RFP Best Practices for K-12 Cleaning Vendor Selection

A field guide for school business managers writing a Request for Proposal for commercial cleaning services.

Published by Advanced Building Care. Free to download, free to share. This is the document we wish every business manager had on their desk when they sent us their first RFP.

Why this guide exists

Most school business managers we work with had never written a cleaning RFP before they wrote ours. They wrote one anyway — usually borrowed from a template they found online or pieced together from memory of vendors they'd worked with — and the result was a document that didn't get them what they needed.

The symptoms of a weak RFP:

- Vendors respond with proposals in completely different formats, making side-by-side comparison impossible
- Specialty work (carpet, floor strip-and-wax, electrostatic disinfection) is bundled into a base rate you can't audit
- No pricing-transparency mechanism, so you only see real numbers after you've committed to a vendor
- Vague performance standards that vendors interpret in whichever way makes their bid look better
- Insurance and bonding requirements set too low, so cheap vendors look qualified when they aren't

The cause isn't that business managers are bad at writing — it's that K-12 cleaning is a category most people procure once every 3–5 years, so the muscle memory never builds. By the time you've written your second cleaning RFP, you'll have learned half of what's in this guide. We've written this for you so you can skip the learning curve.

The guide assumes you've already decided to switch vendors (see our companion document, the *K-12 Cleaning Vendor Switching Playbook*) and you're now in the phase where you actually have to write the document that goes out to vendors. Everything below is the playbook for that document.

What an RFP actually is

A Request for Proposal is a structured document that does three things:

1. **Tells vendors what you need.** Specific scope, frequency, performance expectations, qualifications.
2. **Tells vendors how to respond.** Required sections, format, pricing structure, response deadline.
3. **Sets the rules of the procurement.** Walkthroughs required, references required, scoring methodology, decision timeline.

A well-structured RFP gives you proposals you can actually compare. A poorly structured RFP gives you a stack of marketing brochures from vendors hoping you'll pick whichever one looks the friendliest.

The difference is mechanical. A good RFP forces every vendor to respond against the same structure, with the same line items, in the same units. That's what makes side-by-side comparison possible.

The 5 sections every K-12 cleaning RFP must include

Section 1: Facility profile

This is where you describe what the vendor is being asked to clean. The more specific you are, the more accurate the bid.

What to include:

- **Organization name and contact information** for the procurement (yourself, your phone, your email)
- **Each campus** the vendor will service, by address
- **Total square footage per campus** — separated by interior cleanable sqft and exterior areas (parking lots, exterior windows, etc.)
- **Space types** at each campus — classrooms, restrooms (count + size), gym, cafeteria, kitchen, science labs, art rooms, music halls, gymnasium, administrative offices, library, common areas
- **Floor types** — carpet, vinyl tile (VCT), hardwood, polished concrete, ceramic tile. Vendors price floor work differently by type.
- **Operating hours** — when is the building occupied? When can the vendor work?
- **After-school activity calendar overview** — which days of the week have sports, drama, debate, parent meetings, board meetings, performances? This affects when the vendor can clean specific spaces.

- **Student + staff count** per campus — affects supply consumption and restroom traffic
- **Existing supplies inventory and storage** — does the vendor inherit the supply room, restock, manage, or replace?
- **Existing equipment** — floor machines, vacuums, anything you own that you want the vendor to use or replace

The first time a business manager writes this section, it tends to be 1 paragraph. The version that gets useful bids tends to be 2 pages. Specifics drive accuracy.

Section 2: Scope of work

This is what vendors are quoting on. The most common reason vendor bids look wildly different is that this section was vague.

Structure scope as a frequency-driven matrix:

