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Our opinion

Is anyone listening?

You know that old expression about not looking a gift horse in the mouth? Some officials of the New York City Board of Education, apparently, wouldn't even look at the horse.

Everyone knows that noise from airplanes landing and taking off at Newark Airport has made life unbearable for people in many North Shore communities.

Although you might not realize it at first, schools are particularly affected, because learning requires being able to hear the teacher. Frequently, classes have been interrupted in some schools because the teacher's voice is drowned out by the roar of a passing jetliner. That aspect of the airplane noise problem has been cited repeatedly by those who have been battling the Federal Aviation Administration on the overflights.

The FAA has resisted efforts to change the flight patterns of planes in and out of Newark. But in order to reduce the impact of aircraft noise, the federal agency, together with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, has had a program in place since 1983 to pay the full costs of soundproofing schools in affected areas.

Moore Catholic High School in Graniteville is the school to take advantage of the program most recently. The work being done there will cost \$1.5 million.

The FAA, which funds 80 percent of the program, also offered to fund installation of soundproofing in three Island public elementary schools, PS 26 in Travis, PS 60 in Graniteville and PS 44 in Mariners Harbor, which have been severely affected by the problem. Similar work has already been done in public schools near Kennedy and LaGuardia airports.

The Island schools turned the FAA and the P.A. down.

The reason given was that the problem is not serious enough to warrant the work.

Huh? What were all those signs saying "FAA, Let Us Learn!" held up by public school students and their parents at aircraft noise hearings and rallies? What were all those teachers complaining about?

Again, the FAA's offer is free, no strings attached. The schools can hire their own contractors and do the work and at their own convenience. But the Board of Ed, in its wisdom, say no thanks. What's the problem?

Jerry Cammarata, a member of the Staten Island Community School Board who has been active in the fight against aircraft noise, noted the complete absence of any kind of community or school board input in the decision.

"For the Board of Education to flatly refuse this without going to the school board first is a major slap in the face to this school board, which relies on community input," he said. Obviously, he said, if residents of the area have such serious problems, "it's safe to assume that all other institutions in the area, including the schools, have the same problem."

The planes' roar may be making everything inaudible in places like Mariners Harbor, Travis and Graniteville, but it's clear those school officials who made this decision have the real hearing problem. They don't listen to their own teachers, parents or students.