

Noisy classroom hinder learning: study

■ Some N.B. schools have already installed amplification systems to help students better hear teachers

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

On Parliament Hill yesterday, Andre Lafargue, an audiologist with River Valley Health, urged provincial governments to do more to ensure classrooms are constructed so that

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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 already 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 students can hear clearly regardless of where they're sitting in the room.

Many schools have purchased the amplification systems themselves, 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 technologically 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 "very positive results" for the entire school.

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 spin-offs," 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 acoustics in classrooms.

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.

Donna Bliss, principal at Priestman Street School in Fredericton, is experiencing 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 "constantly assessing" where the government could add more systems and is looking at that possibility for the department's next budget.