

Malnutrition Affecting 15% of Children

Ministry of Health announced that 15 percent of children countrywide are suffering from malnutrition, generating an annual loss of 56 billion rials for the nation, said ISNA.

Head of the ministry's Office to Improve Nutrition, Robabeh Sheikholeslam, in her address to a conference titled "Baby and Health" highlighted the importance of children's growth, and said, "At age six, the height of a

child is 70 percent of the height of a mature person which highlights the significance of the preschool period."

She went on, "Children's brains need twice as much energy as adults. A healthy baby measuring 3.5 kilos has

two billion cells and 100 billion neurons."

The official added that 60 percent of infants in some parts of the country and 40 percent of them nationwide suffer from iron deficiency.

"Iron deficiency can decrease the child's

intelligence quotient by nine points, low birth weight by five points, formula feeding by eight points and iodine deficiency by 13 points," she added.

Sheikholeslam said that malnutrition can intensify and prolong diseases,

delay physical and mental growth, and deter the child's ability to acquire complicated skills.

She then pointed to the socioeconomic repercussions of malnutrition, saying it reduces production, increases imports and causes

poverty, as well as socioeconomic recession.

Sheikholeslam put the prevalence of underweight at 13.7 percent in rural and 9.6 percent in urban areas, and the occurrence of shortness at 11 and 21.8 percent in

villages and cities respectively.

According to her, 40 percent of under-six children in villages and 25 percent in urban areas suffer from zinc deficiency, which is caused by the lack of micronutrients in the soil.

Kindergarten Enrollment Insufficient

A meager 7 percent of nine million Iranian kids enroll in kindergartens, deputy head of the State Welfare Organization for cultural affairs said.

Mohammad Reza Khabbaz added, "This is while the figure is as high as 70 to 95 percent in developed countries."

As reported by IRNA, Khabbaz who was speaking at a press conference on the occasion of the Children's Week (Oct. 2-8) warned, "Should the officials and parents remain apathetic toward the situation of the nine million under-six population, the number of street kids would probably increase in not-too-distant future."

He added that only 600,000 out of the nine million target population are covered by preschool education, available at 9,400 day care centers across the country.

Putting the number of

those working at kindergartens at 435,000, Khabbaz pointed to plans to keep up with regional states by increasing the number of kids attending kindergarten from the current 7 percent to 20 percent by the end of the fourth five-year development plan (2005-2010).

"The development will create 50,000 new job opportunities," he expanded.

The official cited latest decisions by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security based on which 11 state institutions were obliged to mop up and rehabilitate street children.

Khabbaz categorized vagrant kids as child laborers, abandoned kids and juvenile delinquents.

He exclaimed that two billion rials worth of credits set aside for the rehabilitation of street kids has not been yet disbursed by the government.

Khabbaz put the number

of children supported by SWO at 114,000.

Addressing the same gathering, director general of SWO's Office for Children and Young Adults observed,



Kindergartens will be classified in the near future based on their facilities and services.

"Kindergarten attendance is the right of kids living in deprived areas rather than those residing in privileged regions, since the latter experience fewer problems."

Ahmad Esmailian recalled that some two

billion rials had been set aside for 20 provinces to provide children in underprivileged districts and shanty towns with preschool education.

The official further

noted that the kindergartens' tuition for infants is about 500,000 rials in Tehran's 20 districts.

Parents in the deprived province of Sistan-Baluchestan pay the least fee.

Esmailian concluded that the kindergartens would be classified in the near future based on their facilities and services.

He hoped that the measure would help boost competition and quality of services in kindergartens.

He also recalled that Khorasan Cultural Council ranked first nationwide last year.

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Ramadan in Universities

Over 310 religious propagators, 100 of them women, are stationed in higher education institutions across the country during Ramadan to help students capitalize on the spiritual blessings of the fasting month.

Elaborating on Ramadan special programs, deputy head of the Leader's Office for universities' cultural affairs, Hojjatoleslam Saber Akbari-Jeddi told ISNA, "As per a program titled 'Green Presence', the propagators hold sessions on the exegesis of Qur'an for students every day."

Akbari-Jeddi named "From Ramadan to Ramadan" as another program scheduled exclusively for university instructors.

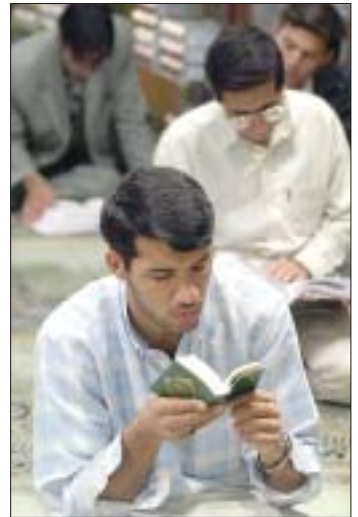
According to the official, those interested would study chapters of a prominent exegesis of the Holy Qur'an by Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi within the specified time periods. The professors will have studied the whole exegesis in two years.

He stated that university professors, members of student associations as well as the elite would meet with the leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei during the month.

Simple Iftar (fast-breaking) banquets will be held at higher education centers, Akbari-Jeddi concluded.

