



NEW YORK STATE  
SCHOOL BOARDS  
ASSOCIATION

24 Century Hill Drive  
Suite 200  
Latham, NY 12110-2125  
518.783.0200  
www.nyssba.org

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WAYNE E. SCHLIFKE  
*President*

TIMOTHY G. KREMER  
*Executive Director*

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# Forecast

*Emerging issues in public education*

## The four-day school week: A fuel's paradise?

By Edwin C. Darden

With fuel and energy costs again devastating school budgets, districts around the nation are resurrecting the four-day school week, or considering that option for the first time.

Districts in New York State might be tempted by the idea. The 62 city school districts endure a constant cash crunch; suburban school districts strain with depleted dollars to save prized programs; and rural school systems incur higher fuel costs from long bus routes.

But there are risks. Will a shift to a non-traditional format negatively affect student learning? And will it result in real budget savings? Also, is it worth the headaches that will come with switching students, administration and operations to a new schedule?

Only about 100 school districts in 16 states operate on a four-day school week schedule, according to Marc Egan, director of federal affairs for the National School Boards Association (NSBA). Colorado has the highest number, with roughly 60 districts out of 180 statewide.

But the idea is gaining serious steam. The American Association of School Administrators in July 2008 released its Fuel and Energy Snapshot Survey. The survey found that 14 of the responding superintendents are moving their districts to a four-day school week. Another 82 superintendents are considering it.

The four-day approach inspires both fans and skeptics. Supporters applaud it as an efficient way to maintain a high-quality, free public education without breaking the bank. Disbelievers say the lost instructional time and pretzel-style logistics make it a dubious proposition.

Debates about a four-day school week

are the newest incarnation of a perennial debate on the fact that schools follow an antiquated agrarian (farm-related) calendar. Pundits, politicians and educators have long questioned the wisdom of a 10-month school year since youth's hands are no longer needed at harvest time. And why are schools active for just six hours a day?

Small, rural school districts have been the primary innovators in experiments with the four-day school week. Indeed, most of the states with four-day schools are west of the Mississippi River (see Fig. 1). Suburban and city school districts have thus far shunned the idea, prompting questions about its universal applicability.

This is not the first time that budget concerns have prompted talk of a truncated schedule. Some districts made the change in the early 1970s during the height of the energy crisis. When costs spiked again in the 1980s, another cohort of states and school districts followed.

Referring to a 2001 study by the Northwest Educational Laboratory in Portland, Ore., then-director Joyce Ley said, "The four-day school week was probably one of those few decisions made in education in the name of money that actually ended up having educational benefits in terms of the academic performance of kids. Schools end up operating more efficiently, and they can maintain their programs even when their resources have been reduced."

But there are more questions than answers about the four-day week. Even though the four-day school week has existed for more than three decades, reliable research on the academic and financial benefits is severely limited.



### Will it play in New York?

The major problem for New York State school board members is that state law does not authorize a four-day school week. The law demands a minimum of 180 days of instruction. Anything less would violate the law and harm a district's daily allotment of state aid (the biggest source of revenue).

Overcoming that hurdle may require a new law, and there is interest in the four-day week among legislators. State Assemblyman Peter Rivera (D-Bronx) has targeted the 2009 legislative session for a bill that would require all school districts to file a four-day school week plan with the State Education Department. Under that proposal, implementation would be voluntary, but every district would have to submit a plan. It is also possible that State Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills could issue an exemption that permits districts to measure instruction by hours rather than days. It is not clear, however, whether Mills holds that power.

For school board members, a practical concern is that school districts might need to re-open contracts with employees or otherwise accommodate workers because of the unusual expectations.

Susan Gendron, Maine's education commissioner, has refused waiver requests from school districts in her state. Gendron said she cannot unilaterally override Maine's 175-day law to permit school districts to count hours. She hinted that she is likely to submit a bill in the 2009 legislative session that would authorize four-day weeks.

The Tennessee School Boards Association polled its member districts in September 2008 on the four-day school week, asking whether board members support a change in Tennessee law to allow it by lengthening the school day. Of 502 respondents, 49 percent or 247 board members were in favor, while 41 percent or 207 members were opposed.

New York school districts have been cautious in exploring the possibili-

ty. Five years ago, Rochester and Buffalo both considered a four-day schedule, but ultimately declined.

Thomas Rogers, executive director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, is among the doubters about the four-day school week. "The most promising academic

four-day week is what research says about its effect on academic results. Unfortunately, there is no definitive research on the subject. Anecdotally, districts report some slight gains or say the move has had no effect.

Several districts have documented improved attendance among students and teachers, more planning time for teachers, and reduced disciplinary problems as collateral benefits. In some cases students who need extra academic help use that fifth day to work with teachers.

As well, it is important to note that a four-day week does not necessarily result in less instructional time. Several districts simply divide the extra day into fourths and add the time equally among the remaining days. Time-saving techniques include shaving minutes from lunch, reducing the time between classes and shortening recess.

That was not done in the MacCray School District in western Minnesota. The high school class period increased from 47 to 55 minutes daily, but cumulatively each week 101 fewer minutes of instruction are given. Most education experts, including charter school proponents, clamor for more classroom time for students, not less.

The same caution was sounded by NSBA's Egan, who told *Education Daily* that instructional time is "...one thing we think school boards have to be very aware of when considering four-day weeks, especially with the talks about globalization and how the U.S. can be competitive with other countries that have longer school days."

Some districts using four-day weeks use savings on fuel and overhead to fund academic programs such as tutoring, a full-day kindergarten or enrichment activities. Superintendent James Kemp of the Webster County (Ky.) School District said his district's academic reinvestment plan paid dividends. The district's ranking on statewide tests rose, he said in an interview, from 115th in 2003 to 61st in 2008.

