

New Straits Times, 10/10/2020, M/S 2/3

DIGITAL DIVIDE

CONCERN OVER SCRAPPING OF PHYSICAL CLASSES

Many students are ill-equipped to handle online learning, say educationists

DHESEGAAN BALAKRISHNAN
AND DAWN CHAN
KUALA LUMPUR
news@nst.com.my

NON-GOVERNMENTAL organisations have voiced concern over the move to cancel physical classes for the rest of the year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected large swathes of the country.

They believe that a significant number of students nationwide are ill-equipped to handle online learning, with many still lacking access to laptops as well as Internet connection for the move to be effective.

Parent Action Group for Education president Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim called on the ministry to reconsider its decision on Sunday to close schools nationwide abruptly.

"The government should allow students taking Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) to attend physical classes in schools under stricter standard operating procedures (SOP).

"Since these students will have the whole school at their disposal, classes can be conducted in the hall or smaller classes in classrooms to ensure physical distancing.

"National schools are also not air-conditioned and classrooms are generally airy. The good air ventilation makes classrooms safer for lessons.

"Schools merely have to ensure physical distancing between students when they are going back home after school," she said.

Noor Azimah said online learn-

ing had not augured well for students from the underprivileged community.

"Moreover, online learning has been a grave failure. It has instead widened the gap between the students from the haves and the have-nots more acutely.

"The alarming rate where at-risk children are dropping out of school is also a major concern as they are deprived of face-to-face class teaching and are not able to follow online learning.

"This makes them completely disinterested in schooling and learning," she said.

Noor Azimah said allowing SPM and STPM students to attend physical classes was consistent with the United Nations and the World Bank's advice for countries worldwide to keep schools open.

The report, which was released on Oct 28, found that children in poor countries had been deprived of close to four months of schooling since the Covid-19 pandemic began early this year.

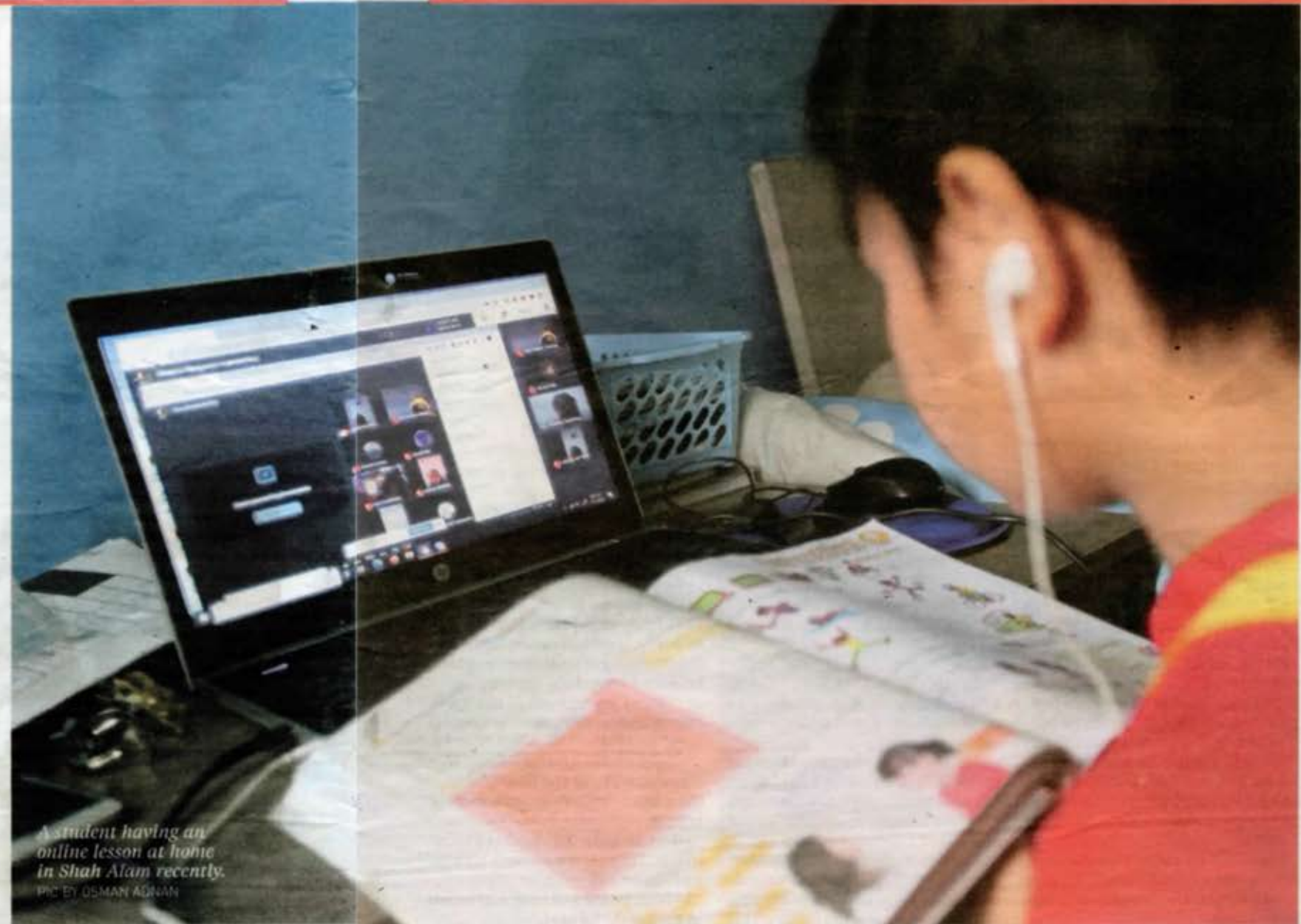
On the contrary, students in rich countries benefiting from remote learning only lost six weeks of schooling.

