


LETTERS

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Protecting our children in school

THE Education Minister recently stated a teacher who was suspected of molesting nine pupils had been transferred to another school as part of the ministry's standard operating procedure. It is also of concern with regards to reports made against teachers suspected of molesting students, the minister stated "disciplinary action against them is determined by the courts".

The practice of transferring teachers suspected of sexually molesting children to a different school has been going on for decades. The public, especially parents, are appalled with the approach as this could be risky for children in the new school.

When the investigation of an alleged sexual abuse by a teacher is going on, the education authorities should firstly inform the Welfare Department's Child Protectors to enable them to assess the well-being of the children involved and submit a report. The authorities should also immediately redesignate the suspect to a desk job where he (or she) does not have any contact with children. The practice of transferring a teacher to another school where the suspect still has contact with children should be halted. When balancing the interests and safety of children with the rights of the alleged offender, the children's right to protection from sexual abuse must come first. The interest of the accused is still protected if investigations are expeditious and transparent.

It must be stressed when a child complains of sexual molestation or assault by a school teacher, very often the parents only inform the principal or education authorities expecting them to take the appropriate action. Many parents do not want to file a police report for many reasons, including not wanting to subject their children to further trauma caused by tedious and non-child-friendly process of criminal justice, such as police investigation, medical examination and the court process.



Pupils pour out of the school's side gates where their parents and guardians wait to pick them up. The writers say policy makers need to work together with school authorities to ensure education staff are trained and empowered to stop all forms of child abuse. — Picture by Zuraneeza Zulkifli

The education authorities do not have to depend on the courts to determine their course of action to ensure child protection. It is noteworthy following a police case in 2001 against a public servant who had allegedly molested students at a school premise, and consistent with the government's General Orders (Conduct and Discipline) 1993 Regulations, the Education Disciplinary Board had terminate the services of the public servant concerned, despite the fact he was found not guilty by the relevant criminal court.

The Board recorded their justification "the contact or presence of the officer in a school could adversely affect the safety especially of the students of said

school ... there is no way to control the behavior of the perpetrator even if he had been transferred to another school ... recurrence is feared since previous cases are not known to members of the public". This is a clear example of the Education Ministry acting with authority to safeguard the interest of children.

The outcome of a properly conducted internal inquiry can determine the appropriate disciplinary action to be taken if found necessary.

The ministry must pave the way in showing how Malaysia is serious about protecting the well-being of children by ensuring best practices in accordance with General Orders, Child Act 2001 and our government's commitment to Convention

of the Rights of the Child are not merely spoken about, but are acted upon.

Policy makers in the ministry need to work together with school authorities at both district and state levels to ensure education staff in departments and schools are trained and empowered to take the necessary steps to stop all forms of child abuse.

Clear, standardised procedures and effective protocols to follow must be made available to all concerned and implemented effectively.

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