

By Eamon Donoghue

A MOTHER is campaigning to have the problem of heavy schoolbags addressed – as she said her son developed a back problem from carrying around a bag the weight of a small child for two years.

Margaret Finn from Swinford, Co. Mayo, said she had to give her eldest son Adrian painkillers regularly to keep him in school and to get him to sleep at night, such was the extent of his agony.

The mother of two said that he would regularly be forced to carry a 25lb schoolbag but this could reach 28lb on some days.

She said while he has grown stronger, he has visible posture problems. However she fears her younger son Kevin, who last week began first year in Scoil Muire agus Pádraig, in Swinford, is now about to go through the same ordeal.

Mrs Finn took her concerns to the powers that be, by contacting officials in the Education, Health and then for Children but one day decided to take her story the Taoiseach himself, confronting him in person.

'Enda Kenny was coming to the school... So I found one of their bags and filled it up with 25lb of books and I went in. I handed him the bag and said, "here, do you, think it's fair that kids should be carrying around this weight?". But to be honest he made nothing of it and said, "I used to carry a bag around like that when I was a young lad and it didn't do me any harm", that's what he said.'

'He has posture problems now'

While neither the Department of Education or the Department of the Taoiseach would respond last night when the Mail put this to them, Scoil Muire agus Pádraig did tell the Mail that Mrs Finn is not the only parent to have made such a complaint to them.

Mrs Finn told the Mail Adrian, now 15, has developed a serious and visible arch in his back because of the bag he has had to carry around.

'Adrian started school in 2012 and he had a very bad time of it,' she said. 'When he started school, and you know he was given a bit of time to gather up the books, but once he started to get them all together I just noticed that the weight was terrible and he was then complaining every night with an aching back.'

'Then it got very bad, and he was taking different stuff, and a lot of painkillers and this went on for some time and got worse.'

'If he had nine subjects for one day he might be carrying this 25lb, or up to a 28lb bag around... I was weighing it as I was absolutely horrified and I couldn't understand that no-one was doing anything about it.'

Mrs Finn's younger son Kevin, 13, just began school last week, and despite not yet having all of his books, his bag is already weighing 25lb.

Mrs Finn says Adrian and Kevin each weigh well under 120lb, meaning their bags are well above the recommended weight for children to carry on their backs – which is 10 per

Is it fair to burden my sons with 25lb bags for a day at school? (That's the same weight as carrying a small child)



Picture posed by models

cent of your body weight. 'Adrian was taking the painkillers to get to sleep, and he hated going into school because he was in pain and, yeah, he had to miss days with it. I used to feel if I gave him a painkiller he wouldn't miss school as I just didn't want him missing school. His lower back was the worst part.'

Mrs Finn said when she asked the doctor for stronger painkillers, he instructed her not to give him painkillers so often as they would destroy his liver. 'He said that it was terrible and he offered to write to the school,' she said. 'He's in third year now and

he has posture problems, if you look at him you'd definitely see it; his back, it's arched now. He has got stronger but he has a significant posture problem now.'

Mrs Finn has been forced to begin driving her children to the school door to alleviate the pain from the weight of their bags.

The part-time farmer and housewife says that herself and her husband Michael have been shocked with the lack of action taken so far.

Deputy principal at Scoil Muire agus Pádraig, Philip Cawley, told the Mail that this issue is 'an awful prob-

lem, a desperate problem. I have four kids and the weight of their bags is ferocious.'

He added: 'I would be hoping that Mrs Finn wouldn't be blaming this on the school. We are concerned about children.' While Mr Cawley told the Mail that he would be in favour of cutting the number of subjects for first-years, his school are not in the process of introducing eBooks. 'You might put that to the Minister for Education and Skills,' he told the Mail. 'But eBooks are not the answer anyway. eBooks are not transferable, they do not work with-

out Wi-Fi – they might be the answer to the weight but not to the overall educational concerns we're having.'

He said wheely bags are available but that pupils feel they don't look 'cool' carting them around.

Mrs Finn's family GP, Dr McLoughlin, confirmed to the Mail that he's been treating her sons for back injuries caused by 'the burden of carrying the bag around all of the time'.

Meanwhile, Fianna Fáil's education spokesman Charlie McConalogue said he would highlight the issues Mrs Finn raised in the Dáil.

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Campaign: Mother-of-two Margaret Finn and the heavy schoolbag



Coveney seeks UN assurances for Irish troops in Golan



Risk: Simon Coveney

THE UN needs a safer base in the Golan Heights and other UN forces need heavier weapons before more Irish troops can be committed to the troubled region, Defence Minister Simon Coveney said yesterday.

Speaking after the inaugural Defence Forces Veterans' Day in The Curragh, he said a further deployment of Irish troops would only happen if the UN gave assurances around acceptable levels of risk.

He suggested a safer place to base UN troops might be closer to the Israeli border. He also said there needed to be 'a review of weaponry' used by other UN forces there.

UN troops have been in the Golan

By Neil Michael and Paddy Clancy

since 1974, keeping the peace between Israel and Syria.

But now the Syrian civil war has reached the area, with Islamist rebel groups confronting pro-Assad forces.

The issue is at a crisis point as 43 UN peacekeepers from Fiji remain hostages of Al-Qaida-linked fighters.

Around 300 Nusra Front rebels captured the Fijians after seizing control of a key crossing point between Syrian and Israeli-controlled parts of the Golan.

The rebels also surrounded two

contingents of Filipino troops who refused to surrender and fought a series of gun battles with them.

Irish troops successfully extracted 35 of the Filipinos while another 40 managed to reach safety under cover of darkness.

Negotiations for the release of the Fijians has begun and yesterday, Mr Coveney said Irish forces might be called on to go in and 'get them' once negotiations had concluded.

His comments came after those of Enda Kenny, who said the last thing Ireland needed to be dragged into was a civil war.

The Taoiseach underlined Mr Coveney's apparent readiness to pull

out Irish troops unless the UN acts to make their mission safer.

He said: 'The troops are there as part of a UN Mission with a particular mandate. They are not on the Golan Heights to be dragged into a civil war.'

Mr Coveney said he was due to discuss the matter with cabinet colleagues later today.

But he told reporters yesterday: 'The UN now needs to respond either with a change of mandate or a change of structure to the new realities on the ground.'

He added: 'I am not willing to commit Irish troops to a mission until risk is managed appropriately.'