

Anwar: Schools 'failing' the poor
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Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) advisor Anwar Ibrahim has expressed concern with the national education system.

The opposition politician, who was a former education minister, said the centrepiece of any nation's development must include its education policy.

"Therefore, it is worrying that on the verge of our 50th Merdeka, our schools are stuck in third world curriculum while many do not have 'first world infrastructure'," he said in a statement today.

While the government has been talking about smart schools for over a decade, Anwar said, the Education Development Masterplan revealed that nearly 20 percent of primary schools do not have clean water supply, 35 percent lack a computer lab, more than one fifth lack science labs and one tenth do not have uninterrupted electricity supply.

Overall, he added, more than two thirds of primary schools do not have complete infrastructure.

Anwar also quoted his wife and PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who in an open letter to the Education Ministry in December 2006, revealed that Malaysia's percentage of spending on education lagged behind Senegal, Malawi and Kenya.

She also disclosed that Malaysia was among 24 nations, including Palestine and Maldives, to suffer a drop in primary school enrolment between 1999 and 2004.

Hishammuddin rapped

Anwar said the regions stuck with the worst-equipped schools tend to be those in the rural areas, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, which serve poor and marginalised communities.

"This exacerbates the social inequality and diminishes the ability of education to provide sustainable social mobility," he added.

The PKR advisor also took a swipe at Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein by saying that even when the majority of those marginalised are Bumiputeras, the minister is more concerned about brandishing the keris than solving this problem. Hishammuddin, who is also Umno Youth chief, drew much flak for raising the keris (a traditional Malay dagger) during the Umno annual meet last year.

Meanwhile, Anwar also criticised the present curriculum which remains highly exam oriented.

"All emphasis is on rote learning and performing well in examinations. Rather than providing for a holistic approach, the new open system in SPM has led to an obsession of scoring as many A's possible without any question of its relevance.

"More worryingly, this starts from an early age as our children are burdened with a heavy workload in addition to their heavy school bags. This is worsened when parents enroll their children in tuition centres," he said.

Luxury of choice

Anwar, who was also a former deputy prime minister, said the government's utter lack of faith in the national education system is illustrated by the decision to allow more Malaysians to go to international schools.

"While it is a shame that our national schools are no longer the schools of choice for those who can afford to choose, the bigger tragedy is that they are failing those who do not have the luxury of choice," he added.

Anwar also called for the reinstatement of the national language as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics while constructive measures are introduced to improve proficiency in English.

In 2003, the government changed the medium of instruction for the two subjects to English. The idea was mooted by former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Anwar described this as a haphazard decision which has led to the lowering of standards as the ministry is intent on proving that the switch has not affected students' performance.

"We do not dispute the need to improve the command of English, but this must be done through improving teaching standards and allocating more time for the subject, not by sacrificing our struggle to establish the national language as a common bond between all Malaysians," he said.

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