

Technology's great, but it could eliminate snow days



By Jen O'Malley | *Associated Press*

One of the best parts of winter could be melting away for many Indiana students. Snow days are becoming more rare.

The state's Department of Education will allow many schools to hold online learning days. They would be used in cases of inclement weather. Students won't miss critical instructional time. And it will help districts avoid extending the school year to make up missed days.

But not everyone is on board with the change and the move has sparked concern from some members of the State Board of Education.

Board member Brad Oliver thinks the virtual option is worth exploring but he wants assurances about how attendance and instruction will be monitored. He wants lawmakers to define what constitutes an instructional day in a virtual learning environment. That would help ensure students still receive the 180 days of instruction required by state law.

"I'm concerned about students getting lost in the cracks," Oliver said. He said he couldn't foresee a 7-year-old calling up the hotline to ask a teacher for help with homework.

Last winter, some Indiana districts missed up to 15 days. That forced them to shorten spring breaks and extend school days. Some had to add extra days at the end of the year.

Virtual instruction does have its rules. Schools must ensure that teachers are available to answer questions. And provide appropriate learning activities for those with disabilities.

Many districts are opening computer labs. Or they're providing lists of businesses and libraries with free Internet. Other districts, where Internet access can be a challenge, have stuck with traditional makeup days.

Critical thinking challenge: *What things are essential to make online learning work?*