Activity	Frequency	Areas	Notes
Trash and recycling collection	Nightly	All buildings	Liners replaced; recycling separated
Restroom service	Nightly	All restrooms	Fixture detail, descale, restock, sanitary disposal, floor mop
Restroom mid-day touch-up	Optional, lunch + post-dismissal	All student restrooms	Wipe, restock, mop
Classroom clean	Nightly	All classrooms	Trash, dust, vacuum, mop, board erase, high-touch surfaces
Floor care — vacuum + spot	Nightly	Carpeted areas	Spot-treat stains; no extraction
Floor care — strip and wax	Summer (June–August)	All VCT	Full strip; 3–5 coats finish
Floor care — burnish	Quarterly	All VCT	Between annual strip-and-wax
Carpet extraction	Twice annually	All carpeted areas	Hot water extraction; high-traffic priority
Gym floor recoat	Summer	Gymnasium	Screen-and-recoat or full sand-and-finish
Window cleaning — interior	Quarterly	All windows	Streak-free
Window cleaning — exterior	Twice annually	All ground-accessible exteriors	High-access work as separate line item
Electrostatic disinfection	Optional, weekly during Oct–March	High-touch surfaces	EPA-registered hospital-grade
Kitchen cleaning	Coordinated with food service	Cafeteria + kitchen	Depending on whether food service is in-house or contracted
Specialty / event cleaning	As scheduled	Event spaces post-event	Post-performance, post-game, post-board-meeting

Vendors will price line items against this matrix. The cleaner the matrix, the cleaner the comparison.

A common mistake: lumping "floor care" into one line and letting vendors decide what it includes. Don't. Spell out strip-and-wax, burnish, carpet, and gym floor recoat as separate work, because they're priced separately in real vendor operations.

Section 3: Performance expectations

What vendors must commit to delivering, in writing.

Include:

- **Quote turnaround time** — *"Vendor must provide quote within X business days of walkthrough."* Three days is a reasonable bar. Vendors that need a week to quote a school will be slow on issues too.
- **Issue response time** — *"Vendor must respond to any quality complaint within one business hour and dispatch corrective action the same day if required."* This is the most important commitment in the document. Get it in writing.
- **Named primary contact requirement** — *"Vendor must assign a single primary contact with direct phone access, reachable Monday–Friday 8am–6pm, with escalation path documented."* No 1-800 lines.
- **Backup staffing requirement** — *"Vendor must demonstrate ability to maintain coverage when a regularly assigned staff member is absent. Solo operators and 2-person crews will not be considered."*
- **Quality program** — *"Vendor must provide a documented quality program including monthly account review with [school designee]."*
- **Communication discipline** — *"Vendor must proactively notify school designee of any incident, missed clean, or staffing change within one business day."*
- **Substitution protocol** — what happens when the primary cleaner is sick, on vacation, or leaves the company? How is the replacement briefed?
- **Reporting cadence** — monthly invoice with summary of work performed; monthly account review meeting (in-person or call); quarterly quality scorecard

These commitments form the basis of your monthly account reviews after signing. If a vendor commits in writing during the RFP and doesn't deliver after, you have grounds for a contract conversation.

Section 4: Qualifications required

This section sets the floor. Vendors who don't meet these requirements should not be considered.

Standard minimums for K-12 cleaning in Utah:

- **General liability insurance**: minimum $2M per occurrence, $4M aggregate. Naming your school as additional insured.
- **Workers' compensation insurance**: state-required minimums, certificate provided

- **Bonding**: minimum $50,000 employee dishonesty bond, certificate provided
- **K-12 experience**: minimum 3 years of K-12 cleaning experience required, OR 3 current K-12 references on file
- **Multi-campus experience** (if you're a multi-campus network): at least 1 current account with 2+ campuses
- **References**: minimum 3 current customer references, contact details provided, at least 1 K-12 reference
- **Staff background-check policy**: state or national background check required for all staff working in school facilities; documentation provided per contract
- **OSHA awareness training**: required for all staff
- **Bloodborne pathogen training**: required (K-12 facilities regularly encounter bodily fluids; staff must be trained)

Optional but worth specifying:

- **Years in business**: minimum 5 years operating in your metro area
- **Specific certifications**: CIMS-certified, Green Seal-certified, IICRC-certified (for carpet/floor work)
- **Local operations**: vendor must have local management, not just local crew
- **Background check policy** at a specified level (e.g., fingerprint-based vs. database)

State minimums as REQUIREMENTS, not preferences. Vendors who can't meet the floor shouldn't be advancing in your process.

Section 5: Pricing format + contract terms

This is the section that makes side-by-side comparison possible — or impossible.

