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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*

MISHAWAKA, Ind.—Principals always say no running in the hallways, but the head custodian at Emmons Elementary School is trying something new; he is teaching in the hallways. Rick Johnson uses innovative solutions to involve students in maintaining clean surroundings, teaching them responsibility and instilling a sense of pride in their own school.

Due to his outstanding leadership, Johnson is a runner-up recipient of the national C.L.E.A.N.® Award. This honor includes a cash award of \$2,000, an all expense paid trip to the National Education Association (NEA) National ESP Conference to receive the award, and a one-year NEA membership.

“Given the recent outbreaks of diseases like MRSA and Norovirus in schools, the importance of cleanliness as it relates to what I do every day as a custodian is monumental. The responsibility of ensuring that preventive cleaning measures—such as wiping down desks and doorknobs with antibacterial agents—is one that I take seriously and with great pride,” said Rick Johnson. “I hope the work I do every day to ensure a safe and clean school environment leaves a lasting impression on students and staff and they realize the importance of what school custodians do every day.”

Johnson’s outstanding custodial and maintenance skills have earned the school the Gold Star award for building cleanliness, an award given only to schools that score the highest on the school district’s comprehensive rating scale. To accomplish this, Johnson’s team cleans for health, removing germs as well as dirt. This includes the use of antibacterial door knob and desk wipes to reduce germs and improve student health.

“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.”

(more)

Johnson's Custodial Cadet Program is a voluntary apprentice program that provides students with daily practical cleaning experience. His volunteer student helpers clean windows, take out trash, and operate the floor scrubbing machine (under supervision) during lunch and playground recesses. The program is so popular it has a waiting list, and students must earn a spot through good behavior and teacher recommendations.

"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."

Johnson also initiated the school's recycling program. Paper is recycled, and aluminum tabs are collected and sent to Riley's Children's Hospital in Indianapolis to benefit the hospital. His green school program extends outdoors where he also works as groundskeeper. In the spring he sometimes plants his own flowers to help beautify the grounds.

Johnson gives more than time and attention to students. With his own money, he has awarded \$100 savings bonds to his best Cadets to use for college. His generosity extends outside the school to Little League baseball where he volunteered for many years as a coach, manager and fundraiser.

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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