

Manitoba teachers benefit from AI helper

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

TECH-SAVVY teachers across the province are adding ByteAI to their back-to-school supply lists.

The new artificial intelligence chatbot — available free via codebreakeredu.com/chat/ — was designed in collaboration with Manitoba teachers to create a time-saving tool that can assist with lesson planning and building digital literacy.

“I really like the saying, ‘You should use technology to replace things that should be replaced,’” said Kirsten Thompson, president of the Manitoba Association of Educational Technology Leaders.

Thompson wants to shift the “fear-mongering” narrative surrounding generative AI so it is not regarded as a frightening technological advancement, but rather an addition that can be leveraged for critical thinking and learning at-large.

Earlier this year, the group partnered with Code Breaker Inc., an education consulting firm founded by an Ontario elementary teacher who has a background in computer science, to launch an AI platform for specific use in education.

Simply put, ByteAI is an offshoot of OpenAI’s ChatGPT — the groundbreaking chatbot that went online in November 2022 and began providing human-like answers to user prompts of all kinds — and draws on the original technology’s mainframe.

It’s unique because users do not have to enter any personal information and the robot does not track student information. In addition, it will not entertain inappropriate questions, Thompson said, noting school privacy and code of conduct policies were top of mind as it was being developed.

Teachers can ask the robot to write everything from seating charts to specific classroom activities tailored to any grade and subject.



For students, the chatbot can simplify the research process because they can request extensive background information in one place.

Thompson is a proponent of teachers using ByteAI alongside their students to emphasize its data-gathering process and encourage critical thinking about what the chatbot produces.

“Analysis is a really deep part of our (English Language Arts) curriculum and so, being able to deconstruct a piece of written work in order to determine potential bias and language choices is something we’re hoping students will do in all types of literacy,” she said. “AI should be no different.”

The association has signed a three-year sponsorship agreement with Code Breaker. It has earmarked \$2,500 annually to operate ByteAI and in turn, advance its mandate to bridge the gap between technology and curriculum.

Generative AI is “consuming” conversations across the sector and all signs suggest it will continue being embedded into everyday tools like email servers that now provide suggested replies, said Brenda Stoesz of the University of Manitoba’s Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning.

“I think that’s a good thing because it makes us think again about the purpose of learning and the purpose of what we’re doing. Disruption is OK because it challenges us,” said Stoesz, a research lead at the centre with expertise in AI and academic integrity.

The rapid growth of this technology over the last year should prompt users to consider its ethical implications, including a tool’s biases, the greenhouse gas emissions required to power it, and when it is appropriate to access, she said.

In recent months, Stoesz has been running workshops to teach academics about the ever-growing AI landscape and discuss these robots’ existence with students in the context of academic integrity.

