

Remote learning support centre launched

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Lesson plans, video-conferencing tips, and a helpline for distance learning are among the resources available on Manitoba's new online hub for remote teachers and students.

The long-awaited launch of the Manitoba Remote Learning Support Centre coincided Monday with the return of upwards of 200,000 students to both traditional and kitchen-table classrooms.

All students are expected back at school Jan. 18, following a two-week period of remote learning for grades 7-12. Pupils in K-6 were given the option to do remote or in-class learning.

No matter current learning setting — be it remote, homeschool or regular school — teachers, parents and pupils can access the one-stop-shop for remote resources (www.mbremotelearning.ca).

For Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen, the launch marks the start of what he said will be the equalization of distance learning across the province.

"There are always going to be divisions that have a greater capacity to deliver on certain things, either based on their location or because of the resources they have, but it certainly will go a long way in providing more equity," Goertzen said Monday, during a conference call with Dana Rudy, deputy minister of education.

The hub will not only give educators an abundance of materials and contacts to navigate through at-home learning, Goertzen said, but small divisions may also direct students to certified teachers at the centre for full-time, direct instruction.

The \$10-million initiative is being staffed by certified teachers, educational assistants, instructional coaches, clinicians, information technology experts, and other support staff through June 2021.

The educators, who are employed by the St. James Assiniboia School Division, which partnered with the province to operate the hub, will run professional development webinars and continue to create K-8 remote lessons and assessment materials that will be posted online.

Many of the educational literacy, numeracy, social studies and science activities are designed to be completed in two-week blocks. There are also mental health resources on the site.

The centre stops short of taking over all remote instruction — a criticism voiced by parents and educators in recent weeks.

"Too little, too late. Is this even what we asked for? I don't think, in speaking with parents, that this is what we asked for," said Brenda Brazeau, executive director of the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils.

Brazeau, whose Grade 10 daughter has been learning remotely since mid-autumn, said she is concerned about the quality of education this year — in part, because teachers are under immense stress. She added she's skeptical the centre will provide much-needed support.

James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, has also been an outspoken critic of the hub, citing the fact it doesn't provide relief to teachers required to do both in-class and remote teaching.

While Bedford said it is a shame the launch, originally expected in November and later, December, took place the same day teachers went back to work so they could not use it to prepare, he also expressed optimism.

"It's good to see the province is recognizing the challenges of teaching remotely, because those challenges are not going to go away," he said, adding it appears to have "real potential" to assist small divisions with fewer resources for remote programming.

It remains unclear how families with limited access to reliable internet, devices or phones will benefit from the hub in remote regions, said Vaughn Wadelius, chairman of the Kelsey School Division, which has a student population of around 1,500 in northern Manitoba.

The Pas-based division's plan for the next two weeks includes print packages and permitting students to attend school for "short periods of time" to connect to WiFi.

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