Senior Education Minister Dr Radzi Jidin on Sunday announced that the school opening date for the first term of the 2021 session nationwide has been set for Jan 20.

He said maximising the duration of school days and reducing the year-end holidays would enable students to have an adequate face-to-face learning period in preparation for the following year.

Radzi had acknowledged weaknesses in the implementation of teaching and learning through home-based learning methods throughout the Movement Control Order (MCO) period.

He said the ministry's study on students' readiness in online learning from March 28 to April 2 showed that 36.9 per cent of students did not have smart devices to enable them to follow online learning.



A student having an online lesson at home in Shah Alam recently.
PHOTO BY OSMAN ADNAN

A senior school administrator, who wanted to be known only as Clara, hoped the ministry would allow Form Five and Form Six students to return to school for physical classes.

"Science subjects, especially, cannot be taught effectively online. We need face-to-face interaction to check if students are able to grasp the concepts.

"Otherwise, some students might just sit quietly throughout the online classes and teachers cannot evaluate if students have achieved the learning outcomes.

"In fact, when only Form Five and Form Six students were allowed to return once schools initially reopened after the MCO, teachers were very satisfied with the outcome.

"Students appeared to be more focused as the school environment was more conducive for learning with fewer students.

"Teachers who were falling behind in their teaching schedule due to the MCO managed to catch up during that period," she said.

Likewise, Clara suggested that schools implement a modular system for students in the lower forms, rather than tire teachers out with online classes.

"Teachers prepare tutorial modules and arrange them by classes for collection at the school's guard house. Parents can

come and collect the material from there for their children.

"Once the students complete the module, parents can return the modules for their teachers to mark and grade the work.

"This will ensure that no student is left behind due to lack of Internet access and devices," she said, adding that many schools in Ipoh had tried the method and found it to be effective.

Meanwhile, National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP)

secretary-general Harry Tan felt that more time should be given to see how the ministry's new directive pans out.

"Teachers will always have the interests of their students at heart.

"Let the schools figure this out first and, if there are problems, NUTP will be the first to point them out," he said.

However, Tan said that the government must enhance digital connectivity for students to en-

sure that they do not lose out on their education.

"Many underprivileged students from the B40 group, Orang Asli community and special-needs children are deprived of proper gadgets and stable Internet access for online learning.

"Therefore, we urge the government to provide interest-free loans or tax-free devices to students so that they can improve their digital access and follow their online classes," he said.