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## The Four-Day School Week

By Molly Chamberlin and Jonathan Plucker

Moving some Indiana schools to a four-day school week has recently been suggested as a strategy for reducing the state's large budget deficit. Four-day school weeks are primarily used in seven predominantly rural states,<sup>1</sup>

with several larger states considering the change to address budget shortfalls.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2002, 100 – 120 school districts across the nation, most west of the Mississippi, use the four-day school week

(Richard, 2002). All of the school districts currently using the four-day system are located in small, rural communities. The districts serve, on the average, fewer than 1,000 students.

### Reasons for Switching to the Four-Day Week

In most school districts, the four-day school week is used to save money. A few districts also considered the move to a four-day week because of athletic events usually being held on Fridays. School districts generally have not made the decision to

move to a four-day week in order to improve student achievement, although a few districts use the fifth day for academic purposes. For example, in Saratoga, a 250-student school district in Arkansas, schools use Monday as a day for tutoring

students with low test scores or other academic problems, to offer college classes on campus, and for Reading Recovery programs for elementary students.<sup>3</sup>

### Summary of Research on the Four-Day School Week

POTENTIAL BENEFITS	POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS	UNKNOWNNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced transportation, heating &amp; cooling, and food service costs</li> <li>Decreased student and teacher absenteeism</li> <li>Increased time for academic support and extracurricular activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Substantial savings may not result unless teacher pay is reduced</li> <li>Increased demand for child care</li> <li>Longer school day may be difficult for younger students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effects on achievement</li> <li>Effectiveness in non-rural areas or large rural districts</li> </ul>

#### In this issue...

- Reasons for Switching . . . . . 1
- Potential Benefits . . . 2
- Potential Drawbacks . 2
- Potential Financial Impact . . . . . 3
- Conclusions and Recommendations . 3

## Potential Benefits

School districts report a range of benefits after transitioning to a four-day school week:

- School districts in South Dakota, Colorado, and New Mexico, operating under the four-day school week, have reported cuts in transportation costs of 13–20%.<sup>4</sup> However, in order to maximize transportation savings, schools may have to either reduce or eliminate transportation for extra-curricular activities on non-school days.<sup>5</sup>
- The same report stated that food service costs could be reduced by up to 20%, and reduction of fuel costs was possible, although utilities costs may remain unchanged if school facilities are used for extracurricular activities on non-school days. In New Mexico, school districts were able to save 10–15% on fuel and 10–20% in transportation costs. In looking at Cimarron, N.M., schools, perhaps the first district to implement a four-day week in the 1970's, overall cost efficiency appears to have risen.<sup>6</sup>
- Many of the school districts have reported a reduction in student and faculty absenteeism. Having a free weekday may allow parents to schedule medical appointments for children without their having to miss school. Many of the school districts have reported drops in student absences. Faculty in-service is usually held on the days off, so that school districts do not need to schedule half-days or extra days off. Less faculty absenteeism reduces the need for substitute

teachers, reducing personnel costs and preventing instruction interruptions caused by teacher absences.

- Generally, public reaction to four-day school weeks is favorable.
- Little is known about the impact of four-day weeks on student achievement, although anecdotal evidence suggests that the longer class periods of the four-day week lead to achievement gains:
  - The superintendent of one school district in Beauregard Parish, Louisiana, reports that the highest achievement in the district on standardized test scores has come from four-day schools. He also reported that last year's ACT scores at the first school in the district to implement the four-day week were the highest ever.<sup>7</sup>
  - Cimarron, NM, schools have shown more academic gains on the four-day schedule than on the previous schedule.
  - Interestingly, a 1993 study done in a suburban Idaho school district found positive results in student achievement on standardized tests after one year of a four-day school week, and the study also found a decrease in student and faculty absenteeism and a reduction in costs; however, the program was discontinued after only one year, primarily due to a lack of public support.<sup>8</sup>

## Potential Drawbacks

Critics note several potential problems with four-day school weeks:

- Longer hours may be very difficult for younger students.
- Professional development is required to help teachers transition to the use of innovative techniques to adapt methods and curriculum for the longer school day.
- Some political leaders and education reformers believe that shortening the school week sends a mixed message. These reformers generally recommend lengthening instructional time not shortening it. Technically, the four-day week can be comparable in contact hours to the five-day week.
- Many advocates for the four-day week are not convinced that the advantages would be realized in larger, less rural districts, with potential problems related to increased demand for child care, working with special needs students, and delinquency (Fager, 1997). For example, child care may not be a problem in small, rural communities, because families often know one another, and older children can care for younger ones. Yet caring for children who are not in school on a weekday may be difficult in larger, more urban communities.
- Substantial savings may not materialize if personnel pay isn't reduced. Reducing teacher pay would run counter to the goal of attracting high quality teachers to Indiana classrooms.

## Potential Financial Impact

Policy Center staff conducted a preliminary analysis of financial savings that could result from a shortened school week. The full text of the analysis is available at <http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc/inpolicy>. In brief, substantial savings are unlikely to be realized without reducing personnel costs. Reducing teacher, administrator, and support staff compensation would be very difficult, and unwise, if the total contact hours remain constant when moving from the five- to four-day week. In addition, increased child care costs are likely to offset any substantial savings from the four-day school week. These assumptions lead us to believe that the savings associated with a four-day school week will be substantially less than 20% of non-personnel costs, with the potential for very low savings in suburban and urban districts where child care programs would have to be created or significantly expanded.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The four-day school week is intuitively appealing at a time when Indiana faces major budget shortfalls. Although the four-day week has been used with limited success in small, rural districts in the western United States, the shortened instructional week has not been implemented in larger rural, suburban, or urban districts. Given the lack of research on the impact on student achievement and questions about the amount of money that would be saved, large scale implementation in Indiana does not appear to be warranted at this time. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that small, rural districts may benefit from shortened school weeks.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Colorado (47 of 178 school districts), New Mexico (18 of 89), and Wyoming (20 of 48) have the most widespread usage. Kansas and Utah also employ the four-day school week in a few of their smaller school districts. From Richard, A. (2002, September). Rural schools see dividend in four-day week. *Education Week*, [www.edweek.org/ew/wstory.cfm?slug=04week.h22&keywords=dividends](http://www.edweek.org/ew/wstory.cfm?slug=04week.h22&keywords=dividends).
- <sup>2</sup> Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Virginia (also from Richard, 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> Fager, J. (1997). Scheduling alternatives: Options for student success. Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, [www.nwrel.org/request/feb97/article4.html](http://www.nwrel.org/request/feb97/article4.html).
- <sup>4</sup> Hot Springs School District (South Dakota) Homepage, [www.hssd.k12.sd.us/4day.htm](http://www.hssd.k12.sd.us/4day.htm).
- <sup>5</sup> Colorado State Dept. of Education. (1999). The four-day school week, revised Feb. 1999, from EDRS.
- <sup>6</sup> Koki, S. (1992). Modified school schedules: A look at the research and the Pacific. EDRS no. ED354630.
- <sup>7</sup> School District of Greenville County. (2003, February 5). Shortened work week for school districts. News Release, [www.greenville.k12.sc.us/district/news/release/shortwk.htm](http://www.greenville.k12.sc.us/district/news/release/shortwk.htm).
- <sup>8</sup> Sagness, R., & Salzman, S. (1993). Evaluation of the four-day school week in Idaho Suburban Schools. October 1993, from EDRS.

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Smith Center for Research in  
Education, Suite 100  
Indiana University  
2805 East Tenth Street  
Bloomington, IN 47408-2698  
(812) 855-1240



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