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PM wants to know why Shahidan is insistent on proposal

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JITRA, Wed. - Declaring that the Government had not decided on the extension of school hours, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he was keen to know why Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Shahidan Kassim was insistent on implementing the proposal.

The Prime Minister said he had not received any details of the proposed extension, which Shahidan said would be implemented throughout Perlis from March 1.

"We will look into it," Dr Mahathir said, "because we want to know exactly what the purpose of his proposal is ... I still don't know what his plans are."

He was speaking after attending a Hari Raya Aidiladha open house at Dewan Wawasan here.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, speaking to reporters in Kepala Batas, said the Perlis State Government should discuss the matter with the Education Ministry as it involved policies implemented by the ministry.

In an immediate response to Abdullah, Shahidan told the New Straits Times said he would abide by the Deputy Prime Minister's suggestion and contact the ministry on the matter.

Shahidan was quoted yesterday as saying that Perlis would go ahead with its plan to extend school hours, which will be called "tuition classes".

Under the plan, school hours would be from 7.45am to 4.30pm.

Subjects such as Arabic, Moral Education, Fardhu Ain and English would be taught in the afternoon.

Dr Mahathir said the Federal Government could not stop any party from giving extra classes but it needed to determine the curriculum, such as in religious studies.

"The Federal Government would like to determine that the Islamic Studies curriculum provided to students at each level is adequate.

"We don't object to any additions, such as the teaching of Arabic language, but we must also realise that the time to study is limited and we need to ensure that subjects taught will be beneficial," he added.

Dr Mahathir said it was sufficient for pupils to receive the basic foundations of various subjects while in school, because this would enable them to specialise in the subjects of their choice later on.

"At school level, we learn the basics which will allow us to specialise in a subject at tertiary level, including Islamic studies."

Asked whether Shahidan's claim that the extension of school hours was originally Prime Minister's idea, Dr Mahathir said although he mooted the idea, there had been as yet no decision to implement it.

"We are still in discussion. In Johor, for example, there are extra religious classes in the afternoon which act as additions to Islamic Studies taught in the morning.

"We are still studying whether the Johor system can be implemented nationwide as one of the approaches for the national school system," he said.

Speaking to reporters in Kangar, Shahidan today responded to Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad and the Ministry's Director-General Datuk Abdul Rafei Mahat for cautioning Perlis over its plans to extend school hours.

Shahidan said Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) in Johor and Selangor had been

teaching religious subjects after school hours "since Merdeka" without having been questioned.

He was commenting on a news report quoting Abdul Rafei cautioning Perlis that its plans to extend school hours must not involve schools under the Ministry.

Musa was quoted saying any change in school hours must be implemented simultaneously in all States.

Shahidan said the move by Perlis was to help the Ministry by taking over the SAR "lock, stock and barrel" and conducting tuition classes on Arabic, Fardhu Ain, moral education and English in the afternoon.

He said Perlis had implemented the programme in 1996/97 but it was withdrawn due to financial constraints.

However, he said, the State had been conducting such classes in its six religious schools.