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4 Better or Worse? 4-day school week motivations, benefits, risks

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Sources for this Analysis

Journal articles and think tank reports

Dissertations and case studies

Policy reviews by the Education Commission of the States and the National Conference of State Legislatures



Districts Adopting 4-Day Week

14 Idaho districts have adopted a 4-day week

- 40 more are considering a transition
- Fewer than 150 districts nationwide have 4-day week

Most are rural and small with:

- Declining budgets
- High transportation costs

Some only go to a 4-day week in winter months



How the 4-Day Week Works

Students have 1 day per week off

- Monday, Wednesday, or Friday
- Teachers and administrators work the 5th day without students
- Students do special assignments on 5th day
- Custody burden shifts to families on 5th day

Other school days are 90 minutes longer

- Volunteers may run study halls during this time



Districts Want to Save Money

- Cut days for substitutes as well as custodial, food service, and clerical staff
- Reduce heating, cooling, and transportation costs
- Others do it to appease local “cut spending” groups or to help hunters and farmers



Financial Benefits are Elusive

Estimates for savings range between <1% and 9%

- ECS: 2.5% average

Fixed costs limit the share of the budget that can be cut to an average of 20% in most districts

- Professional salaries, benefits, capital costs, leases – no reduction
- Utility savings are small

If buildings stay open past the normal closing time

- Overtime pay and food service costs can increase
- Savings can disappear if school buildings stay open to provide programs

Some fear state will reduce funding to capture any savings



Positive Consequences for Students

- Total minutes spent in class increase
- Lower student absenteeism
- Additional time for enrichment and individualization
- Students can participate in internships or on-line learning programs on the 5th day
- Test scores may go up (or go down or not change at all)



Consequences for Teachers Can Be Positive

- More opportunities to try new teaching methods and creative uses of time
- Teachers are out of class less often
- The district may become more attractive to teachers



But Student Consequences Can Be Negative

Younger kids can become too tired on long days

Kids can waste the 5th day

- Less likely if Wednesday is the day off

Disadvantaged kids can fall back on long weekends

Days lost to weather, illness count for more

A higher proportion of school time can go for assemblies, trips, games

Teacher absences are even more harmful

Early gains can be short lived as bad habits emerge



Parent Reactions Vary

- Some value longer student days, new opportunities for learning
- Others treat the 5th day as a time for hunting and fishing
- Some struggle to find child care for the 5th day
- Others fear that kids will get into trouble



Good and Bad Examples Abound

- Oregon district: Students off on Wednesday, must demonstrate work
- Idaho district: Focused on professional development
- Colorado district: Community activities make 5th day productive

But

- Other Colorado districts: Savings never materialized, test score gains transitory, and 5th day wasted



The Stakes are High on Getting It Right

Districts need to:

- Plan on how to use every minute
- Make sure teachers are on board for long, hard days
- Move professional development & meetings to the 5th day
- Keep games, assemblies & field trips to the 5th day
- Work with state to limit demands on superintendent to the 5th day
- Do a hard-nosed assessment of how potential savings may offset new costs
- Look out for kids who aren't thriving
- Create strong incentives to minimize teacher absences
- Cut leave days allowed



Big Questions About the 4-Day Week

- Is there a best day to take off (e.g. Wednesday)?
- Should the state set planning and time use criteria?
- Who will judge benefits, losses?
- Are there alternative ways to make comparable savings?
- Can the state give districts greater flexibility to cut professional positions, hours?
- How can district leaders learn from good and bad examples?



ROCI Will Look Further

- Case studies of Idaho districts' experience
- Best ideas from other states
- Alternative ways to save the same money