



DIRECTORS GENERAL

LETTER CIRCULAR

Information: X **Date:** 20 September 2013
Action Required: X **Ref:** DES/DQSE/05/2013
To: All Heads of Schools (State and Non-State Schools) and Sections
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Subject: School Bags Policies and Procedures

Heads of school are requested to give priority to the problem of heavy school bags and endorse the need to educate and inform parents, students and members of staff on the subject, especially at this time of the year when a sizable percentage of students and their parents tend to invest in the school bags to use during the coming scholastic year.

Following various reports and studies carried out locally, Year 4 and Form 1 students were earmarked as the categories most at risk and thus must be given particular attention.

It is recommended by both the above mentioned reports and the Pediatric Orthopedic Society of America that backpacks have to be used correctly to distribute the weight of the load among some of the body's strongest muscles and avoid injury to muscles and joints. Backpacks should have the following features:

- two wide padded shoulder straps;
- a firm padded back;
- waist straps;
- be of lightweight (albeit sturdy) material.

The bag should also be compartmentalized and the straps buckled tightly with heavy books placed closest to the centre of the bag.

When carrying a backpack, bending should be done by using both knees, not over the waist. Students shall also be encouraged to carry out back strengthening exercises, even during PE lessons, that help to build up the back muscles involved in carrying the backpack.

Wheeled carriers should not be allowed as these constitute a hazard to students during transportation especially up and down stairs and buses and tend to be excessively heavy even when empty. One strap bags and 1 strap carrying style bags are to be avoided.

Ideally, the weight of the schoolbag and contents should not exceed 10% of the student's body weight. The weight of the bag should definitely never exceed 20% of the student's total body weight.

The school should follow a text-book based timetable and the timetable should take into account the relative combined weight of books and related equipment and stationery.

In order to decrease the load carried by students, recommendations include:

- Adopting the use of soft format work which will drastically reduce the need to carry heavy weight to and from school; this has got the added advantage of being environmentally friendly;
- Where lockers are available, the system should be well managed, encouraging students to check the contents of their bags and remove them into lockers;
- Educating students to leave at home unnecessary items;
- Considering making available a second set of textbooks at school, if and where available;
- The selection of textbooks should take into consideration the associated weight involved and perhaps only targeting text contents relevant to that particular scholastic year and have accompanying e-versions;
- The adoption of a file system by each student at home so that students will only be required to carry the relevant few pages to and from school, hence avoiding the daily carriage of heavy files. Schools can help in developing this idea by facilitating a one-time provision of a file with dividers. Educating parents and students in its use helps in the successful adoption by students.
- Teachers are to be asked to refrain from asking students to get thick packs of notes for class use - packs of notes are to be avoided. Module style notes can be used/adopted and students will have less weight to carry.

It is important to take into consideration students with particular needs such as those who suffer from scoliosis or other medical conditions, which imply restricted capabilities to carry loads.

Schools are strongly encouraged to bring the above to the attention of students, parents and staff

Ms Micheline Sciberras
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