

The Four-Day School Week

The four-day school week is another strategy in the education administrators' toolbox to reduce costs and provide teacher incentives. Additionally, some experts believe that four-day school weeks decrease absenteeism and increase academic scores.

Background

A shorter school week is not a new concept. This idea, considered radical by some, began in the 1970s, and has been employed intermittently in schools across the country. For example, in August, 2008, Caldwell Parish in northeastern Louisiana joined more than 100 school districts in 17 states by switching to a four-day school week, specifically Tuesday through Friday (Kingsbury, 2008). With rising diesel prices at the time (\$4.70 per gallon) and longer distances driven in rural school systems (approximately 1,000 miles daily), saving money on gas was the primary reason for making the change. The effort saved \$135,000 annually, which was 5 percent of the annual operating budget.

Weighing the Options

When a school budget must be cut and options include laying off teachers, cutting extracurricular activities or eliminating field trips, a four-day school week can provide a least painful option when the budget needs to be slashed.

Four-day school weeks do not necessarily alter the number of hours that students spend in school. In Caldwell Parish, the day was lengthened and recesses were shortened. For example, students in junior high went to school from 7:50 a.m. until 4:09 p.m.

Four-Day-Week Schools

Webster County in Kentucky switched to a four-day school week in 2003. The decision was made as a best alternative to closing one of the district's seven schools as a result of reduced revenue from property taxes. From 2003-2008, Webster County saved more than \$300,000 on transportation, utility and insurance costs (Kingsbury, 2008). The school district also reported a decrease in student and teacher absenteeism, thereby reducing the cost of substitute teachers. Webster County administrators also credit the change for the school district's significant academic gains: The 2,000-student district went from being ranked 111th in the state on standardized tests in 2003 to 54rd in 2007 (Kingsbury, 2008). They credit using the budget savings for improving instructional content and hiring one-on-one tutors and extending kindergarten hours.

Copan Public Schools in northeastern Oklahoma switched to a Monday-to-Thursday school schedule to decrease absences from activities (DeNisco, 2014). At this rural district of 220 students, most participated in athletics or agricultural extracurriculars. Many students used up their allotted 10 absences early in the year to attend competitions that occur on Fridays. The new schedule allowed for students to be involved in any activity they wanted without the concern of missing school.

The Peach County, Georgia school district decreased spending on custodial and cafeteria workers, as well as transportation expenditures and utilities, from a shortened week (Herring, 2010).

Copan Public Schools also switched to a shorter week with the hopes of attracting a qualified science teacher. Two months after the position was posted, the school hadn't received

one application. Two nearby districts, Barnsdall Public Schools and Liberty Public Schools, had similar problems with finding qualified candidates and had success with offering a four-day week.

According to a report from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University, as of 2009, approximately 120 districts across 21 states were operating on a four-day schedule (DeNisco, 2014). They further note that this schedule is primarily implemented in rural districts, particularly in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, where transportation costs are higher.

Research: Does It Help or Hurt Students?

Perhaps the biggest concern is whether the shorter week helps or harms students academically. Anecdotal opinions are mixed with some educators complaining that a mere four days can only hurt students (Herring, 2010) and others reporting higher grade-point averages after switching to a shortened week (Toppo 2002; Turner 2010).

A study published in 2015 in the *Association for Education Finance and Policy* and conducted jointly by Montana State University and Georgia State University (Anderson and Walker) examined the question of whether academics are hindered or helped by moving to a four-day schedule.

The researchers looked at reading and math scores from fourth and fifth grade schools in Colorado, specifically because over one third of the school districts in Colorado have adopted the four-day schedule (Anderson and Walker, 2015). The scores used were from the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).

The researchers controlled for bias, and found a generally positive relationship between four-day school week and academic achievement. The exact reason for why students would perform better is left to conjecture. Some experts feel that longer class periods allow teachers more flexibility to organize lessons more effectively and incorporate more varied teaching methods (Rice, Croniger, and Roellke, 2002). The extra day off also gives teachers additional time to plan lessons.

Potential Opposition

One of the concerns of the shorter school week is how financially stretched working families will handle younger children on that fifth day. If a family cannot afford a babysitter, then this will inevitably lead to more children left at home alone, which could have troublesome consequences. (Conversely, high schoolers with an extra weekday off might work more hours at a part-time job, which can also be helpful to struggling families.)

Another drawback is that a longer school day would make it more difficult for students to balance both extracurricular activities and homework with the longer school day. However, for many schools, switching to a shorter school week is a way to preserve athletics and other extracurriculars.

Communities might also be concerned that with an extra day off, high schoolers might engage in more criminal activity.

Like many policy changes, administrators must be prepared for opposition. Addressing key concerns in letters or other means of communication is pivotal. One school district in central Minnesota that switched to a Tuesday-through-Friday schedule assisted with childcare issues by training high school students as babysitters, yet recognized that not all families can

easily afford this option. With some time, many communities are won over by the four-day school week. South Dakota's Custer school district faced initial opposition when they switched to a Monday-through-Thursday school week. Within a few years, 90 percent of parents supported the new schedule (Kingsbury, 2008), which continues as of the writing of this paper. The superintendent at the time of the implementation, Tom Creal, credited the shorter week with higher engagement of students with their studies due to less absenteeism and teachers being able to cover 20 percent more material.

Copan Public Schools expected to face criticism by families, but did not. They held a public forum before seeking board approval for the four-day week, and did not receive opposition from parents (DeNisco, 2014).

Variations of a four-day week

Another variation of the four-day school week is a four-day school week just for teachers; students go to school for five days. Goldie Maple Academy, which is a first through eighth grade public school in New York City, is currently experimenting with this schedule. The days are extended, which some research suggests can boost student achievement (Rebora, 2016). For some teachers, a shorter school week is an added perk; however not all teachers prefer the longer days. Apparently, some teachers have already transferred from Goldie Maple to other schools.

Though cost savings is a motivator for many, one school district in rural Idaho chose to shorten the school week to allow for more enrichment activities (Mader, 2015). Another district in West Texas offers students a four-day-week option, the first in the state. The students attend

class for an extra 25 minutes Monday through Thursday. Attendance is optional on Friday, but mandatory for teachers. Fridays are basically a tutoring day for struggling students; other students are offered activities such as karate, wood shop, and pottery (Hinton, 2016).

Conclusion

The four-day school week has been used to varying degrees since the 1970s. Although originally one of the main motivators to switching to a shorter school week was financial, many schools have used this alternative schedule to help struggling students, attract and retain teachers, and reduce absenteeism. Shorter school weeks are more common in rural districts, particularly Wyoming, Colorado, and Montana. Though research is limited, a recent, statistically significant study, published in 2015, comparing the reading and math scores of Colorado fourth and fifth graders, found a positive relationship between a four-day week and academic scores.

References

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