Universities in Tehran have arranged special programs to observe the fasting month including a host of lectures, classes on Qur'an exegesis, prayers and supplications, and keeping vigil on the nights of Qadr (19th, 21st and 23rd of Ramadan).

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Descriptive Evaluation Scheme In Final Trial Year

Trial phase of the descriptive evaluation scheme, which began three years ago in a number of primary schools nationwide, will be over by the end of the current school

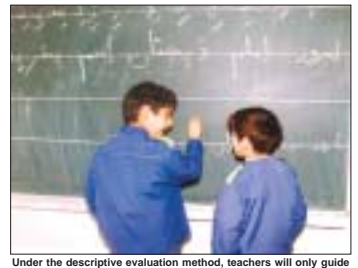
year (June 2006), director general of the Education Ministry's Department for Preschool and Primary Education told ISNA.

"The traditional method of appraisal based on tests and scores has been replaced by descriptive evaluation techniques in 1,200 first, second and third grade primary classes countrywide this year," Hossein Ahmadi revealed.

The Education and Training Research Center will assess the scheme's results after the school year is over and present the report to the High Council of Education for a final decision, the official added.

Ahmadi expanded that the most important part of the scheme was changing the score-based system of evaluation into ranking-based methods for pupils studying at first, second and third grades.

He stated that principals of 500 schools, teachers of 1,000 schools and experts in charge of implementing



Under the descriptive evaluation method, teachers will only guide the students through their progress.

descriptive evaluation plan underwent training within a pilot project.

According to the official, 30 to 35 classes in each province have been covered by the plan this year.

The so-called "descriptive evaluation" which uses words to describe and summarize a student's level of competence is in contrast to quantitative assessment techniques whose summary yields a score, typically a number.

In related news, deputy head of Tehran Education Department told Fars news agency

that some 2,000 Tehrani primary students were brought under the coverage of descriptive evaluation scheme in the current school year.

Alireza Araquinia added that the number of Tehran primary schools engaged in the scheme had increased from six to 14 within three years.

The official stated that under the descriptive evaluation method, teachers would only guide the students through their progress, adding, "Passing or failing a grade is not decided by the final exam scores."

Robert A. Heinlein (American writer, 1907-88):

Do not handicap your children by making their lives easy.



A young boy breaks his fast during Ramadan in Tehran. (Photo by Mehr news agency)

Singapore Mosques Plan Sex Education

Singapore mosques will teach sexuality to Muslim teenagers from December in a bid to revamp religious education for youths, the city-state's Islamic religious council said, Reuters reported.

The program will use a book titled "X-rated", written and published by the council, and will be taught in 13 mosques as part of a series of workshops teaching Islam to teenagers.

"We want the teens to appreciate that the religion addresses all issues, including those considered taboo, such as sexuality," said Farah Mahamood Aljunied,

head of the council's education unit.

Piloted as a jazzed-up and more comprehensive version of the religious classes taught in mosques, the program aims to convince Muslim teenagers to abstain from premarital sex and understand the purpose of sex in Islam.

It will also discuss relationship issues, sexuality and puberty, as well as the role of family and friends in the lives of teenagers.

"We wanted a holistic program which not only addresses moral needs but also situational issues that a teenager might face, all integrated with

religious elements," said Aljunied.

Only religious teachers and volunteers who have been trained by the council and have had prior experience with teenagers will teach the subject, said the council, adding that it already has a pool of over 100 trainers.

The program will complement Singapore mosques' regular religious classes, which use a standardized syllabus for children and teenagers, teaching a range of academic religious subjects including Qur'an reading and Arabic.

Muslims make up about 15 percent of Singapore's 4.2 million population.

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Young Latvians Like to Live Abroad

More than 40 percent of Latvian high school students want to move abroad as soon as they finish school, with Britain and Ireland the destinations of choice, according to a poll, AFP reported.

The study, conducted last month among students in the capital Riga, showed 41.5 percent of Latvian high schoolers would like to leave the Baltic state, while only 5.4 percent said they wanted to stay.

"The results are surprising and sad. If the state does not do anything to get young people to stay in the country, in 10 years there will not be sufficient number of working-age people," said Inga Zencmugova, a representative of the group that carried out the poll.

"The fact that young people go abroad is both beneficial and dangerous: on one hand it

is good that they leave, because they earn money, learn languages, study and then come back and contribute to the Latvian economy," said Baiba Rivza, head of the Council of Higher Education.

"But there is a risk that many of them will not return, and that would be a loss for Latvia."

Some 40,000 nationals of the Baltic state, which has a population of 2.3 million, live and work in Britain or Ireland, which with Sweden were the only three older EU member states to open their markets to workers from former communist countries such as Latvia, which joined the bloc last year.

"We are a new EU member state, the borders are open, and young people have so many opportunities," Rivza told AFP.

"But not all of them leave Latvia. This poll is more a statement of what they would like to do than what they really do."

The high unemployment rate in parts of Latvia could be another factor.

Nationally the jobless rate was 8.5 percent last year, but in the eastern Latgale region, close to the border with Russia, between 18 and 20 percent of the workforce are out of jobs.

"It is hard to get a good job in Latvia if a person does not have any experience. This is a big problem for students. The state should find a solution," Rivza said.

Details of what the other 60 percent of high school students in Latvia want to do when they finish school were not given by the polling agency.