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Dubuque Community School District Awarded IPM STAR Certification: Eleventh in the Nation to Earn Honor

IPM STAR rewards excellence in managing pests and pesticide hazards

DUBUQUE, Iowa – Dubuque Community School District (DCSD) has earned IPM STAR status, becoming only the eleventh school district in the nation to achieve this distinction. The award will be presented at a meeting of the Board of Education on December 13, 2004 in Dubuque.

Children, because of their lower body weight, rapid metabolism and developing body systems and behavior, are more vulnerable pesticides. Children are also more likely to contact the ground, floor or other areas where pests and pesticide residues may be present.

Schools typically deal with a variety of pests, including stinging insects, rodents and weeds. Integrated Pest Management, or IPM, reduces reliance on pesticides by focusing on long-term, preventative solutions. Rather than scheduling regular pesticide applications, IPM practitioners correct conditions such as poor sanitation, leaky pipes or broken window screens that can provide food, water and access shelter that pests need to survive.

IPM STAR certification is awarded by the IPM Institute of North America, in partnership with the US EPA Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program. The process includes a rigorous on-site evaluation, a comprehensive set of reports and recommendations, and a concerted effort by school administrators, staff and contractors to meet high standards for effective, least-risk pest management.

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The IPM program at DCSD was initiated in 2003 following a cockroach complaint in a high school that made the local press. A pest control technician sprayed pesticide to the baseboards in the school. Baseboard spray applications are an old technique that creates pesticide exposure risk for staff and students, and are no longer considered the most effective or the least-toxic method of cockroach control.

DCSD buildings and grounds staff realized it was time to make a change, and contracted with a local company, Voss Pest Control, to provide service on an as-needed basis. Voss does not spray pesticides inside school building, yet is able to effectively resolve pest problems that when DCSD's in-house staff need assistance.

A recent complaint about cockroaches at one of the high schools, which probably arrived in a student backpack, shows how the approach works. Jim Brimmer, assistant manager of buildings and grounds, was contacted by the school's head custodian about the problem. Working together, they found a leaking pipe that was providing the pests with access to drinking water. After the leak was fixed, the cockroaches disappeared. The lesson: without water, cockroaches that make their way into the school cannot survive.

In another instance, Brimmer called Bob Setter, entomologist and termite IPM specialist at the University of Iowa, to look into options for managing termites found at one school. Following Setter's advice, Jim and Voss Pest Control staff identified the extent of the infestation and settled on a treatment limited to the affected area. Careful monitoring afterwards indicated the treatment was effective.

Voss operates under an IPM approach for all of its accounts. "Every insect is different," says Roger Voss, company owner. "You have to find out how it came in, was it attracted by something? For example, carpenter ants generally only go after moisture affected wood. So maybe you have a maintenance problem to deal with that will solve the problem." Voss relates that IPM is a successful way to do business; "We always do a thorough inspection and try to find the cause of the problem. It takes more time and care up front, but we have very few call backs."

The IPM program operates under an official policy adopted by the board of education in December 2003 with the active support of superintendent John Burgart. The policy benefits Dubuque's 1700 staff and 10,000 students, occupying two high schools, three junior highs and 12 elementary schools.

The policy includes some very specific language addressing conditions that can encourage pests: "cardboard boxes and other clutter are to be eliminated throughout school buildings, and food-related appliances are banned from classrooms." "I insisted on some of these provisions," relates Brimmer. "I know the new rules didn't make everyone happy – but we've seen results in greatly reducing our pest problems and pest control costs. In one instance, the clutter we cleaned out filled four full-size dumpsters, just from one 33,000 square foot building!" An annual, district-wide auction provides an opportunity to dispose of unused equipment and supplies that might otherwise become homes for pests.

DCSD has made non-chemical controls a mainstay for managing pests. Trash can liners help to contain trash, keeping dumpsters cleaner and reducing yellowjacket problems. Soda in bottles is encouraged over cans, because bottles can be recapped before placement in recycling bins, reducing attractive odors and liquids. Sticky traps are placed in problem areas, to alert custodians to any cockroach activity. Traps are also used where rodents are a problem, eliminating the need for rodenticides. The maintenance program for athletic fields includes periodic fertilizer applications, overseeding and aeration to keep the turf thick and healthy and resistant to invasion by weeds or other pests.

Staff training is key tool in the battle against pest and pesticide hazards. Drs. Mark Shour and Carol Pilcher, entomologists with Iowa State University, conducted training sessions for head custodians and school nurses and administrators. Shour explained which pests are the most common in schools, what kinds of conditions encourage pest problems, and what everyone can do to keep pests out of school buildings. The required training did not meet with a warm initial reception, according to Shour. "They went in screaming and hollering, but came out happy," he recalls. "They couldn't believe we could talk about bugs for so long."

Shour is making the most of his new converts to school IPM. Mark Burns, now principal at Washington Junior High School, was introduced to IPM at the first training session presented by Shour. Burns is now educating others, presenting on Dubuque's IPM program at a workshop hosted by Shour at Iowa State University in Ames in March 2004. His presentation is available on Iowa State's school IPM Web site, <http://www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/schoolipm/>

IPM STAR was initiated by the IPM Institute with funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency and the National Foundation for IPM Education. The IPM Institute is an independent non-profit organization based in Madison, Wisconsin. The Institute works to increase awareness and adoption of IPM in agriculture and communities. Visit the Institute's website at www.ipminstitute.org for more information.

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