phenomenon, the tide turned away from carpets.

Carpets, in some sectors, are now viewed as a dirt and germ trap, filling our institutions with dirt, debris and hiding places for mold and harmful bacteria.

Not just popular view

In many cases, the reevaluation is also being motivated by the need to replace that old worn carpet.

It seems clear to many that removing the asbestos tile while removing the old carpet and addressing air quality concerns by installing VCT kills two birds with one stone.

***Some schools
are removing
carpet – fearing
poor IAQ.***

But does carpet really contribute to poor indoor quality?

My view is that carpet has the potential to contribute to poor indoor air quality. But if maintained properly on a scheduled basis, I feel the other positive factors and good cleaning and care practices eliminate this possibility.

Other factors

Budget and staff cuts have arrived and most of us are just coming to terms with these shortages.

One very important impact on all of us will be the decision to replace carpet with VCT.

It seems everyone forgot, or never realized, how significant an impact this decision has on staffing needs.

The cost of maintaining VCT flooring is significantly higher than maintaining carpet, because of:

- Equipment
- Finishes
- Labor intensive work.

Carpet's good factors



In addition to the positives already mentioned, carpet is really much simpler, less expensive and less labor intensive than maintaining VCT.

Daily maintenance of carpet calls for:

- A thorough vacuuming and you're ready for the next day
- Removal of gum
- Spotting when required.

Carpet typically requires far less maintenance than VCT.

For those hardly used areas a quick bonnet cleaning will usually do the trick until your next extraction or other method of full cleaning is scheduled (traditionally done during school

breaks).

For instance, a wide vacuum makes a hallway clean and ready with three passes.

Additionally, most schools already have the required equipment on hand to tackle just about any carpet cleaning task required.

Our crews are trained and experienced as well. I think it's a well-known fact that vacuuming a classroom is much faster than banging a dust mop around 25 desks and picking up the debris.

VCT factors good and bad

VCT is far more durable and forgiving of spills and other abuse.

When properly maintained, it gives visitors an excellent first impression.

But VCT requires massive man-hours to keep that burnished shiny impressive look.

One hallway typically requires five trips by the same cleaner from start to finish to reach the goal of a clean shiny floor (see sidebar, "VCT in the hallway").

That's four more trip than carpet requires and two periods of drying times to contend with.

Labor intensive, people unfriendly

Let's not forget that the care of VCT makes traffic during the cleaning a no-no. Carpet on the other hand does not restrict traffic during vacuuming and with carpet there is no wet floor and possible slip and fall worries to contend with.

Unlike carpet, VCT requires repeat applications of labor to reach your goal.

Take it to the administrators

Facility and cleaning managers shoulder the responsibility to inform fully budget weary school administrators of the costs associated with their decisions.

It's not just a debate over air quality, though it may be all the administrators are considering.

Factors associated with the installation of VCT that should be raised to administrator's attention include:

- New floor scrubbers will have to be purchased
- Increased spending on strippers and finish will be necessary
- Several new burnishers will have to be acquired
- Additional cleaners will be needed to maintain it.

A good carpet maintenance plan of thorough daily vacuuming, timely removal of spots and a major cleaning schedule suitable for your particular situation puts carpeted floors right up there with VCT flooring where air quality is concerned.

The positive aspects of having carpeted flooring where suitable is superior is going back to VCT.

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