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Acoustical standards needed in classrooms - coalition; Performance related | Poor acoustics in Canadian classrooms can be bad for both teachers and students

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A coalition of speech and audiology professionals are raising their voices in an effort to help dial down excessive background noise and improve poor acoustics in Canadian classrooms.

Concerned About Classrooms Coalition, which also comprises teachers and organizations focused on hearing health, is seeking to enhance the learning environment of students and vocal health of teachers across the country.

The group is calling on Ottawa to show leadership by urging the provinces and territories to implement acoustical standards for Canadian schools.

The Acoustical Society of America has developed a classroom acoustic standard that sets specific criteria for maximum background noise and reverberation time in an unoccupied classroom, said Linda Walsh, president of the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists. The coalition believes Canada should follow suit to implement a similar set of standards.

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

Sources of this background noise can include lighting ballasts, heating and air-conditioning systems, computers and electrical appliances as well as outdoor noise such as traffic and playgrounds, said Walsh.

"Children who primarily learn through listening need a learning environment in which they can fully hear and understand the teacher's instruction, particularly children with learning disabilities, hearing loss or those learning in a second language," Walsh said in a conference call Friday.

Difficulty hearing as a result of excessive background noise and poor acoustics can lead to decreased performance by students, reading deficiencies and delayed language acquisition, among other consequences, she said.

And it's not just students who are affected. When classroom background noise is high, teachers must raise their voices, causing inevitable vocal strain, she said, adding that teachers constitute the highest percentage of voice-related cases in speech therapy clinics across Canada.

"While there are many factors that can interfere with a child's academic development, poor acoustical conditions in classrooms are preventable. These need to be optimized to support learning," said Walsh.

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