Saving Teachers’ Voices

Statistics show that more than a million teachers suffer from voice problems and that they are 32 times more likely to be plagued by voice problems than other workers. Since a teacher’s voice is his or her primary occupational tool, it’s imperative that principals make teachers’ vocal health a priority.

If teachers’ voices are hampered by pain, hoarseness, or low volume, not only do they suffer physically, but students’ learning is placed at risk. All children in the classroom must be able to hear the teacher’s voice clearly to learn. Missing just a few words of the teacher’s message could lead to misunderstanding, especially for English language learners.

Why Teachers Have Voice Problems

Most voice problems among teachers are attributable to poor acoustical conditions in schools; the fact that teachers aren’t taught about healthful voice use; and/or the lack of voice enhancement systems in schools. It is estimated that 75 percent of teachers’ voice difficulties could be prevented or self-managed if teachers were given knowledge about healthful voice use.

Enhancing the Teacher’s Voice

In most classrooms, the students in the front row can usually hear clearly—as long as the teacher doesn’t move around or turn to face the chalkboard—while those more than six feet away lose clarity of speech.

A voice enhancement system can close the communication gap by allowing the teacher to speak at a comfortable level while the device electronically raises the output volume and distributes it evenly around the classroom.

There are two broad types of enhancement systems: portable, in which the system is fully worn by the teacher; and wireless, in which most of the components are installed in the classroom. Although there are advantages and disadvantages to each system, cost, portability, and comfort issues often drive the decision as to which one to use.

A portable system costs around $300 per teacher, while an infrared wireless system runs about $1,500 per classroom. For teachers who work outside the confines of a single classroom (such as physical education teachers), a portable system is preferable. Teachers who are in the same classroom all day may prefer a wireless system.

How Enhancement Helps

Regardless of the type of enhancement system selected, however, evidence supports the benefit of teacher voice enhancement both on teachers’ vocal health and student achievement. Large urban school districts that have implemented teacher voice enhancement systems also have seen decreases in teacher absenteeism averaging 25 percent.

Research shows that voice enhancement is particularly effective in meeting the learning needs of urban students. At Pioneer Elementary School in Salt Lake City, English language learners demonstrated accelerated learning when the teacher’s voice was enhanced because they could now hear the teacher’s word pronunciation more clearly and distinctly. Comparing the achievement by these students with those of students in a control group on the state’s Criterion Reference Tests, the school found a 16 percent gain.

The Orange County Public School District in Florida found that students in schools with voice enhancement systems scored on average 10 percent...
higher on state tests than students from schools without such systems. One of these schools was Ivey Lane Elementary School in Orlando. With district support, principal Darryl Weathers installed teacher voice enhancement equipment in all classrooms and credits it with contributing to the school’s movement from an “F” to an “A” on the state achievement test.

Based on this success, the district installed enhancement systems in several high schools and middle schools, with similar results. Student comprehension increased, classroom discipline problems in the classroom decreased, and teachers reported suffering less fatigue at the end of the school day.

The Denver Public School system has made teacher voice enhancement systems standard for new school construction and renovations. “It’s sort of a no-brainer,” says district program manager Allen Balczarek. “The ‘back row’ is eliminated, so to speak. And teachers can save their voices—and their careers!”

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

The National Institute of Health underwrites Voice Academy, a Web site devoted to educating teachers about voice care and providing information about voice enhancement systems. www.voiceacademy.org.