

9 October 2007

PUTRAJAYA: A heavy load has been lifted off the slim shoulders of schoolchildren.

--

Starting next year, pupils in Year One, Two and Three, will stop using workbooks to lighten their schoolbags. The workbook ban on Level One pupils was made following a study by the Education Ministry after numerous complaints of children having to drag heavy bags to school. "Level One pupils can rely on the activity training books provided free by the ministry," said Education Ministry director-general Datuk Alimuddin Mohd Dom.

He said Level Two students (those in Year Four, Five and Six) would be limited to only one workbook for each subject.

For years, parents and various associations, including the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), had been urging the authorities to address the problem of heavy school bags. CAP president S.M. Mohamed Idris had said that a Universiti Putra Malaysia study had found that 58.3 per cent of schoolchildren suffered from lower back pain associated with carrying heavy bags. The researchers had said that most schoolchildren carried a bag weighing 15 per cent of their body weight. This is the upper limit advocated by health practitioners. Alimuddin said teachers should not use workbooks to replace textbooks. "Workbooks should be regarded as just a source of additional training. It should not be encouraged for use in the early years of schooling," he said. He said schools should also consider a flexible timetable to overcome the problem of heavy schoolbags. "Teachers should remind their pupils every day about the books which they need to bring the next day." He gave an assurance that there would be adequate supply of free textbooks for all primary and secondary school students next year. "We have been told by the publishers that there will be enough textbooks for everyone, everywhere," he said, adding that the books would be distributed to all schools at least three or four days before the start of the new school term. The free textbooks are available for all students in government-aided schools and Sekolah Menengah Agama Rakyat, regardless of the income of their families. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had announced the free textbooks when tabling the budget in parliament last month. Alimuddin said the school fees of RM4.50 for primary school pupils and RM9 for secondary students would be abolished. However, parents would still have to pay for additional facilities provided by schools such as school ties, and uniforms for co-curricular activities or sports activities. School principals, however, must get prior approval from state education registrars. "Registrars have the right to reject their applications if the amount was too high and would pose a burden to parents." He said the ministry planned to impose a ceiling on payments to be made by parents. "The ceiling will vary from school to school but the amount will be reasonable. We will meet with the school authorities on this matter soon." He also pointed out that parent-teacher associations (PTAs) were not allowed to collect fees from parents. "Parents, however, can contribute to PTAs and it is up to them how much they want to contribute." He also said the 2008 school session would start on Wednesday (Jan 2) for schools in Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, and on Thursday (Jan 3) for schools in the other states.