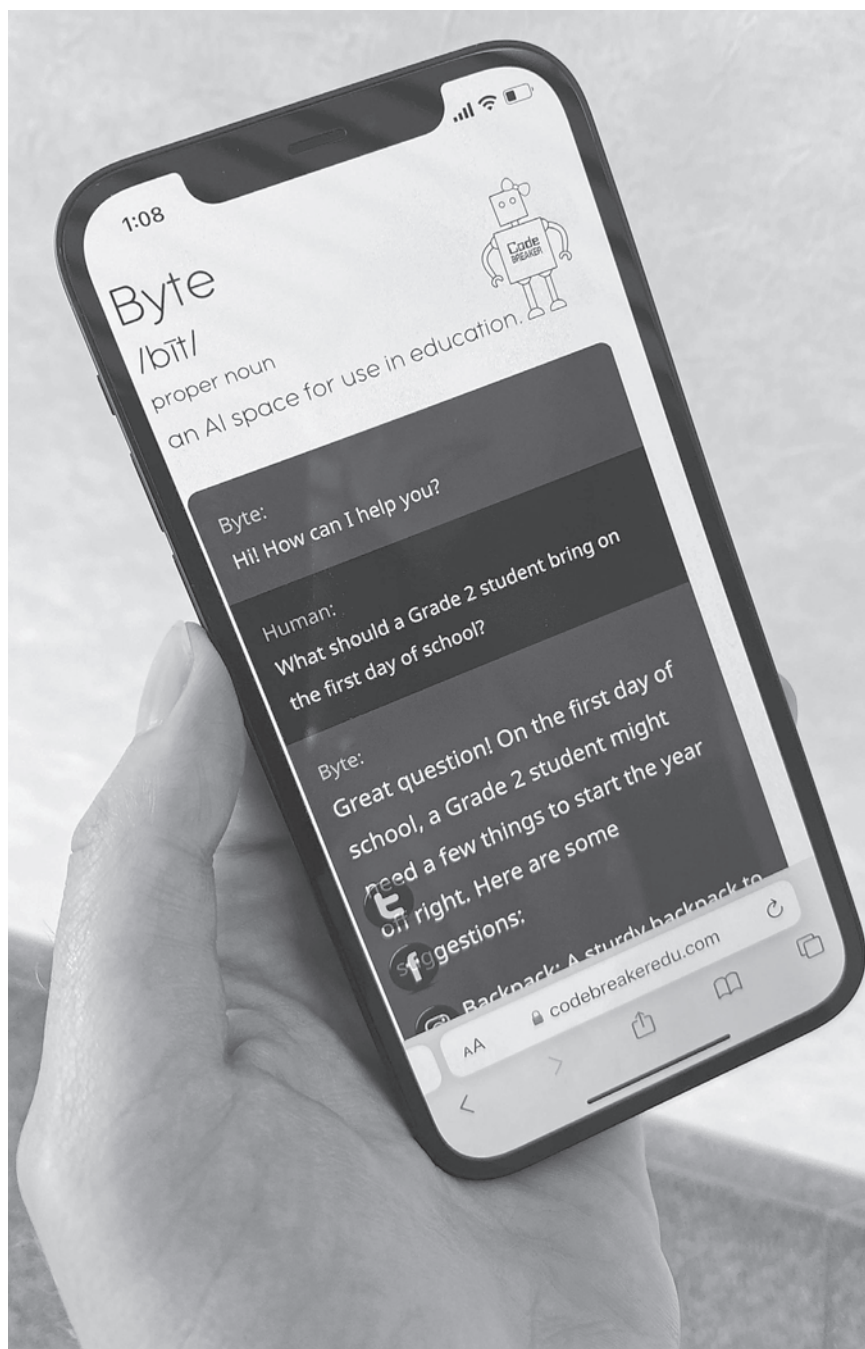
While these tools can kick-start learning by facilitating brainstorming sessions, they can also ensure students “bypass the learning and gain unfair advantage by not engaging in that learning process at all,” said the founder of the Manitoba Academic Integrity Network.

Stoesz likens tools such as ChatGPT, ByteAI and Google Bard to calculators. External devices can be of use in some situations, but they are no replacement for the benefits of being able to multiply in one’s head or do other basic math in an instant, she noted.

While noting the sudden rise of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to signal a new era of education, Stoesz added handwriting and hard copies are making a comeback as teachers undertake assessment at a time when robots can write essays in seconds.

Manitoba’s online high school recently bolstered its standard disciplinary protocols in a bid to deter students from submitting AI-plagiarized work as their own amid what the InformNet principal described as a “concerning rise” in incidents.

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BRIEFS

WEST NILE VIRUS CASE CONFIRMED IN MANITOBA

A MANITOBAN was hospitalized with what turned out to be the province’s first confirmed case of West Nile virus this season.

The confirmed case was detected along with three other probable cases, the provincial government announced Friday. The patient lives in the Winnipeg health region and is in their 40s.

“The individual experienced neurological symptoms and was hospitalized. They were most likely exposed to (the virus) in late June to early July. A public health investigation has been completed. More information about the other cases will be posted on Manitoba Health’s West Nile virus web page if they are confirmed to be infected with (the virus),” the government stated in a news release.

In 2022, there were seven cases of West Nile virus in Manitoba, and five of those cases required hospitalization.

The province stated 45 pools of mosquitoes infected with the virus have been identified in Manitoba so far this year, with eight pools identified the week of Aug. 13 to 19. Weekly West Nile updates with information about confirmed cases and regional surveillance are posted at www.gov.mb.ca.

PAIR STABBED ON MAIN STREET

TWO men were stabbed near the Northern Hotel on Main Street early Friday.

Winnipeg police found the victims after being called to the 800 block of Main Street at about 2 a.m., spokesman Const. Claude Chancy said.

The victims were taken to hospital in unstable condition, Chancy said.

No arrests have been made.

MAN, 51, FOUND DEAD NEAR VEHICLE IN RM OF TREHERNE

Portage la Prairie RCMP are investigating after a man was found dead near a vehicle in the Rural Municipality of Treherne on Thursday morning.

Officers were called to the scene, near Municipal Road 44 West, at about 10:10 a.m. They found the body of a 51-year-old man.

The body has been sent for an autopsy, and the cause of death is not yet known.

Portage la Prairie officers, along with major crime Mounties and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, are investigating.

