Primary education a must next year

Nst 14 DEC 2002

■ By Annie Freeda Cruez
anniefc@nstp.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — The Education Ministry will implement the compulsory primary education system nationwide when schools re-open next month.

Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Samsuddin, who announced this today, said children, aged between seven and 12, must be enrolled in schools.

Under the new amendments to the Education Act 1996, parents who fail to enrol their children will be liable to a maximum jail term of six months or RM5,000 fine or both.

"However, we do not want to enforce the penalties as we want parents to willingly enrol their children so that they will not be deprived of basic education," he said at his office today.

"The ministry will use part of its RM5 billion allocation under Budget 2003 to provide free books, bags, uniforms and also pocket money for food and transport to poor children.

"The parents, therefore, cannot give the excuse that they cannot afford to send their children to school because they are poor."

The compulsory education will include the disabled and children with learning disabilities.

He said the ministry was already getting feedback from State Governments on the number of children between the ages of seven and 12 who have not enrolled in primary schools.

The initial reports showed about 0.5 per cent of the child population in this age group had yet to do so.

This means that there are a few thousand children who have not registered in schools in rural and urban areas, especially in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and among the Orang Asli.

"This is serious and all proactive measures are being mobilised through the State Governments, district offices and village development and security committees (JKKK) to get the parents to come forward and enrol their children," he said.

Ministry statistics show that at least 4,000 children fail to enter Standard One every year and about 20,000 pupils drop out after Standard Three annually.

On next month's intake of Standard One pupils, Abdul Aziz said they expected a one per cent increase from the 530,788 who enrolled this year.

He also said the Government has set up a RM1 billion fund to ensure children from hardcore poor families were able to continue their education in secondary schools.

He said some eight per cent of the 2.5 million student population came from families whose monthly incomes were below RM500.

Asked if there are sufficient places in schools to absorb the 126,000 students from Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) when school re-opens, he said there is enough. "We can accommodate these students. But what is more important is whether the parents want to send their children to study in national schools to obtain quality education," he said.

At the 88th Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers' meeting on Dec 2, it was decided that the 126,000 students in the SAR be absorbed into national schools to ensure they obtain quality education. Most of the SAR are funded by State Governments.

Earlier, Abdul Aziz met the Nasyid group from Kinabatangan, Sabah, who will be singing the song *Titisan Budi Ukiran Abadi* over Radio Televisyen Malaysia on Dec 20 in conjunction with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's birthday.