Fig. 1

### States with school districts on a four-day school week

Arizona	Montana
California	New Mexico
Colorado	Oregon
Idaho	South Dakota
Kansas	Texas
Kentucky	Utah
Louisiana	Wisconsin
Michigan	Wyoming
Minnesota	

**Note:** Arkansas, Delaware and Virginia all authorize four-day school weeks by law, but no districts currently take advantage.

results that we are seeing come because of more time on task, extended day and extended school year," he said. "The move toward a four-day week flies in the face of that research, while saving a dubious amount of dollars."

But others are intrigued. In New York's Hadley-Luzerne Central School District, a rural system in the southern Adirondacks, Superintendent Irwin Sussman is enthusiastic about a variation of the four-day week. He proposes conducting classes nine out of every 10 weekdays. The move would lengthen the school day by 40 minutes and eliminate a bus run. Sussman estimates a cost savings of up to 45 percent on transportation alone.

### Academic impact uncertain

One obvious question regarding the

Fig. 2

### Pros and cons of the four-day week

**Advantages**

- Reduces transportation, heating and other overhead costs
- Improves morale and inspires increased attendance (by students and teachers)
- Allows time for sporting events, doctor appointments and personal business
- Permits students to spend more quality time with their families
- Creates a good recruiting tool (an extra day off) for small districts that can't compete on salaries
- Allows over-involved students a day to "de-stress"
- Results in fewer discipline problems and lower drop-out rates

**Disadvantages**

- Creates long, exhausting class days for students (especially in younger grades)
- Imposes difficulty finding day care for children whose parents work outside the home
- Leads to additional time away from the classroom, which could prompt students to forget what they learned
- Causes officials to address collective bargaining issues that arise because of the change

But no academic gains were found by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in a study released in August 2008 called, *Focus on the School Calendar: The Four-Day School Week*. According to the report, "There is a decided lack of evidence that the four-day week helps or hurts student achievement – anecdotal information seems to point merely to a lack of harm."

Yet, some of those living the four-day week are disgruntled. "This is a great system for the adults but is not at

all good for the kids," declared Superintendent Sheila Breen of the Grand Canyon Unified School District #4 in Arizona, about 75 miles north of Flagstaff. "Our students are achieving. I think it is just slower than it would be otherwise," Breen said bluntly.

Breen noted that the community's devotion to the current set-up is the only reason school officials will not reverse course.

### Financial benefits

Savings in schools using a four-day week are greatest in the areas of transportation, food, and energy. (see Fig. 2) Also, fewer substitute teachers are needed.

But even proponents warn not to get too enthusiastic. Static expenses, such as building maintenance and maintaining a certain classroom temperature for animals or science chemicals, can eat away at the improved bottom line.

The larger the district, the more complicated the finance puzzle can get.

But Superintendent Kemp of Webster County, Ky., is a true believer. He said his district has saved more than \$220,000 annually and gathers another \$50,000 in state aid because daily attendance has increased (see Fig. 3).

Likewise, in Caldwell Parish, La., school officials say the amount saved is more than \$135,000 or 5 percent of the total district operating costs. The bulk of the savings (\$92,000) is attributed to fewer bus trips; parish school buses travel more than 1,000 miles a day.

A study of four-day weeks in Idaho found the overall savings was a modest 1.6 percent of the total fiscal budget. Even so, it noted that a small percentage could mean thousands of new dollars for academic endeavors.

The 2008 SREB study concluded that potential savings "appear to be a small percentage (2 percent) of the overall budget. Actual savings may be even lower because districts may use the unscheduled day for additional assistance (particularly to at-risk students),

enrichment activities, professional development or extracurricular activities."

### Operational issues

From an operational standpoint, implementation of the four-day-school week varies. Some schools use Friday as the day off, while others choose Monday. Districts on the adapted schedule commonly conduct extracurricular activities and staff development days when school is not in session.

For parents, the big issue is child care. School officials in MacCray, Min. helped to alleviate some concerns with community education courses that trained older students to be babysitters.

Another factor is that students on free- and reduced-price meals may miss nutritious opportunities when school is closed on the fifth day.

Fig. 3

### Saving money

#### Savings realized by the 2,000-student Webster County (Ky.) school district after implementing a four-day school week

- Certified substitute teachers: \$26,711
- Classified substitute teachers: \$14,749
- Overtime (certified & classified staff): \$ 7,891
- Extra bus trips (salary & fuel): \$7,500
- 14 no-transportation days: \$52,020
- Workman's comp: \$75,059
- Liability and transportation insurance: \$25,000
- Utilities: \$12,837

**Total general fund savings: \$221,797**

**Note:** An improved attendance rate resulted in \$53,480 in additional state aid

Source: Superintendent James Kemp

### Conclusion

Much of the information about a four-day school week is conflicting and hard to verify. The impact on achievement seems negligible, the savings are immediate but small, and the administrative changes and selling it to the community can be difficult. Most importantly, however, the four-day week is unproven in all but the tiniest and most remote districts. While a handful of school districts in New York State (and many around the nation) match that description, that demographic omits some of the largest systems with the greatest academic challenges and greatest financial need.

There are no easy answers for board members and superintendents seeking to cut costs. At bottom, the math behind a four-day week remains fuzzy. Therefore, the leadership team must investigate carefully and make clear-eyed calculations – and still, it is uncertain whether the change really adds up for a majority of districts in the Empire State.

*Edwin C. Darden is an attorney and expert on legal and policy issues that influence K-12 public education. He is the principal of EdAdvocacy, a consulting firm near Washington, D.C. Contact him at [Edwin@edadvocacy.com](mailto:Edwin@edadvocacy.com).*

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Latham, NY 12110-2125

