

Muhyiddin guarantees vernacular schools will stay
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The Education Ministry has assured that vernacular schools will continue to exist and be defended under the new National Education Blueprint launched today, allaying fears of Chinese and Tamil educationists.

The ministry also moved to arrest the declining standard of English by making it compulsory for students to pass the SPM English language exam from 2016 onwards.

Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the right of Chinese and Tamil schools to use mother tongue languages as a medium of instruction is guaranteed under the Education Act 1996.

"The existing education policy is based on the Education Act, which is still upheld in the education development plan.

"The ministry does not intend to sideline any stream that exists in this country; in fact, it will ensure that every student of government schools, government-aided schools gets access and equity and quality education.

"The existence of vernacular schools is also safeguarded by the Education Act 1996 (Section 28) and I would like to state here that right to practise mother-tongue education in these schools has never been denied," Muhyiddin said at the launch of the 13-year education blueprint for 2013-2025.

The blueprint is strongly opposed by the United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong) for fear that it would affect the status of vernacular schools and the Chinese language in national education.

Muhyiddin later told a press conference that the ministry had been meeting with Chinese groups about allocating additional lessons in the Malay language in vernacular schools.

"We have discussed and the ministry initially decided to implement 270 minutes of Malay lessons (a week). The Chinese vernacular schools have asked us not to enforce such a long period so we met halfway and decided to go with 240 minutes," Muhyiddin said.

However, the minister hinted that Dong Zong in particular had decided to disagree with the move.

"I need not say who they are, I'm sure you already know," said Muhyiddin.

Currently, vernacular schools are only required to insert 180 minutes of Malay lessons per week. According to Muhyiddin, who is also the deputy prime minister, the education ministry intends to ensure that vernacular school students are also adept with the national language.

"We are adding in (the hours) because we find that the mastery of the Malay language in vernacular schools is much lower. Why? Because it is not their mother tongue. So we can't leave it at that. Their standards have to be elevated."

The topic of education and race remains sensitive in Malaysia as Malay groups consistently blame the existence of vernacular schools as the reason for racial polarisation.

Meanwhile, Chinese and Indian groups see the need for such schools as a channel for parents who wish to have their children kept in close contact with their ethnic roots.+

Muhyiddin also assured continued equal access to quality education for all schools.

The National Education Blueprint is aimed at raising quality of Malaysian education system to match its already satisfactory enrolment rates.

It includes revamping the school curriculum by 2017, an emphasis on learning maths and science in Bahasa Malaysia and raising the standard of English as a second language.

Muhyiddin said to beef up the standard of English, some 9,000 teachers will be trained for the Cambridge placement test in October by the British Council, up from 5,000 previously.

He also addressed a perennial complaint of teachers of being bogged down by administrative work, saying a centralised service centre will be formed to perform such tasks leaving teachers free to focus on teaching.

He said schools would also be tasked to conduct extra Bahasa Malaysia and English classes.

He said the national examination and school-based assessments will be modified in stages, whereby by 2016 at least 40 per cent of questions in Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) and 50 per cent in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) are higher-order thinking questions.

Besides the issue of vernacular schools, the ministry is facing a challenge with producing graduates who are proficient in English - a problem the government has realised is hindering Malaysia from being globally competitive. - September 6, 2013.

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