

National/International

Many schools 'living on borrowed time'

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As many as 800,000 Canadian students may have difficulty learning because they are taught in aging and poorly built schools, a new survey released Tuesday suggests.

Fluctuating temperatures and poor air quality affect about one in six schools in Canada, says the survey done for the Ontario Association of School Business Officials.

"Classrooms that are too hot or too cold, with bad indoor air quality and poor maintenance, have a negative effect on the learning and teaching environment," said association spokesman Mike Graham.

The association — made up of school board engineers and other officials — released the report at a news conference in a historic one-room schoolhouse in downtown Toronto.

Graham said the problem of deteriorating schools has been made worse by hard economic times.

The report — entitled Canadian Schoolhouse in the Red — concluded that 25 per cent of schools in British Columbia and 20 per cent in Ontario were inadequate when the survey was done this spring.

At the other end of the scale, five per cent of Alberta's schools and four per cent in Quebec were lacking. The study said 12 per cent of Manitoba's schools and 13 per cent in Saskatchewan and the Atlantic provinces were inadequate.

The \$120,000 study was paid for and conducted by Honeywell Ltd., which interviewed more than 600 school administrators from across

the country. The association asked the company to do the study after reviewing a similar report it did in the United States.

About 2,300 schools housing about 800,000 students provide inadequate facilities and are "living on borrowed time," the report warned.

Many of them "are glass boxes built inexpensively to meet the baby boom" of the 1950s and '60s, said Dr. Shirley Hansen, a consultant from Annapolis, Md, who compiled the study.

The condition of about 46 per cent of schools was rated good.

The deterioration of schools is worsening because cash-strapped boards of education are dipping into their maintenance budgets to pay for rising hydro bills, the study said.

Problems such as poor air quality were blamed by Hansen for contributing to minor health problems among students, including headaches, sore throats and colds.

The report did not contain any figures on the extent of building-related health problems in schools.

Canadian school boards have put off more than \$1 billion in maintenance, but could save about \$300 million a year in operating expenses if they improved and upgraded their schools, the report said.