



# Putting ESSER Funds to Good Use: 5 Ways to Create Cleaner Environments for Students and Teachers While Returning Back to School

By Edward Pim, Senior Vice President of Operations & Experience, OpenWorks



Funding is often the biggest obstacle in the way of schools when it comes to enhancing the learning environment beyond the basics.

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund is providing a significant influx of resources for schools across the nation. However, an interesting problem revealed itself as schools find themselves struggling to decide how to spend the largely unexpected funds. In fact, according to an analysis of the federal ESSER data by the National Conference of State Legislatures, only 19.1% of the program's funding has been used as of Feb. 28, 2022.

The relief package, which provided nearly \$190.5 billion to the ESSER Fund through three separate stimulus bills, is incredibly helpful and impactful in addressing the impact that COVID-19 has on schools across the U.S. For many schools, which are historically underfunded and lacked resources, this money gives them the opportunity to make facility updates that have been needed for years.

And as the pandemic continues to burden schools for more than two years into the initial outbreak, many schools are choosing to allocate resources towards cleaning, disinfection, and other safety measures that will prevent the spread of disease and ensure there is a plan in place should a case occur at their school. The hope is that these measures will reduce the frequency of at-home learning, which is difficult for teachers and students alike.





## Truth is in the Numbers

Extensive research from organizations including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed how a healthy school environment affects attendance, concentration, and overall education outcomes. Indoor air quality, the use of safe chemicals for cleaning and disinfection, and mold and mildew management are just a few facilities maintenance categories that drastically impact students.

The CDC also revealed asthma to be one of the leading causes of school absenteeism, resulting in nearly 14 million missed school days annually. Yet, proper facilities maintenance can reduce the number of irritants and allergens in the air that exacerbate asthma symptoms and trigger attacks.

Regular facilities maintenance is critical to preventing the spread of viruses like COVID-19 and ensure safe and healthy environments on the whole.

## Creating Cleaner, Safer Schools Using ESSER Funds

From thorough cleaning to indoor air quality improvements, there are many ways schools can use their ESSER funding to create a safer learning environment for students and staff. But to ensure that schools are taking the best first step forward, and one that will be attainable for the long-haul, school operations should zero in on five key areas of focus regarding regular cleaning and disinfection, deep cleaning, periodic disinfection, long-lasting surface protection and indoor air quality. By strategically budgeting for each of these categories, schools can minimize disruptions by ensuring all necessary measures are taken to prevent the spread of illness and restore a safe environment quickly if an outbreak does occur. Specifically:



### 1. Regular Cleaning and Disinfection

How effective is your school's current cleaning routine? Do you have regular disinfection practices in place to remove the germs that spread illness? Ensuring a routine is in place is important, but equally critical is the need to use tools and chemicals that are both safe and effective, especially in learning environments. The EPA provides a list of disinfectants, List N, which are proven to kill the virus that causes COVID-19.

Regular cleaning and disinfection keep students and staff safe from germs, dirt, and dust that cause adverse health effects. It includes removing dust, dirt, and germs from high-touch surfaces and high-traffic areas.

### 2. Deep Cleaning

A deep cleaning should be completed periodically to address any areas that are difficult to clean while school is in session. Some of these services require wait periods in which the surfaces can't be walked upon or would otherwise disrupt students and staff, which is why they should be completed over breaks. A deep cleaning usually includes carpet cleaning and extraction, strip and floor wax, high dusting, and tile scrubbing, among several other services.

These services help to maintain the school and prevent the buildup of dirt and grime. Hard-to-reach places like cafeteria rafters may go unnoticed on a day-to-day basis, but they can quickly acquire enough dust to become unsightly and pose a health risk. Deep cleans address every surface of the school and bring it back to life after a semester of heavy use.

### 3. Periodic Disinfection

If the Coronavirus outbreak taught schools anything, it's that periodic disinfection isn't something that should be taken lightly. In fact, the pandemic ensured that it is just as essential as regular cleaning. Periodic disinfection means having a plan in place and a service provider in the event of a COVID-19, or other virus outbreak, event at a school. High-quality providers have access to advanced technology, such as electrostatic sprayers, which are safe and effective for killing the germs that cause viruses. Periodic disinfection should be used as both a prevention strategy, as in the case of COVID-19, the flu and common cold, and an emergency response.