NDP, Grits make appeals to renters feeling the pinch

DANIELLE DA SILVA AND CIERRA BETTENS

MANITOBA’S NDP and Liberal leaders made pitches to tenants on Friday by promising to boost tax credits, toughen legislation governing rent hikes and secure affordable and social housing units for low-income earners.

New Democratic Party Leader Wab Kinew pledged to give renters a \$700 tax credit at a cost of \$26.7 million annually, if his party wins the Oct. 3 election.

The income tax credit would restore cuts made in 2021 when the Tories reduced a renters tax credit to \$525. It was replaced with the residential renters tax credit in 2022.

Kinew said an NDP government would also amend laws that award above-guideline-rent increases to landlords who make improvements to their properties or report increased operating expenses.

“(Premier) Heather Stefanson and the (Progressive Conservatives) have allowed landlords to charge rent hikes that far exceed the provincial guidelines. Under her leadership, rent control rules are so lax that landlords can impose big hikes with only a few months’ notice,” Kinew said outside an apartment tower in the Kirkfield Park constituency, which is represented by Tory MLA Kevin Klein.

“If we have rent control in this province, should you really have to become a full-time activist just to be able to pay your bills? I think not,” Kinew said. “We need to strike a new balance that tips things back in favour of you the renters, you the tenants, you the folks who are struggling to pay your bills during this time of record inflation in recent memory.”

The Residential Tenancies Board permitted landlords to raise tenants’ rent by an average nine per cent, with hikes ranging between five and 126 per cent, in the first half of 2022, the *Free Press* reported in November. The province set rent control guidelines at zero per cent for both 2022 and 2023.

Hikes were approved despite the Tory government issuing property tax rebate cheques to Manitoba landlords amid the two-year freeze. The province has set the rent increase guideline at three per cent in 2024.

New Democrats introduced a private member’s bill last year aimed at limiting eligible expenditures considered in an above-guideline-increase application and only permit applications for “extraordinary increases” in utility costs, taxation or capital expenditures. The bill did not pass first reading.

Kinew said some elements of the bill would make into government-sponsored legislation if the NDP is elected. He said rent controls would be given teeth while respecting landlords who maintain properties and invest in them.

“We’d have to look at ensuring there’s real improvements being made, real investments on the capital side that the renter is certainly going to welcome because it makes their place



New Democratic Party Leader Wab Kinew pledged to give renters a \$700 tax credit at a cost of \$26.7 million annually, if his party wins the Oct. 3 election.



Dougald Lamont vowed to streamline assistance for homeless people if his party wins the election.

better to stay, but also strike that balance around affordability,” he said.

Kinew also pledged to create an approval process for non-profit and co-operative entities that want to divest properties built with public funds intended for affordable housing. The process would be aimed at ensuring renters’ rights and affordability measures are maintained, he said.

The Liberals also promised to bring in tough new rules to crack down on “reno-victions” and above-guideline increases, which leader Dougald Lamont described as unacceptable.

He vowed to house homeless people within one day of them applying for assistance, by 2025, and better support tenants with policy changes, if his party wins the election.

“Being homeless, for that individual, is an

emergency. It’s not something that can be put off or handled another day,” Lamont said at a news conference at Coronation Park on Friday. “The act of becoming homeless, for people, is traumatic in itself.”

By 2025, the Liberals said no one would be sleeping in parks or bus shelters under their program.

Lamont tied the commitment to ending homelessness to reconciliation, noting that 68 per cent of the homeless and 89 per cent of those who sleep outdoors in Winnipeg are Indigenous, according to the 2022 Winnipeg Street Census.

Half of those surveyed for the census had been wards of the child welfare system at some point in their lives. To address this, Lamont said the Liberals plan to transform child and family services, noting that some have described it as a “modern residential school.”

“In the last 20 years, the Manitoba government was seizing thousands of Indigenous children from their families. They also seized the federal child allowance for those children when supports ended when they were 18,” Lamont said. “That is why those individuals are immediately being made homeless.”

To further prevent homelessness, the Liberals plan to create dedicated shelters for women and families in Winnipeg, Thompson and Brandon, and will ensure high standards of safety, security and pest control in Manitoba Housing buildings.

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ADESA PUBLIC GOVERNMENT AUCTION

Online only live auction
Tuesday August 29th | 3:00 p.m. CT

Featuring Vehicles & Equipment from Manitoba Hydro, The City of Winnipeg, Interlake School Division & many more

Register to bid & view the auction items at
Adesapublicauctions.ca

Bidder registration ends
Monday, August 28th, noon.

Consignment Welcome – Please call 204-790-3605

Viewing by appointment only
\$1000 Pre Authorized credit card required to register

Please call 204-697-4400
to book your viewing

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