

Calgary Herald

Noise drowning out teachers

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The average Grade 1 student misses one out of every six words spoken by their teacher due to excessive background noises like ceiling fans and rattling heat vents, says a group of hearing and speech language experts from across Canada.

"If they are missing up to one or two words out of every six, that could mean they are getting wrong homework assignments," said Gael Hannan, from the Hearing Foundation of Canada. "They are missing a lot of vital information."

Hannan is part of the Concerned About Classrooms Coalition

urging provincial and federal governments to establish building regulations that improve the acoustics in all new schools.

"As a person with hearing loss, I often miss one or two of the words in a sentence," Hannan said. "That can change the complete meaning of the message I am receiving."

It's not just students with hearing problems that are hindered by bad classroom acoustics, said Andre Lafargue, regional manager of audiology and speech-language pathology at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital in Fredericton.

Ear infections and colds can affect the hearing of all young children. On any given day, a classroom could have 25 to 30 per cent of its students with these minor illnesses, which render them temporarily hearing impaired, said Lafargue.

Unlike most provinces, there are guidelines in Alberta urging school designers to consider means of reducing background noise in classrooms, he said.

Alberta Infrastructure's design and construction standards and guidelines for school facilities suggest "acoustic treatment" on classroom ceilings and walls to control noise.

Guidelines also recommend more stringent sound proofing in high noise areas such as music rooms and gyms.

Lafargue acknowledges Alberta is leading the way in helping noise-proof new schools, but he still wants the province to make its recommendations mandatory.

"Guidelines are important. But often when you look at cost and other factors, it's easy to ignore them," he said.

Classroom noise is "a significant learning issue" in Calgary, but local schools are already doing a number of things to help reduce background sounds, said Sandra Vandenhoff, educational audiology for the Calgary Board of Education.

Many schools have cut tennis balls in half and attached them to the bottoms of chair legs to silence them when students move about. Maintenance staff can adjust noisy fluorescent lights.

Teachers are also trained to be aware of simple things, such as shutting the door, which can make classrooms considerably quieter, said Vandenhoff.

The Calgary Catholic School District also ensures new schools are designed to minimize noise. Gym ceilings feature sound traps. Classroom ceilings have special panels and thick drapes which reduce sound, said separate board spokeswoman Janet Sutherland.

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