### 4. Long-Lasting Surface Protection

Even if those schools or districts that prioritize frequently disinfecting high-touch areas, it's impossible to ensure they are wiped down between each and every person touching them. Technology now exists to protect surfaces for longer periods of time. Products like Continuous Care use cutting-edge technology to disinfect and create a long-lasting antimicrobial coating and surface protectant that is applied after cleaning is complete. The disinfectant and antimicrobial coating used with Continuous Care is an EPA List N approved disinfectant, confirmed to be effective in killing SARS-CoV-2, the virus associated with COVID-19. Applying it with an electrostatic sprayer provides 360-degree coverage, killing viruses and inhibiting the growth of bacteria and microorganisms.

### 5. Indoor Air Quality

It goes without saying, but properly operating ventilation is vital to maintain the ongoing health and wellbeing of everyone at a school. For school leaders, it's important to consider Ventilation Mitigation strategies as part of the disinfection process. Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) monitoring devices report on the levels of common pollutants and other air conditions in real-time. They also help reduce costs by identifying areas of overspending on heat and air conditioning and improve employee happiness by increasing air quality. Portable air cleaners can help reduce airborne contaminants, including particles containing viruses. They may be particularly helpful when additional ventilation with outdoor air is not possible without compromising indoor comfort (temperature or humidity), or when outdoor air pollution is high.

That said, an air filter is not nearly enough by itself to fully protect people from COVID-19 and other viruses. The CDC recommends HEPA fan/filtration systems be used only to enhance air cleaning, especially in high-risk areas. Dry Hydrogen Peroxide (DHP) systems turn humidity from the air into hydrogen peroxide that can safely and effectively reduce microbes in the air. In addition to being safe for human exposure, it is used in occupied settings and provides an effective no-touch addition to a manual cleaning process, which assists with ongoing decontamination in high-traffic areas.



## Making the Most of Every ESSER Dollar

At a time when every dollar spent is scrutinized, it becomes more important than ever to ensure discussions about cleanliness and disinfection are part of a larger operational conversation. Getting leadership's buy-in will be critical to not just launching a sound program but maintaining it for years to come.

Start by creating a committee of advocates whose expertise and vision from diverse areas of the school can strengthen your cleanliness and disinfection plan. Bringing different points of view to the table, they'll likely bring up questions that are otherwise not considered.

Next, create a realistic budget. Leveraging the strength of a national facility management provider like OpenWorks helps build a framework for a right-sized budget. They also help identify priorities by building out "must-haves" and "nice-to-haves" based on individual needs.

Become well versed in what your cleaning plan currently looks like and put a critical lens on what may be missing. Ask industry experts about often overlooked areas, and also off-limits areas, deep cleaning and disinfection frequency, the need for air filter changes and general guidelines on best practices in terms of regularity and effectiveness.

Faculty, staff and students play a critical role in a facilities management program. Take the opportunity to educate them about new cleaning and disinfection practices, and empower them to have skin in the game by taking on tasks to help create a safe place to learn.

## Know You're Not Alone

The idea of implementing and maintaining an effective advanced cleaning and disinfection regimen is daunting. But the existence of ESSER funding, which currently needs to be spent by Sept. 30, 2024, creates an opportunity for facilities and operations managers to leverage the many resources that exist to put them on the path to continued success.

From ongoing day-to-day cleaning, disinfection and indoor air quality checks – to specialized summertime solutions – it's essential to have a commercial cleaning provider that understands the unique needs of schools and aligns with each school's needs. Not only are health and wellness philosophies invaluable, but it's also key to execute a well-thought-out plan, while making the most of the precious funding that has been made available to create a foundation for lasting change in a school's facilities management plan.

*Edward Pim is Senior Vice President of Operations & Experience of OpenWorks, a national leader in facilities management, providing unparalleled quality and customer service through robust technology solutions and a proven network of elite service providers. OpenWorks' facilities maintenance services include cleaning and disinfecting, landscaping, supply replenishment, HVAC service and more.*



# About OpenWorks

OpenWorks is a national leader in facilities management services including cleaning and disinfecting, landscaping, supply replenishment and HVAC service. Founded in 1983, customers trust OpenWorks to provide reliable quality and customer service through robust technology solutions and a proven network of elite service providers. This performance earns OpenWorks an industry-leading 99% customer retention rate and the confidence to offer new customers a limited money back guarantee. Give OpenWorks a try today!

**Phone: 1-844-962-1037**

**OpenWorksWeb.com**

