

Education officials reject call for lighter books

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SPRINGFIELD -- Despite a request from Illinois lawmakers, state education officials say they will not be telling publishing companies to make smaller textbooks aimed at lightening the load for schoolchildren.

Teaching children and parents about the proper way to wear backpacks would be more practical, said Becky Watts, the Illinois State Board of Education's chief of staff.

"It doesn't really get at the heart of the problem," Watts said. "Kids put lots of other things in their backpacks. Besides textbooks, it's water bottles, tennis shoes and all those things."

House Resolution 186, approved last year, directed the state board to look at backpack-related health problems among children and make recommendations about the maximum weight for individual textbooks. The proposal called for a decision to be made by July 1.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that 7,277 emergency room visits a year are triggered by backpack-related injuries.

But mandating textbook size would also be difficult for local school districts, Watts said.

"It would cause an undue administrative burden on local school districts to have to take into their purchasing decision maybe this is the best fourth-grade social studies book out there but it weighs an ounce too much," she said.

Issue for parents?

If the state can't address the problem, then parents and educators should make publishers change book size, said state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, who has pushed similar proposals in the past.

"There are a lot of issues that come to the fore where parents say, 'You're right, but what am I supposed to do about it?'" she said. "There is plenty you can do. You are the one paying for these books. I think the parents need to exert their

power on this.”

National organizations, such as the American Occupational Therapy Association and the American Chiropractic Association, agree backpacks should weigh no more than 15 percent of a person’s body weight. For instance, a 60-pound child should only carry 5 pounds in a backpack.

The groups caution anyone from carrying more than 25 pounds in a backpack.

Physical signs that a backpack may be overstuffed include tingling and numbness in the arms and legs or a change in posture.

Other safety tips include:

- Wearing both shoulder straps
- Avoiding excessive twisting when putting on or removing the backpack.
- Wearing the pack in the middle of the back.
- Purchasing a backpack with a padded back to take pressure off the spine, shoulders and underarms; hip and chest belts to transfer weight from back and shoulders to hips and torso; multiple compartments to better distribute weight; and reflective material so motorists can see the wearer at night.

The Illinois State Board of Education is scheduled to considering the study at its June meeting.