

# Snow-day alternative creates new challenges

By Adam Beam, AP

FRANKFORT, KY – Public school students in 13 districts across Kentucky will be home schooled – mainly via the Internet – during some snow days this year as part of an experiment aimed at keeping students learning amid the growing number of weather-related closings.

The state's solution has caused a new set of challenges for some districts in one of the country's most impoverished areas. Some students don't have computers or home Internet access. And the school district might lose some state and federal aid.

Nonetheless, the snow day problem is too significant for Kentucky to ignore. Schools across the state had nearly four times as many snow days last year as they did the previous year. Some districts canceled school for more than a month.

To make that time up, schools had to cancel spring breaks and shorten summer vacations, creating low attendance days that hurt their state funding. The legislature had to pass an emergency law letting five districts cut their school years short.

Educators fear they might face a similar problem this year. Some schools have already used snow days.

Coping with fierce winter weather by teaching over the Internet has become more common in recent years, but it's harder in states like Kentucky, which ranks 46th out of 50 states for availability of high speed Internet. The problem is most pronounced in rural counties, which is why the state is moving forward with a \$200 million plan to lay 3,000 miles of

fiber-optic cables.

Thirteen school districts are part of an expanded program allowing students to complete assignments from home either by downloading them or working from packets prepared and sent home ahead of time. In exchange, the state will forgive up to 10 makeup days.

“If you could make this work, you would never have a snow day,” said David Cook, director of innovation and quality management for the Kentucky Department of Education. “You would just have kids doing this kind of instruction and learning anytime you have snow.”

Schools in Owsley County, where 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, missed 30 days because of snow last year. Owsley officials say they embraced the program because interrupting schooling takes a disproportionate toll on high-risk students.

Districts that opt to use the home school option would lose state transportation dollars and federal money for free and reduced lunches.

Though school buses might not be able to ply all the county’s side roads to bring kids to school on snow days, education officials might still be able to deliver meals to the students at some central locations, such as community centers.