

Equip classes with surround sound, speech experts urge; 'When we put speakers in a class ... everybody shuts up and listens'

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OTTAWA - All Canadian teachers from kindergarten to Grade 3 should wear microphones and classrooms should be equipped with surround-sound systems to give every student the equivalent of a "front-row seat," say audiologists and speech pathologists.

Citing research that shows young children cannot hear one of every six words the teacher says, the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists said yesterday that classroom chatter, the din of computers, the hum of lights and outside distractions make classrooms noisy places that hinder student learning.

"When we put speakers in a classroom ... everybody shuts up and listens," Andre Lafargue, a New Brunswick audiologist, told a news conference on Parliament Hill.

A new study of 1,162 students in kindergarten to Grade 3, conducted by the New Brunswick government and professors at University of New Brunswick and the Atlantic Baptist University in Moncton, N.B., found that sound amplification is a significant benefit to young students and should be considered a "vital part" of helping them learn.

In the study, researchers studied 31 classes with sound systems installed and 29 without. Students hear poorly if they are more than 2.75 metres away from the teacher. Another significant problem is that teachers' voices become strained trying to make themselves heard. In tens of thousands of classrooms across Canada, teachers are already donning lightweight microphones around their necks to project their voices in the classroom.

Teacher Anna Crosland at Bear Creek Elementary School in Surrey, B.C., said that "it's still early days" for surround sound at her school, but the systems appear to be making a difference since they were installed in the middle of the last school year.

"Even the youngest children are able to articulate that it's easier for them to hear the teacher," Ms. Crosland said. "I see the children, physically sit back in their chairs, knowing they're not going to have to struggle to hear what the teacher has to say."

The systems also appear to be making a difference for students who are learning English as a second language, she said.

The nearby West Vancouver School Board just bought dozens of systems for about \$1,200 each, for all classrooms from Grade Primary to Grade 3. "We think it's going to help our children," said superintendent Geoff Jobson, who hopes to expand the system for students in all grades if the board sees results this year.

The speech-language pathologists and audiologists association said that classrooms are becoming noisier than ever. Not only are computers and other technology creating a classroom buzz, students are also doing more talking than ever before because of interactive learning that requires more participation and group work.

"When you walk into a typical classroom these days, you see a lot of interaction, children helping each other, assistants moving around, children are not sitting still in their chair," said Linda Rammage, association president.