Parkside teachers ‘pump up the volume’

By SUE HOFFMAN

Students are hearing their teachers more clearly than ever at Parkside Elementary School. Even more importantly, they're understanding more of what they hear through better listening.

Parkside is one of several schools pioneering the use of classroom microphones in an effort to help students listen better and learn more. Teachers there are striving to achieve an ideal listening-learning environment for all students, employing amplified sound that was once prescribed only for the hearing impaired.

Pam Friedauer, Parkside's speech and language pathologist, and Donna Ostberg, learning disabilities resource teacher, have sought funding for this program by applying successfully for grants totaling $18,000, and by achieving the recent support of the Parkside PTA.

Two-thirds of Parkside’s classes have an “easy listener” amplification system developed by Phonic Ear Inc. The system consists of a portable microphone worn by teachers, receiver/amplifiers, speakers and wall chargers for batteries.

Mrs. Friedauer and Mrs. Ostberg share the goal to have amplification in every classroom. By mildly amplifying the teacher's voice, the Phonic Ear system helps reduce distractions like background noise that interfere with effective listening.

Mrs. Friedauer and Mrs. Ostberg began using amplified sound recently as part of the “building better listeners” program. The program, which the two teachers developed six years ago, instructs children on how to become better listeners.

"Kids have a problem knowing when to listen in class," said Mrs. Friedauer. "Maintaining attention to a speaker is also difficult for children," adds Mrs. Ostberg.

The program provides a specific cue — "Boys and girls, eyes on me, listen!" — before giving students directions. Students are taught to sit up straight, set their eyes on the speaker and keep their mouth and body quiet when they hear the cue.

Each year, Mrs. Friedauer and Mrs. Ostberg instruct several classes on the program to help students become more effective listeners.

"Amplification is very advantageous to the program," said Mrs. Friedauer. "Our objective is to facilitate an ideal listening-learning environment in each classroom by making the teacher's voice clearer."

Originally developed by Phonic Ear Inc. for students with hearing or attention deficit problems, the amplification system improves listening conditions for all students. Phonic Ear claims that children spend nearly half of the school day in listening activities. Use of the amplifier, says the company, has resulted in improved test scores and fewer children needing special education.

Teachers at Parkside say that the amplification system has had definite benefits. "When they’re able to hear and concentrate, they’re learning more," said fourth-grade teacher Carole Marshall.

Her students also had positive comments about the Phonic Ear system. "I like it because it helps you hear better when the teacher is not looking at you," said student Kim Rogers.

"You can hear as well from the back of the room as in front," said student Alan Greenspan.

Third-grade teacher Marjo Horst, who is also using the microphone, said her students ask her to turn it back on after she has turned it off. She also stated that she can easily get her children's attention by using the listening cue.

Mrs. Friedauer and Mrs. Ostberg continue the time-consuming search for grant money to achieve their goal of having microphones in every classroom.

In addition to installing the single microphone system, Parkside is pioneering a loop system in which the voices of two teachers in a classroom can be amplified simultaneously.

"This is the only school in the U.S. with this advanced technology," said Mrs. Friedauer.