

Christian Science Monitor
from the July 25, 2000 edition

To be heard above the fray, teachers reach for mikes

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES - When Lizette Adkisson started teaching three years ago, she had to raise her voice over the sound of the ventilation system and fidgeting fifth-graders.

Now, with the help of wireless microphones, Ms. Adkisson is sure the students hear her and believes they are grasping concepts better.

The microphones are installed in all 44 classrooms at Fenton Charter School. At least 300 other California schools use them, as well as schools in Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington.

"I don't have to strain my voice anymore," Adkisson says. "I just speak in a normal tone and it grabs their attention. And I don't have to repeat myself as much."

Though teachers have gone for decades without microphones, experts say the world is much noisier now. Ventilation systems, lawn mowers, street traffic, and overcrowded schools are just some of the things that have contributed to noisier classrooms.

"Teachers are blowing their voices out. They didn't do that years ago," says Brian Van Waay, president of TeachLogic, the company that installed Fenton's systems. "But now, they have to talk over all this noise."

The benefit isn't only for the teachers, however. Evidence shows that in classrooms where teachers use microphones, students get better scores, and show improved behavior and self-esteem.

In 1977, the government funded a project that studied the effects of louder teacher voices on performances of students in grade school.

During the three-year study, grades of students in younger grades increased in listening, language, and word analysis when teachers used microphones. Other amplified classrooms produced better scores in math and computation.

More recent studies have also indicated improvements in students' speech recognition, reading comprehension, and learning behaviors.

"It's long overdue," says Ken Ullrich, a clinical audiologist in Wenatchee, Wash. "I know that classroom amplification will do for children's listening and learning what classroom lighting did for children's seeing."

On one recent afternoon, Adkisson slipped the set over her head, bringing the small microphone inches in front of her mouth. She neatly tucked the black transmitter box in her dress pocket. Her voice was amplified about 15 decibels through a rectangular-shaped speaker hanging in the center of the room.

"When she gives directions, I don't have to walk up there and ask again," said one of her students, Reymond Maldonado, age 9. "And, I don't have to scoot up in my chair to try to hear her."

Adkisson and many other Fenton teachers often allow their students to use the microphone when reading aloud or asking questions during class, a practice that has proved popular.

"It encourages participation and gives them confidence," she says.

The microphone systems range in price from \$700 to \$1,400, depending on style and accessories. Newer systems, which use infrared lights or sensors to transmit sound rather than FM radio technology, can run up to \$1,600.

Some observers warn that school officials should regard new technologies like microphones as a tool for tackling larger problems in the school system, not a solution in and of themselves.

"The real strength of education still lies in person-to-person contact," says William Rukeyser, coordinator of Learning in the Real World, a Woodland, Calif.-based group critical of ballooning school spending. "If people think that technology is going to replace it, they may be headed down the wrong path. If they believe it will enhance it, then they may be going in the right direction."

(c) Copyright 2000. The Christian Science Publishing Society