

Schools must tone it down – audiologist

By KATE WRIGHT

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OTTAWA — A local audiologist hopes other provinces will follow the lead of some New Brunswick schools taking steps to tame noisy classrooms.

On Parliament Hill on Monday, Andre Lafargue, an audiologist with River Valley Health, urged provincial governments to do more to ensure classrooms are constructed so that students can hear properly for better knowledge retention.

He said more needs to be done to protect teachers from straining their voices while talking over noise distractions, such as computers and projectors, in classrooms.

A number of New Brunswick schools have installed amplification systems in their classrooms to help students hear more clearly and to allow teachers to talk above classroom distractions without raising their voices.

Teachers are equipped with a small microphone and surround-sound speakers are set up in the classroom to ensure they can be heard.

Many schools have purchased the amplification systems, costing between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per unit.

Lafargue said New Brunswick is “leading the way across the country” in making changes in classrooms to allow students to learn more efficiently.

“It is essential for parents to know that noisy classrooms have the potential to negatively affect their children’s learning, particularly for children with learning disabilities, hearing loss or those learning in a second

language,” he said.

“We are creating classrooms that are very technological advanced, but we’re creating a problem. If we had proper acoustics, it could help absorb noises.”

There are schools in all nine English-speaking school districts in New Brunswick that are looking to in-classroom amplification systems to improve acoustics in classrooms.

Duane McLellan, principal of Salem Elementary School in Sackville, said installing an amplification system in his school three years ago has yielded positive.

With FM systems outfitted in 17 classrooms in the school, McLellan also added handheld microphones for children to use when speaking in front of the class.

“There have been some nice spinoffs,” he said. “Before, many

children that were in the back couldn’t hear, but now they’re more involved. Some children may have been reluctant to speak, but with the microphone in front of them, they’ll speak now.”

A recent study from the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network shows that one in six words is not understood by the average Grade 1 student due to excessive background noise and poor classroom acoustics.

McLellan said the amplification systems not only make words easier to hear, they can also be tuned to emphasize new sounds more clearly for young learners.

“Sound is so important to learning to read and many children at this age level can’t fully hear words — the amplification has helped that.”

Donna Bliss, principal at Priestman Street

School in Fredericton, is getting similar results with 25 amplification systems in her school.

She said her students have become better listeners and teachers no longer have to raise their voices to gain control of a noisy classroom.

Parents at the school fundraised to purchase the sound systems, which cost nearly \$1,500 each.

“We’ve had very positive results and I would encourage any school that’s able to do so as well,” she said.

Department of Education spokesman Jason Humphrey said the department has helped to fund some amplification systems in schools, but couldn’t say how many.

He said the department is assessing where the government could add more systems and is looking at that possibility for the department’s next budget.

Humphrey said the department is continuing to work with audiologists on a plan, but the cost would have to be factored in with other educational-resource costs.

McLellan said governments need to go a step further and create building-code standards so all new classrooms are built with better acoustics to minimize noise pollution.

“You wouldn’t consider building a building without lights and it’s kind of similar,” he said. “When you have lights, you can see and read better.”

While Lafargue agrees governments need to play a bigger role in classroom development, he said parents and educators also have a role to play in making small changes now.

He said teachers can place tennis balls over chair legs to minimize scratching noises on floors, or shut down electrical devices when not in use to silence unnecessary noise.

“It’s not just up to the powers that be — you have to be creative,” he said.

“It is essential for parents to know that noisy classrooms have the potential to negatively affect their children’s learning.”

Andre Lafargue
Audiologist