

Vancouver Sun

Experts say noise hampers learning; Loudness is also taking a toll on the health of teachers, advocates say

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Byline: Meagan Fitzpatrick

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: iStock / The effort to be heard above classroom background noise can strain teachers' voices.

Noisy classrooms are preventing children from learning and taking a health toll on teachers, according to experts who want the federal government to adopt national sound standards for new schools and improvements made to existing ones.

"Excessive background noise and poor acoustics can lead to poor understanding of the speech signal, decreased performance by students, reading deficiencies, delayed language acquisition and many other negative consequences," Linda Walsh, president of the Canadian Association of Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists, said at a press conference on Parliament Hill on Friday.

Walsh's association is one of 18 that make up the Concerned About Classrooms Coalition, and it says the absence of standardized classroom acoustics is a gap that must be filled.

"Our government needs to take responsibility for our children's education and push the provinces to implement building standards for schools," said Maureen Clarke, a member of the coalition that teaches deaf and hard of hearing students in North Vancouver.

The coalition is recommending Canada follow a model already developed in the United States by the Acoustical Society of America that established specific criteria for maximum background noise and reverberation times for classrooms depending on their size. Reverberation times measure how long it takes for sound to be absorbed.

Lighting fixtures, computers, heating and air conditioning units, outdoor noise from traffic or the schoolyard, and normal classroom sounds like chairs scraping on the floor can all make it difficult for students to hear their teachers and it's even more of a challenge for children with learning disabilities or hearing loss or students who are learning in a second language, the experts said.

One in six words is not understood by the average Grade 1 student because of the excessive noise and poor acoustics in classrooms, according to the group.

Teachers also suffer from the high noise levels, Walsh explained.

"When the classroom background noise is high, the teacher must raise his or her voice, causing inevitable vocal strain," she said, adding that teachers constitute

the highest percentage of voice-related cases in speech therapy clinics.

The coalition argues that if Canada had acoustic standards in schools fewer teachers would have to take time off which costs the health and education systems and interrupts the learning process for their students.

The coalition wants the federal government to set building standards for all new schools and to assess existing schools to determine how improvements can be made. Improving classroom acoustics is relatively inexpensive, according to the group, and can be as simple as hanging curtains, installing hypo-allergenic carpets, and putting felt pads on the bottoms of chairs, they said.

The group plans to step up its lobbying efforts in the next few months and is also reaching out to provincial governments to work in partnership with them.