

Manitoba expands remote learning to help fight COVID-19 in post-holiday period

By: **The Canadian Press**

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WINNIPEG - The Manitoba government will require many students to stay home from school and learn remotely for two weeks after the holiday break in an attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

From Jan. 4 to Jan. 15, students in grades 7 to 12 will have to learn remotely, except those with special needs. Students in kindergarten to Grade 6 will have the option of learning remotely or going to school.

Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen said the aim is to reduce interaction among students and staff following the holiday period when many people will gather with loved ones.

"We have seen, traditionally, in other places and in Manitoba, where there is (a) holiday break, that the COVID-19 numbers can go up after the break," Goertzen said Wednesday. "So this provides, from a public health perspective, some additional assurance just to see what those numbers are looking like."

Many high school students have already been using a mix of in-class and remote instruction since school resumed in September, while most younger students have remained in the classroom. The change for two weeks in January will be a heavy burden for teachers, especially in the younger grades, the provincial teachers' union said.

"It means their workload goes through the roof," James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, said. "The idea that a teacher can teach students in the classroom, in front of them, and teach students remotely — and do both those roles successfully at the same time — is like texting and driving. It is impossible to do."

The Manitoba School Boards Association was more optimistic and said lessons had been learned from the spring when schools were temporarily closed to in-class instruction. "There's a lot of really strong infrastructure in place already, so I'll say it's not necessarily what the system was expecting ... but I'm confident that divisions will be able to adapt," Alan Campbell, the association's president, said.

Goertzen said teachers will get help, including direct-to-student remote instruction, from a new support centre that is still in the process of being staffed. Extra funding, much of it from the federal government, will also be available to help with the workload, he said.

Manitoba was facing the highest rate of new COVID-19 infections among the provinces until it was surpassed by Alberta last week. The Manitoba government-imposed restrictions on public gatherings and business openings three weeks ago, and the daily number of new cases has started to drop in recent days.

Chief public health officer Dr. Brent Roussin said the drop in new cases, which had been in the 400-500 range, is welcome, but the health-care system is still being strained. There were a near-record 51 people with COVID-19 in intensive care beds on Wednesday. The province has been looking for ways to expand intensive-care capacity in hospitals, which could involve moving some non-COVID-19 patients off-site to buildings such as convention centres.

The province is also facing opposition to some of its restrictions. Springs Church in Winnipeg has been defying a ban on public gatherings by holding drive-in church services. The government has promised to issue fines of \$5,000 to the church and \$1,296 to some individuals who attended. The church is asking a judge for an injunction against the government's rules. A hearing is scheduled for Thursday.

"We have to ask ourselves why the government has deemed it unsafe for Manitobans to drive to their place of worship with their windows rolled up for the entirety of a service, and practice their faith," a press release from the church said.

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