How vendors must structure pricing

Specify the format. Don't accept "$X per month" total. Require:

- **Recurring monthly base** in $ per square foot per month for nightly cleaning
- **Day-porter rate** (if applicable) in $ per hour per shift, separately
- **Specialty work** priced as separate line items per visit or per unit:
  - Strip-and-wax: $ per square foot
  - Carpet extraction: $ per square foot
  - Window cleaning: $ per pane equivalent (interior + exterior separately)
  - Electrostatic disinfection: $ per square foot per visit

- Gym floor recoat: $ per square foot
- Restroom deep clean: $ per restroom per visit

- **Optional add-ons** priced separately:
  - Mid-day restroom touch-ups: $ per visit
  - Additional event cleaning: $ per event

- **Supply pass-through**: are supplies (paper, soap, liners) included in the monthly base, or invoiced separately at vendor cost?

This format makes vendor comparison mathematical. If Vendor A is $0.10/sqft and Vendor B is $0.13/sqft for the same scope, you know which is more expensive — and you can ask what's different.

Contract terms

- **Contract length**: month-to-month is standard for cleaning. Decline multi-year unless there's a meaningful reason. The vendor should earn renewal every month.
- **Out clause**: 30-day notice from either side is standard. Some vendors push for 60 or 90 — push back unless there's specific cause.
- **Annual escalation**: cap at 3–4% per year, OR tied to a published cost-of-labor or CPI index. Without a cap, vendors can raise prices arbitrarily.
- **Naming the school as additional insured**: required
- **Background-check documentation**: vendor provides annually
- **Termination for cause**: spell out what constitutes cause (repeat missed cleans, failure to maintain insurance, failure to deliver agreed scope) and what remedy you have (curing period, immediate termination)
- **Existing supply inventory**: at contract end, does the outgoing vendor get to remove their supplies, or are they school property?
- **Post-contract reference**: vendor agrees to be a reference for future RFPs if asked

Get these in the RFP, not the contract. By the time you're negotiating the contract, your leverage is gone.

How to score vendor responses

You'll get back proposals from 3–5 vendors. Scoring is the next decision.

Use a 10-criteria scorecard

Each criterion is scored 1–5. Total out of 50. Anything below 35 should not advance.

#	Criterion	What 1 looks like	What 5 looks like
1	Reliability evidence	Vague claims, no specifics	Specific accounts named (anonymized OK), track record demonstrated
2	Accountability structure	1-800 number; no named contact	Named primary contact with photo, role, direct line, escalation path
3	Communication discipline	"We'll call you when we need to"	Documented account-review cadence, proactive incident communication
4	K-12 experience	First school account	5+ years; multiple current K-12 accounts; references available
5	Multi-campus capability	Solo operator or 2-person crew	Documented backup staffing; current multi-campus account
6	Insurance and bonding	Meets state minimum	Above your stated minimums; certificates provided in proposal
7	Pricing transparency	"$X per month, all-inclusive" with no breakdown	Line items per your requested format, supplies pass-through documented
8	References	None provided; or only friendly references	3+ provided, including ≥1 similar K-12 account, contact info verified
9	Response time	"Best effort" or no commitment	Same business day quote; 1 business hour on issues
10	Contract terms	Multi-year lock, no out clause	Month-to-month with 30-day out, escalation capped

Add a separate REFERENCE-CHECK score (1–5) after you've called references for your top 2 vendors. The reference score often shifts the ranking — proposals can be sales-engineered; references rarely are.

What to do with the scores

- **35+/50 with reference score 4+**: viable candidate
- **35+/50 with reference score < 4**: hesitate. Call additional references. Watch for warning signs in walkthrough behavior.

- **Below 35/50**: out of contention. Don't waste walkthrough time.
- **Below 30/50**: don't even shortlist.

If two vendors score within 5 points of each other, the references decide.

Common RFP mistakes (and what to do instead)

After reading dozens of cleaning RFPs over the past decade, here are the patterns that lead to bad vendor selections.

Mistake 1: Asking for "best price"

Bad: "Provide your best monthly price for the scope above."

This tells vendors that price is the deciding factor. The cheapest vendor wins — and the cheapest vendor often misses days, has high turnover, and costs more in incidents than they save in monthly bill.

Better: "Provide pricing per the format in Section 5. Pricing will be evaluated in conjunction with the criteria in Section 4 and the response standards in Section 3."

You're not promising to pick the most expensive. You're promising the cheapest isn't an auto-win.

Mistake 2: No walkthrough requirement

Bad: "Submit your bid by the deadline."

A vendor who quotes without seeing the building is guessing. They'll either overshoot (you overpay) or undershoot (they miss days because the scope didn't fit the budget they quoted).

