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Buildings affect learning, prof says

Research links students' performance to condition of school

BY SEAN MYERS

CALGARY — Students who attend classes at deteriorating schools in need of repair perform significantly worse academically than those able to learn in top quality facilities, according to a new study conducted by a University of Manitoba sociology professor.

"Clearly, when faced with poor facility conditions, teachers and students alike do significantly poorer than they would otherwise," said Prof. Lance Roberts.

"And we can do something about this."

Roberts conducted a literature review of more than 300 journal articles, research papers and published reports on the issue from across North America in a study commissioned by Ameresco

Canada, a Toronto-based company that has completed modernization work on thousands of schools across the country.

Roberts found a 10- to 15-per cent difference in student performance, attendance rates, discipline issues, health concerns and teacher satisfaction and retention between top quality facilities and those in the worst shape.

"The density of use is much higher in schools than in most office buildings, so what kind of environment are they packed into?" asked Roberts.

"If they can't hear what the teacher is saying very well because the acoustics are so bad, and they can't see because of the bad lighting; if they have asthma attacks and colds due to older air handling systems and are chilly because of a drafty old building ... it's not a surprise that these

things would affect learning." Education officials argue, however, that while the condition of schools may play a small role in student performance it isn't the primary factor.

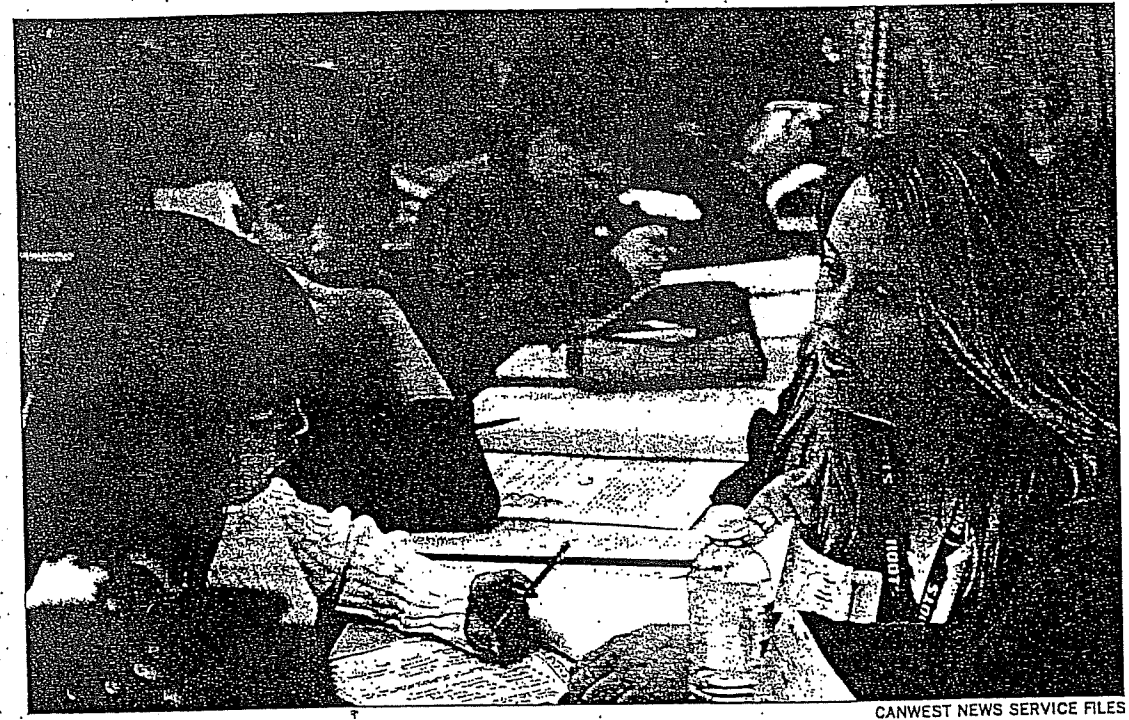
"It's not the building that's going to determine the educational success of kids. It's the people within it and the community surrounding it that will make learning viable for students," said Calgary Catholic School District chairwoman Cathie Williams. "To use the age and condition of buildings as the only factor is erroneous."

Alberta Education spokeswoman Kathy Telfer also questioned the validity of comparing American and Canadian school systems.

"It's like comparing apples to oranges," she said.

"The two main factors that influence students' performance are the quality of the teachers in the classroom and the quality of the curriculum."

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A teacher gives her students close attention in a modern classroom. A study has found links between student performance and other factors and the quality of their school structures.

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