Essential Considerations for School Floor Sanding in London

When I first started working with school floors in London, I quickly realised that the approach had to be different from residential work. A school hallway sees more foot traffic in a single day than most homes see in a week. The wear patterns are not just cosmetic; they affect safety, acoustics, and the overall learning environment. Over the years, I have developed a set of practices that help me deliver results that last, and I want to share some of those insights here.

School floor sanding is not just about making timber look fresh. It is about preparing a surface that will withstand hundreds of children, teachers, and visitors every day. The choice of equipment, the grit sequence, and the final coating all play a role. I have seen too many jobs where a quick sand and a cheap varnish led to peeling within months. That is a waste of money and a disruption to the school.

Understanding the Subfloor and Existing Finish

Before any sanding begins, I always check the condition of the hardwood flooring with a moisture meter. Schools often have leaks or spills that go unnoticed. If the timber is damp, sanding will gum up the sandpaper and push moisture deeper into the boards. I have had to pause jobs because a hidden leak under a radiator had raised the moisture content above 12%. In those cases, we address the source of moisture first, then let the floor dry before proceeding.

The existing finish also matters. Some older schools have layers of wax polish that have built up over decades. Others have polyurethane coating that is starting to fail. Each requires a different approach. For heavy wax buildup, a floor grinder with a coarse abrasive is the quickest way to strip it back to bare timber. For polyurethane that is only lightly worn, a lighter sand with an orbital sander may be enough to key the surface for a new coat. I always test a small area first to see how the floor responds.

Choosing the Right Equipment

For large corridors and halls, a drum sander is my go-to machine. It covers ground quickly and leaves a consistent finish when used with the right technique. But it can be aggressive. If the boards are thin or have been sanded many times before, I switch to an orbital sander or a floor buffer with an abrasive pad. These machines remove less material and reduce the risk of going through the wear layer.





Edge sanding is always the trickiest part. No matter how good your big machine is, it will not reach the skirting boards or into corners. I use a smaller orbital sander for edges, and I take my time. Rushing edge work leaves visible swirl marks that stand out after the new coating goes on. I have learned that it is better to spend an extra hour on edges than to have to come back and recoat the whole floor.

Dustless sanding is non-negotiable in a school environment. Schools operate during the day, and even if we work after hours, dust settles everywhere. I connect all my machines to a high-efficiency dust extractor. It keeps the air clean and the floors ready for coating without a separate cleanup step. Parents and staff appreciate not finding a layer of fine dust on desks and windowsills the next morning.

Gaps, Scratches, and Repairs

Old school floors nearly always have gaps between the boards. Over time, timber shrinks and the joints open up. I fill these gaps with a wood filler that matches the colour of the timber. For parquet floors, the gaps can be even more pronounced because the blocks move independently. I use a flexible gap filling compound that allows for natural expansion and contraction without cracking.

Deep scratches and gouges are common in high-traffic areas. For shallow scratches, sanding alone is enough. For deeper ones, I sometimes need to use a wood filler or even replace a damaged board. I carry a selection of timber offcuts so I can match the grain and colour as closely as possible. It is not always perfect, but a careful repair blends in much better than a large filled area.

Selecting the Finish

The finish you choose affects how long the floor lasts and how easy it is to maintain. For schools, I lean toward hard-wearing polyurethane coatings. They resist scuffs and are easy to clean. But they can be slippery when wet, so I add a slip-resistant additive to the final coat. Some schools prefer a natural look and ask for Osmo or a similar hard wax oil. These products are beautiful and repairable, but they need more frequent maintenance. I discuss the trade-offs with the school facilities manager so they understand what to expect.

Bona products are another option I use regularly. Their water-based polyurethanes have low odour, which is important when the school is occupied nearby. I have also used Bona's traffic and anti-slip additives to tailor the finish to the specific area. For example, a dining hall needs a different level of slip resistance than a classroom.

Practical Tips for a Successful Job

Over the years, I have picked up a few practical tips that make school floor sanding go more smoothly:



- Always check the school calendar before booking the job. Half-term and summer breaks are best, but even then, there may be summer clubs or exam groups using parts of the building.
- Protect all doorways and vents with plastic sheeting and tape. Sanding dust travels further than you think.
- Keep a log of the grit sequence you use. If you need to go back and spot-sand a section, you need to match the scratch pattern.
- Test the final coating on a small area first. Different batches of the same product can vary slightly in colour.

Working with Different Timber Types

Not all school floors are the same. Some are made from oak, others from maple or beech. Each species sands differently. Oak is relatively hard and requires a sharp sandpaper to avoid burnishing. Maple is softer and can dish out if you press too hard with a drum sander. I adjust

my machine speed and pressure based on the timber. When I encounter a species I am less familiar with, I do a test patch to find the right grit and feed rate.

Parquet floors add another layer of complexity. The blocks are often laid in a herringbone pattern, and sanding across the grain can tear out the softer wood between the grain lines. I always sand parquet at a 45-degree angle to the blocks, then finish with a fine grit along the grain. It takes longer, but the result is a flat, even surface that accepts the coating uniformly.

Moisture and Temperature Control

London's climate can be damp, and schools are often old buildings with poor insulation. I always measure the room temperature and relative humidity before starting. If the room is too cold, the coating will not cure properly. If it is too humid, the timber can swell and the coating may blush. I have postponed jobs because a sudden rainstorm raised the humidity above 70%. It is frustrating, but it saves a call back to fix a failed finish.

I also check that the heating system is off or set to a consistent temperature. Radiant heat from radiators can dry out one area of the floor faster than another, causing the coating to cure unevenly. I ask the school to maintain a stable environment for at least 24 hours after the final coat is applied.

Maintenance After Sanding

Once the floor is sanded and coated, the school needs to know how to look after it. I provide a simple care guide: sweep daily with a soft-bristle broom, mop with a damp (not wet) mop and a neutral cleaner, and avoid harsh chemicals. For polyurethane finishes, I recommend a yearly maintenance coat in the heaviest traffic zones. For oiled floors, a top-up of wax polish every few months keeps the surface protected.

I also suggest that the school invest in good entrance matting. Most of the dirt and grit that wears down a floor comes in on shoes. A long mat at every entrance can trap a surprising amount of debris. It is a small investment that extends the life of the floor significantly.



Why Experience Matters

School floor sanding is not a job for a novice. The machines are powerful, and mistakes show quickly. I have seen floors ruined by someone using too coarse a grit or sanding across the grain. I have seen coatings peel because the surface was not cleaned properly before application. Urban floor restoration in a city like London means dealing with old buildings, tight budgets, and tight schedules. Experience teaches you to anticipate problems before they happen.

I use Läufer machines for most of my work because they are reliable and give a consistent finish. But even the best machine needs a skilled hand. Knowing when to use a floor grinder versus a drum sander, or when to switch from a hard coating to a flexible one, comes from years of trial and error. I still learn something new on almost every job, and that keeps the work interesting.

If you are responsible for a school's floors, take the time to find someone who understands the specific demands of the environment. The right approach to school floor sanding will give you a floor that looks good, performs well, and lasts for years to come.