

What's the Problem?



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Students bear weight, backpacks of heavy course load

By [Venice Buhain](#), August 14, 2013

Backpacks weigh heavily on the mind of Matt Macy, 12, a seventh-grader at Nisqually Middle School.

Matt — who carries a bag for sports, plays drums in band and carries his regular backpack — occasionally has to rest on his way to his bus stop.

"All along the main bag, there's stitches, there's duct tape," he said, describing the repairs to his main backpack, which his mother, Debbie, has repaired and once replaced.

Her daughter Marissa, 15, a sophomore at River Ridge High School, also faces a heavy day. The school was designed with no lockers, and students have to carry their belongings all day.

"I have textbooks for all of my classes, pretty much. I have an AP [Advanced Placement] class, and that's a heavy-duty textbook. I have math, and we have to carry around a huge binder for that," she said.

"It's almost like you're being punished for having a big academic load," Debbie Macy said.

The Macy family recently asked the North Thurston School District to consider what can be done for students weighed down by textbooks.

Heavy backpacks have been a large-enough issue that other states have tried to lighten the load.

In July, California's law regarding the maximum weights of textbooks went into effect. Books should be no heavier than 5 pounds in high school, 4 pounds in middle school and 3 pounds in elementary school, according to that state's Department of Education.

Children's health was the main reason behind the change, the department reported.

A study by the American Physical Therapy Association said bad postural changes, including leaning forward, started to occur when the backpacks were 10 percent to 15 percent of the child's body weight.

The National Safety Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes safe practices, cited a U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission report that more than 21,000 backpack-related injuries were treated at hospital emergency rooms, doctors' offices and clinics in 2003.

However, there has been no proof that backpacks cause permanent injuries, according to an article published by Children's Hospital Boston.

Seattle Public Schools head nurse Jill Lewis said the district passes along the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that students not try to carry more than 10 to 15 percent of their body weight. If they do have a heavy pack, she said, they should use both straps on a pack with broad straps and make sure they're using the waist strap correctly — around their hips, not lower back.

If they must carry a lot of weight, they should opt for a rolling backpack, something she said most kids "aren't very interested in."

Kent School District spokeswoman Becky Hanks said some of the schools in her district offer classroom sets of textbooks so students don't have to haul heavy books back and forth.

The North Thurston district reviewed the Macys' request. District spokeswoman Courtney Schrieve said the middle schools have enough books to allow teachers to keep a set in the classroom and students to keep a set at home.

Having a school set and a home set of books has been the practice at the middle schools for several years, since the schools stopped using their lockers for safety reasons and because they cut into instructional time, Schrieve said.

"Students spent a lot of time getting books out of their lockers or just hanging out at their lockers," she said. North Thurston middle-school students in sports have lockers available to them, and the district offers instrument rental, so band members don't have to lug their equipment to and from school.

"Parents might not be aware of these options," she said. Parents should speak to the school principal if it appears a child is carrying too much, she said.

In Tumwater and Olympia, the high schools and middle schools have lockers available to students, district officials said, though many students choose not to use one.

North Thurston and Timberline high schools in Lacey also have lockers available for students and district officials, and they are looking into whether it's feasible to install lockers at River Ridge High School, Schrieve said.

Marissa Macy said she and her friends hope that can happen soon.

"I have a friend who lives close by, and during lunch he'll go home and swap backpacks," she said. "It's really hard; I want to be in the classes that push me to do better. Except I know the workload is very heavy. It's hard to decide what I should do."

Times staff reporter Emily Heffter contributed to this story.