

"Four Senses" Restroom Inspection

When I do a school restroom inspection, I do not walk right into the bathroom and look around. If I just entered the restroom using only my eyes, I would miss too much. Instead I utilize a "four senses" approach. Let me explain.

Say I am standing outside a Mens room in a high school of 2,000 kids. The hallway where that restroom is located is important. It is the context of the ebb and flow of students. If the restroom is outside a gym a different mix of pupils pass in and out, whereas a restroom in the back hall near a science classroom has less traffic. Surely the context for restrooms outside a cafeteria is different from toilet spaces in locker rooms.

As I stand outside the restroom I look carefully at the lighting, the signage, bulletin boards, and display cases. When I see connections between what is there, I can use these items for a campaign designed to connect with healthy functions and the restrooms. I really study the gender names on the entrance doors. "Boys" and "Girls" for high school students suggest immaturity, and too often these adolescents act like kids. I prefer "Men" and "Women," though my favorite nomenclature is "Gentlemen" and "Ladies."

Next if there is an outside door, I scrutinize the door itself. This structure may have a metal ventilation grate, which in all likelihood is dusty and needs replacement or a good cleaning. Of course I notice if there is any graffiti or scratchiti.

After I have analyzed the context, noticed the lighting, thought about future use of a display case, looked at the signage, and examined the door, then and only then, do I go inside.

And I enter only enough to open and close the door. I study the back of the door. What is its material? Are words etched in the wood or written with a permanent marker? Is the grate kicked in?

After closing the door, I look in the corners behind the door for where the “mushrooms” grow. Is there dust on the floor, or cob webs between the floor and corner wall? Having finished the context, both sides of the door, and the corners, I am now prepared for the “four senses” approach to examine the restrooms.

If there is a light switch on the side of the wall near the door, I turn it off. If there is a security device without a key, I close my eyes. Literally, I shut my eyes. Then I listen, really listen. Do I hear water running from a faucet? Are the urinals or commodes constantly draining? Is there a fan or vent, which is whirring? Next I use my olfactory sense. Can I smell anything? Is there an odor from the floor sewer? Is there the smell of ammonium in the air? Is there any distinct, cleaning solution smell? Then either with a bare hand or gloved one, I touch the walls near the front entrance. Are they plain or painted cinder block, or glazed, or some of each? After hearing, smelling, and touching, I open my eyes, or turn on the lights, for I have engaged all my senses except taste. I am now prepared for a thorough inspection.

First, I begin numbering. That is, I count each commode from the door. The fixture closest to the entrance door is #1, the next #2, and so forth. That way I can say, for example, “Commode #4 has a broken seat.” Anyone knows specifically where to look.

I inspect the commodes, flush each, or at least a sample, including all that are not flushed. I inspect the stalls for toilet paper dispensers. Are there sanitary product receptacles, and do

they have lids and liners? Do the stalls have working doors, hooks, and locks? I repeat the numbering, checking, and flushing with the urinals in every Men's room.

I also inspect the urinals and commodes for gum, food wrappers, plastic beverage bottles, and rolls of toilet paper, pencils and especially cigarette butts.

Then I review the sinks for warm water, functioning handles, and cleanliness.

Now I search for soap dispensers and soap. Then I look at the towel dispensers or air blowers. Does this equipment work? Are the dispensers stocked?

This is the point in the "Four Senses" restroom inspection where hearing, sensing, touching, and seeing all come together. I start with the ceiling and look for watermarks, loose ceiling tiles, swatches of dry toilet paper. I relook at the vent or exhaust fan and anything else not properly associated with a ceiling. Is the surface of the fan cleaned, dripping any substance, rotating?

The walls are next. I look for graffiti, scratchitti, and holes from old toilet paper, towel, or soap dispensers. Inevitably when someone removes these dispensers, such as when a new vendor offers a different towel dispenser, holes are left in the walls. When a staff person leaves replacement holes, kids stuff them with pencils, gum, even drugs. Not to mention that the holes need to be refilled, and repainted since the scared walls help set the tone for the rest restroom.

The last item to be checked is the floor. If the restroom is the hidden secret of the school, then the floor is the last refuge of the hidden secret. All things fall to the floor and I have learned from a competent floor-cleaner that the tiles and the grout can be recleaned and made to look almost like new.

Is the floor clean, dirty, moist, full of sitting water, human excrement, and urine? Is the grout cleaned and are the tiles shining? At this point I sit on a garbage bag and inspect the same sinks and fixtures from the floor level. I have even used a dentist's mirror to look under lids of toilets.

I use a clipboard, a checklist, notes, or I just eyeball the restroom when I visit a school. It depends on my purpose and my time. However by using a "Four Senses" approach, I am more thorough. And I am able to connect restrooms to other issues such as wellness, responsibility and respect.

Cleanliness, durable and attractive equipment, as well as a plan to engage students are essential. Respectful students, caring adults, a comprehensive inspection, and effective equipment will help any school become a safer learning environment. And the key to restroom improvement is to start from one concrete item - say soap dispensers and go as far as possible toward the ultimate goal of a better society. The 'Four Senses' restroom inspection is an excellent way to move from soap to citizenship.

Written by
Dr. Tom Keating
Coordinator
Project CLEAN
www.project-clean.com
projectclean@mindspring.com
404.373.4973