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## School bags are a pain in the back

Heavy school bags are becoming a major health concern of Swiss parents. Pupils in Geneva have threatened to demonstrate over the issue.



Homework really weighs on the shoulders of schoolchildren

Children regularly carry overweight bags, despite campaigns warning teachers and students of the damage that can be done when the load exceeds 15 per cent of a pupil's body weight. You see them at almost every bus stop in Switzerland on their way to and from school - heroic pupils battling with huge overloaded rucksacks. Swiss schoolchildren load themselves up like packhorses for many reasons:

Many schools have no shelves for children to store their books so they have to carry them home. And many teachers say that today's books are a lot heavier. Parents and teachers should take more interest in what children take to school.

When teachers give homework they shouldn't only be concerned about the work children have to do, but also the amount of material they have to carry home. The fault is partly that of the students. Pupils should stop transporting all their books and files out of fear that they've forgotten something. And then you've got all the other things they stuff into their bags which have nothing to do with school.

Back pains and related problems typically begin during puberty. One out of 100 children aged ten to eleven complains of back pains, and this increases significantly as they get older: 24 per cent of students aged 14 to 15 suffer from back problems attributable to overloaded school bags.

And they can continue into adult life. The Federal Coordination Commission for Occupational Safety warned on Thursday that one in five Swiss workers suffered from back problems, which cost the Swiss economy an estimated SFr3 billion a year.

Back problems among young people are not only caused by weighty school satchels. Children have a very sedentary life. School children should learn how to sit properly so they don't damage their backs. Schools should have similar workplaces to modern offices with flexible chairs and so on.

*from swissinfo*

## Schools record falling pupil numbers

The ever-decreasing number of children starting school in the past few years is having a knock-on effect in secondary education. The Federal Statistics Office has for the first time recorded a 0.7 per cent fall in the number of students attending high schools.

School year statistics for 2006-2007 also found that the number of children in pre-school had decreased - by 1.9 per cent - after having risen in the two previous years. According to the statistics office, the generations with more schoolchildren - born when the birth rate was higher - have now finished compulsory schooling. The next generations have fewer children.

In Switzerland the birth rate currently stands at 1.44 children per woman, having dropped from 2.7 in 1964. In neighbouring Germany the figure stands at 1.37 and Italy, 1.33. France bucks the trend at 1.90.

The percentage of foreign pupils in Swiss schools was stable at 24 per cent.

The outlook for tertiary education is brighter, where numbers rose by 3.9 per cent during the last school year.

*from swissinfo*

## One in six adults lacks basic literacy

In Switzerland, around 800'000 adults are considered functionally illiterate, meaning they find it difficult to read or write. An illiterate person will normally have had little or no schooling, but a functionally illiterate person has normally completed compulsory schooling.

The federal office's analysis of last year's "Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey" showed that a large proportion of working-age people lacked basic skills. Around 16 per cent could not read well enough to understand a simple text, while eight per cent could not speak the local language well enough to hold a conversation. The number of foreigners - more than a quarter of the Swiss adult population - is a major factor in the results. Those who moved to Switzerland in the past five years are usually well educated, while earlier generations only had basic schooling.

Older immigrants in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland account for lower reading skills, while in the German-speaking part of the country their lack of knowledge of the local language stands out.

New immigrants are far more qualified than their predecessors and their skills tend to mirror those of locals when they share the same language. The latest arrivals also tend to master more languages than the average Swiss citizen. The report also concluded that people with good skills usually have good positions and are less likely to lose their jobs. They also read more books and take part more readily in group and community activities. They have access to computers and other modern communications technology and make use of them.

*from swissinfo*