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# Making national schools the No. 1 choice

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■ **Comment by**  
**Chok Suat Ling**  
sling@nst.com.my

SEKOLAH Kebangsaan Seri Bintang Utara is located in an unglamorous part of Kuala Lumpur with an even more unsophisticated name — Pudu Ulu. But it is far from unpopular.

Students interested in enrolling have to join a long waiting list. It is not difficult to see why a place in the school — which in a former lifetime was the Bukit Bintang Girls' School — is so coveted.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein singled it out for praise recently. Parents with children there can attest to its excellent academic and co-curricular track record, facilities and the commitment of its teachers. Crucially too, the school's student population is of a good racial mix.

The good news is that there are other national schools like SK Seri Bintang Utara. But there are not enough of them.

It is heartening, therefore, to note from the Budget 2008 that there will be no let-up in the government's efforts to make national schools the preferred choice among parents and students.

*Memperkasakan sekolah kebangsaan* remains the top priority. The urgency is palpable, for these schools are the incubators of the nation's human capital.

The budget proposed RM30 billion for the strengthening of primary and secondary schools and highlighted the importance of narrowing the urban-rural gap, the role of teachers and co-curricular activities.

The changes wielding the most impact, however, are the abolishment of school fees and providing free textbooks to all students from next year — irrespective of family income or number of children. This proposal represents a significant milestone for it will effectively make schooling in Malaysia completely free.

Senior marketing manager Lynna Lee was quite sure that



**Free textbooks for all is one of the changes wielding the most impact.**

she would send her daughter to a Chinese school but her resolve is beginning to weaken: "There have been some interesting changes to the national school system the past several years. Cluster schools, school-based assessment, the teaching of mother tongue lan-

guages and free textbooks sound promising."

Experts are confident that these aggressively progressive measures will change the prevailing sentiment towards national schools, certainly not overnight, but in time.

They are also optimistic that

the budget recommendations — which facilitate and complement proposals in the National Education Blueprint 2007-2010 and the recently launched national higher education strategic plan — can redefine the course of the education system.