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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*

BLYTHEWOOD, S.C.—Principals always say no running in the hallways, but the head custodian at Round Top Elementary School is trying something new; she is teaching in the hallways. Felicia Palmer 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 her outstanding leadership, Palmer 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.

“The school custodian’s job involves so much more than sweeping floors and wiping tables. Our job is to provide our students with a safe, clean, enriched environment where quality teaching and learning can happen. At my school, students learn the importance of life skills such as responsibility, pride, and initiative,” said Felicia Palmer. “When I take pride in my work and I do my personal best, I know students see this and learn from my example. While I do not teach math, science, social studies, or reading, I’m an instructor of the ‘unwritten curriculum’ that teaches students how to take responsibility for the learning environment we provide every day.”

Palmer created the Golden Spatula award to recognize classes that keep their cafeteria table and surrounding area tidy after lunch. She notes that in a school of more than 700 students, cafeteria turn-around time is short. If students leave a lunch table messy, it takes additional time for the custodians to clean it properly before the next shift of students arrive. Proper cleaning includes the use of hypoallergenic antibacterial solutions to disinfect tables and chairs. Students compete for the coveted award and in the process learn responsibility and pride in their school.

“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.”

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Palmer received the Bronze Plunger award in 2008 from Richland School District Two for outstanding restroom cleanliness. That year her two sisters, head custodians at other schools in the district, won the gold and silver plungers for their efforts. Last November the trio was featured in the Neighbor section of *The State*, South Carolina's statewide newspaper.

Palmer and her team continually work on their "cleaning for health initiative." As an example, door handles and other areas are disinfected daily to reduce the spread of germs.

"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."

Palmer also worked with the student-led recycling team to set up a special station in the cafeteria where students can recycle plastic milk bottles and discard the plastic lids, which cannot be recycled. She helps conduct safety audits and is an integral member of the school's emergency response team.

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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