

Could the Internet spell the end of snow days?

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In this April 8, 2011 photo, Cameron Mottet makes up a missed snow day in the kitchen of her home in as her mother Jane looks on Parkville, Mo. Some schools are experimenting with ways for students to do lessons online during bad weather, potentially allowing classes to go on during even the worst blizzard. So-called "virtual snow days" would ease pressure on school calendars and offer students more time to learn in the winter before taking standardized tests in the spring. But there are obstacles, too, especially for families who can't afford computers or Internet access. (AP Photo/Orlin Wagner)

(AP) -- Could the Internet mean the end of snow days? Some schools think so, and they are experimenting with ways for students to do lessons online during bad weather, potentially allowing classes to go on during even the worst blizzard.

"Virtual snow days" would help ease pressure on [school](#) calendars. Because districts are required to be in session for a certain number of

hours or days, losing teaching time to [winter weather](#) can mean extending the school day or cutting short spring break or summer vacation.

And canceling school in the winter, when some of the most difficult material of the year is covered, risks leaving [students](#) with a learning deficit heading into the spring, when many states administer standardized tests.

"Even if you can't continue on at the same pace, being able to keep students on track can make a huge difference," said Doug Levin, executive director of the nonprofit State Educational Technology Directors Association.

Virtual learning, which has been widely used by colleges and universities for years, is becoming more viable for younger students as teachers and administrators grow comfortable with the technology. Online learning also saves money because districts don't have to pay for transportation, electricity and custodians.

But there are obstacles, too. Many families don't have Internet access with speeds that would support complex classroom-style work, especially in rural areas and impoverished inner cities. Families with multiple children - without [multiple computers](#) - could be hard-pressed to keep up.

And some people say kids just need an occasional extra day off in the depths of winter.

"When deep snow falls, the world becomes quiet and still. And if we listen to our instincts, we settle in and enjoy the pure joy of not doing," David Santner wrote on the website for the Poughkeepsie Day School in New York, where his son is a middle schooler, after the school turned to

online learning during a spate of [winter storms](#).

For schoolchildren, old-fashioned snow days used to mean languorous hours spent playing outside in the drifts, watching television or sipping hot chocolate. But someday, kids who can't get to the classroom might just sit down with their computers.

Josie Holford, head of the Poughkeepsie school, which had six snow days and four late starts this past winter, said it's possible to enjoy the outdoors and keep learning. Students in one class were told to draw a picture in the snow for a lesson on angles and to take a picture of their creation.

"We have to recognize as teachers, educators, all of us, that we are in a completely different landscape, and that learning really isn't confined to a textbook or a teacher anymore," Holford said. "We all have to be learning all the time. Why should a snow day stop the progress of learning?"

At St. Therese School in the Kansas City suburb of Parkville, students recently did a virtual make-up day after classes were canceled six times because of weather.

As she used a computer drawing program to complete an art lesson in her kitchen, seventh-grader Cameron Mottet predicted her classmates would embrace the system, especially if it means "they don't have to go to school in June."

Cameron's older sister, whose school isn't making up days virtually, has grumbled that she will be in class while Cameron is free to hang out at the pool.

The first experiments with virtual snow days began a few years ago as

individual teachers started logging on during poor weather to drill older students. Since then, entire schools and districts have joined in, using websites such as Skype and YouTube to keep students as young as kindergarten studying during storms.

An increasing number of teachers have their own websites, so sometimes starting virtual lessons is as simple as telling parents to check on snow days to see if any assignments are posted. Other times, the makeup work occurs afterward, with students completing assignments from home on days set aside for teacher training. Students can chat online with their teachers and ask questions via email.

In one school, younger students were directed to a website to play online money games, while older students in another school completed a simulation program to test how the angle of a baseball pitch affects the distance a ball is thrown.

The experiments appear to be the most prevalent in affluent private schools like Cameron's, where only three of 643 students lacked a home computer.

At an all-girls boarding school in Simsbury, Conn., some teachers started using the Internet for lessons when roads become impassable so students who commute didn't fall behind the others who live on campus.

"It's been a really bad winter, so the teachers were grateful they could use these tools and not lose a day or cram too much material in one day," said Vivian K. Elba, director of marketing and communications at Ethel Walker School.

But the efforts aren't limited to wealthy, private schools. The Mississinawa Valley district on the Indiana-Ohio state line has led Ohio's push for virtual snow days. Fifty-two percent of the district's 700

students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Since Mississinawa got permission last fall to make up two snow days electronically, four other Ohio districts joined the pilot program. Superintendent Lisa Wendel has received calls from other states interested in virtual make-up days.

"It is going to continue to snowball in this country," said Wendel, whose district has been forced to call off classes 11 times this school year.

However, Wendel questions whether virtual snow days will continue in her own district. Ohio lawmakers have thrown out a provision allowing the practice, citing concerns that poor students without home computers and rural students without Internet access could be at a disadvantage. Lawmakers continue to debate the issue.

Jalisa Rush, a seventh-grader in the district who has her own laptop, said she and her friends spent their e-days chatting on Facebook as they did online assignments that included calculating the calories and trans fats in favorite foods. Because some of the projects were more creative, she didn't mind committing five to six hours to them.

"I thought it was really exciting and something new to try, which was really pretty great," she said. But she added: "It gets a little harder because you didn't really have the teacher there to explain something if you have a question."

Carol Hussin, principal of Cameron's St. Therese School, said some parents have complained the online work took longer than the six hours teachers intended, but others said they enjoyed getting a glimpse of their children's studies.

"I think it's a great tool to have," said Cameron's mother, Jane.

"Obviously it's not going to replace going to school. But for situations like this, I think it's wonderful."

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