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Noise affecting learning in class

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Page: A10
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Manitoba should join the call for a national standard on classroom acoustics, the man in charge of the province's public schools' capital spending said Friday.

"Good idea. We're in favour of using a measurable standard" of acoustics for all new and renovated classrooms, said Rick Dedi, executive director of the public schools finance board.

Poor classroom acoustics are making it tough for many kids to hear what's going on, while teachers strain their voices to be heard, a national coalition of speech and hearing experts said Friday.

"Studies show many classrooms have poor acoustics. One in six words is not heard by the average Grade 1 student, because of excessive background noise," Linda Walsh, president of the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, told a teleconference from Ottawa on Friday morning.

"A teacher must raise his or her voice, causing vocal strain," Walsh said.

"The noise conditions in Canadian classrooms are far from ideal."

Comprised of 19 organizations, the coalition called for Canada to adopt a national standard of classroom acoustics, and to ensure every new classroom be built with the best possible acoustics.

Walsh said the design of ceilings and light fixtures, noisy heating systems, computer equipment and background street sounds all affect teachers' and students' ability to hear.

Dedi agreed. "A real challenge is mechanical sounds," Dedi said.

"When you move air, that's when you have noise. We have to design the lowest- noise system possible."

Manitoba Teachers' Society president Pat Isaak said teachers strain their voices to be heard in a classroom.

"We have the expression about using your 'teacher voice', and that says it all," said Isaak.

Andre Lafargue, a regional manager of audiology and speech-language pathology in New Brunswick, said the cost of a new classroom would increase by one or two per cent to provide the best possible acoustics.

In existing classrooms, measures could be as simple as putting felt tips on the bottoms of chairs --

scraping chairs can hit 80 decibels, he said -- to installing non-allergenic carpeting, using books to absorb noise, or putting a tilted two-by-four at the bottom of chalkboards to deflect sounds.

Dedi suggested school maintenance people brainstorm to come up with the best ways of improving acoustics in older classrooms without major cost.

For \$1,200 per classroom, the coalition said, each teacher could have a mike and four mounted speakers to amplify his or her voice throughout the classroom.

The acoustics issue has not been red-flagged here, said Carolyn Duhamel, executive director of the Manitoba Association of School Trustees.

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