Better: "Vendor must complete on-site walkthrough at each campus between [date] and [date] before submitting. Walkthroughs are scheduled by emailing [your designee]."

Mistake 3: Bundling specialty work into the monthly base

Bad: "Monthly price includes all cleaning services."

You can't audit this. You don't know what's included in "all." Vendors will assume the minimum; you'll assume the maximum; conflict at month 2.

Better: separate line items for everything periodic (strip-and-wax, carpet, gym floor, electrostatic, etc.). Even if you bundle them into a single monthly invoice later, get visibility into what each line costs.

Mistake 4: Vague performance expectations

Bad: "Vendor must respond promptly to issues."

How prompt is prompt? An hour? A day? A week? Vendors will commit to "promptly" because it costs nothing and means whatever they want it to mean later.

Better: "Vendor must respond to any quality complaint within one business hour and dispatch corrective action the same day if required, regardless of time of day the complaint is received."

Specific is enforceable. Vague is not.

Mistake 5: Skipping reference calls

Bad: Reviewing references on paper, then calling none of them.

Reference calls are where you learn what working with this vendor is ACTUALLY like — not what they say it's like. The questions to ask are in the *Vendor Switching Playbook*; the short version: ask specifics, not generalities.

Better: budget 3 hours for reference calls — 30 minutes per call, 3 references per top-2 vendor. This is the cheapest insurance in the entire procurement.

Mistake 6: Long-term contract lock

Bad: 2-year or 3-year contract with no out clause.

You're committing to a multi-year relationship with a vendor you've never worked with. If anything goes wrong, you're stuck.

Better: month-to-month with 30-day out, OR 1-year contract with 60-day out at any time. Vendors who push back on this are telling you they expect you to want to leave.

Mistake 7: Treating the RFP as one-way

Bad: Vendor reads the RFP, submits a bid, you decide.

You're missing the conversation. Vendors who ASK GOOD QUESTIONS during the walkthrough are showing you what their account-experience will be. Vendors who just nod and submit a bid are showing you what THAT will be too.

Better: pay attention to how each vendor engages during the walkthrough. Are they asking about scope nuances? Identifying potential issues? Proposing things you didn't think of? The best vendor on paper isn't always the best vendor in practice; the walkthrough often reveals which is which.

Sample RFP timeline

For a July 1 fiscal-year-start contract changeover:

Date	Action
January	Decision to switch + internal documentation
Mid-January	Draft RFP using this guide + your facility specifics
Late January	Identify and shortlist 4–5 vendors
February 1	Send RFP; set 3-week response deadline
February 1–28	Walkthroughs (2-week window starting week 1)
February 21	Vendor responses due
Early March	Score responses; identify top 2
Mid-March	Reference calls on top 2
Late March	Vendor selection; contract negotiation begins
April 15	Signed contract
May	Transition planning with new vendor
June 1	Give 30-day notice to outgoing vendor
July 1	New vendor begins service

If you're outside Utah or your fiscal year is different, slide the timeline accordingly. The 5-month process is the same regardless of calendar.

A note on the procurement process itself

This guide is mechanical. It tells you what sections to include, what questions to ask, what to score. The mechanics matter.

But the mechanics aren't the whole job. The procurement process is also a relationship-building exercise. The vendors you invite to bid form impressions of you, and you form impressions of them. The vendor you DON'T pick this cycle might be your vendor in 3 years — make the process respectful. Decline professionally, give feedback if asked, leave doors open.

The vendor you DO pick is now your partner for some indefinite stretch of years. Start that relationship with clarity, with documented commitments, and with the expectation that both sides will hold each other accountable. The RFP isn't just the document that selects them — it's the foundation of the operating relationship.

A great RFP is the start of a great vendor relationship. A bad RFP is the start of a problem you'll spend three years fixing.

What's next

If you're starting at the beginning of a vendor-change cycle and haven't yet decided to switch — start with our companion document, the *K-12 Cleaning Vendor Switching Playbook*. It walks through the 6-month timeline before you write the RFP.

If you're a Utah school and want to talk about whether Advanced Building Care is a fit for your network, we offer same-business-day quotes and a 15-minute walkthrough — no obligation. Call (801) 618-0601 or visit advancedbuildingcare.com.

Whatever you do — and whether or not you choose ABC — we hope this guide leads to better vendor selections, fewer surprises, and a procurement process that actually feels like a conversation between professionals.

— *The team at Advanced Building Care*