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Parental fines considered for poor show pupils

The city of Basel has moved a step closer to introducing heavy fines for parents whose children regularly come to school sleepy, hungry or with homework not done.

The cantonal government approved an amendment to the Education Act that would allow fines of up to SFr1,000 for the worst serial offenders.

The fine is part of a raft of measures that the canton intends to introduce, making its regulations among the strictest in Switzerland.

At the moment, parents of school-aged pupils in Basel have one legal obligation - to make sure their children attend school regularly. But under the changes, they would also have to attend parent-teacher evenings and ensure their child is physically ready for the day and with their homework done.

"We often hear from teachers that students fall asleep in class because they watch television until midnight," Eymann says. "Parents have to make sure that their children are well rested when they attend classes, that they attend regularly, that they are well looked after, and that they are capable of absorbing what they're being taught. We know that this is a huge intrusion into peoples' private lives, but it's a last resort measure."

The amendment says that in problem cases parents and pupils would first be brought in for a meeting with the school. The next stage would involve parents signing written agreements undertaking to do more. The fines would be a last step.

In particular it is the parents who say they do not want to follow the rules who would be targeted. Unfortunately, such parents do exist, Eymann says. And their children can disrupt lessons for other pupils.

"We want to stop young people joining the ranks of the jobless, in the worst-case scenario. We want to give all children the

best chance to fulfil their potential. This is a small tile in the mosaic - other measures also have to be adopted to finish the mosaic," Eymann says.

But Anna Hausherr, central secretary of the Swiss Single Parents Association, says the proposal is not realistic and parents should not be penalised because of their situation at home.

"Switzerland has an enormous lack of childcare facilities, such as after-hours school programmes and midday meals at school, which most countries of the same standard of living have. That is what should be done first."

She recommends schools set aside time for pupils to do their homework and schools help by providing extra food and drink in the morning in case any children are hungry.

Not all parents have the capacity or time to help their children with homework, she says, adding that it is not always easy to make children eat breakfast before school. Bedtimes can also vary among cultures, and she says it would be better to talk to parents to help them change habits.

Fines would certainly affect those families that don't have a lot of money.

Viviane Fenter of the Swiss Federation for Parent Education agrees.

"Penalties have never helped things. It's through encouragement rather than penalties that we can improve the situation," she says.

Cantons Bern and Zurich are also discussing ways in which parents can be made to take more responsibility for the performance of their children in school.

The president of the Swiss Teachers Association, Beat Zemp, has welcomed the Basel City move, saying parents may well have a more positive effect on their children than teachers do.

The initiative by the education department of canton Basel City

was first put forward in April 2008 and was followed by a consultation process.

It was approved by the cantonal government on February 1 and now is due to be reviewed by the cantonal parliament.

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