



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**  
**March 5, 2009**

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**Mom always said cleaning up would pay off some day**  
*Local school custodian earns national public health award  
by making learning about public health contagious for students*

BREMERTON, Wash.—Principals always say no running in the hallways, but the head custodian at Brownsville Elementary School is trying something new; he is teaching in the hallways. Pat Nicholson is on a mission to improve indoor environmental quality (IEQ) at schools throughout the state to ensure healthier students, staff and faculty, and he is educating fellow staff members and students on how to reach that goal.

Due to his outstanding leadership, Nicholson is the first ever top recipient of the national C.L.E.A.N.® Award. This honor includes a cash award of \$5,000, an all expense paid trip to the National Education Association (NEA) National ESP Conference to receive the award, a one-year NEA membership, products and supplies for his school and a school celebration on National C.L.E.A.N. Day.

“The greatest challenge that I see for school custodians today is to make the paradigm shift from cleaning for appearance to cleaning for health,” Nicholson said. “Custodians that effectively clean for health create and maintain clean schools, healthier students, and higher rates of student achievement. Custodians are vital partners in successful public schools.”

Nicholson’s enthusiasm for “cleaning for health” is spreading. He has educated fellow staff members about removing asthma triggers in the classroom. In addition, he is the only custodian to serve on the Washington Education Association IEQ Work Team where he authored the “Ten Best IEQ Practices” for the Association’s Web site.

“NEA is proud to be a partner with the Soap and Detergent Association and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in presenting the 2009 C.L.E.A.N.® awards! Custodians are critical partners in creating healthy, clean and safe schools for our students. They take so much pride in their work and know that what they do every day fosters an environment where students can learn more effectively,” said NEA President Dennis Van Roekel. “While the students and teachers are in class, in addition to their regular duties, custodians are the eyes and ears of the schools. They know who belongs in the school and who doesn’t, helping create a safe environment so students can learn and teachers can teach. Our schools could not function without our custodians.”

Nicholson testified before the Washington State Board of Health on school health issues, and last year spoke at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s *Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools* National Symposium in Washington, D.C. He has written much of the custodial training material for Central Kitsap School District and has trained other custodians for more than 20 years. His “cleaning for health” practices contributed to lower absentee rates at Brownsville than at neighboring schools, especially during the flu season.

(more)



“Custodians work diligently every day to keep our schools clean, which is essential to the health of students, teachers and school personnel,” said Nancy Bock, SDA Vice President of Education. “These awards recognize the unsung but crucial role custodians play on a daily basis in schools across the nation.”

Students also are involved in Nicholson’s mission. Eight years ago, he decided to paint his floor scrubber to resemble a tiger in an attempt to connect with students. He named the scrubber “Fang.” Last year on National Healthy Schools Day, “Fang” participated in a school skit where he was interviewed by students (Nicholson with a microphone off-stage). “Fang” is a huge hit with students and a novel tool for teaching them about the importance of cleanliness.

Nicholson also recruited sixth-grade students to the school’s recycling program and is teaching them about IEQ as well. He’s been known to take at-risk students under his wing, and his mentorship helps students connect with school.

The national C.L.E.A.N.® Award recognizes the contributions that custodians make to public health in their schools, communities and their profession. The award demonstrates outstanding leadership to school cleanliness and reflects the contributions that education support professionals (ESPs) can make to public health. The award program is a joint initiative of the National Education Association (NEA), the NEA Health Information Network (NEA HIN), the Soap and Detergent Association (SDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This is the first year for the award. Up to five awards will be presented annually: one top recipient and four runners-up.

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