

From Five Days to Four

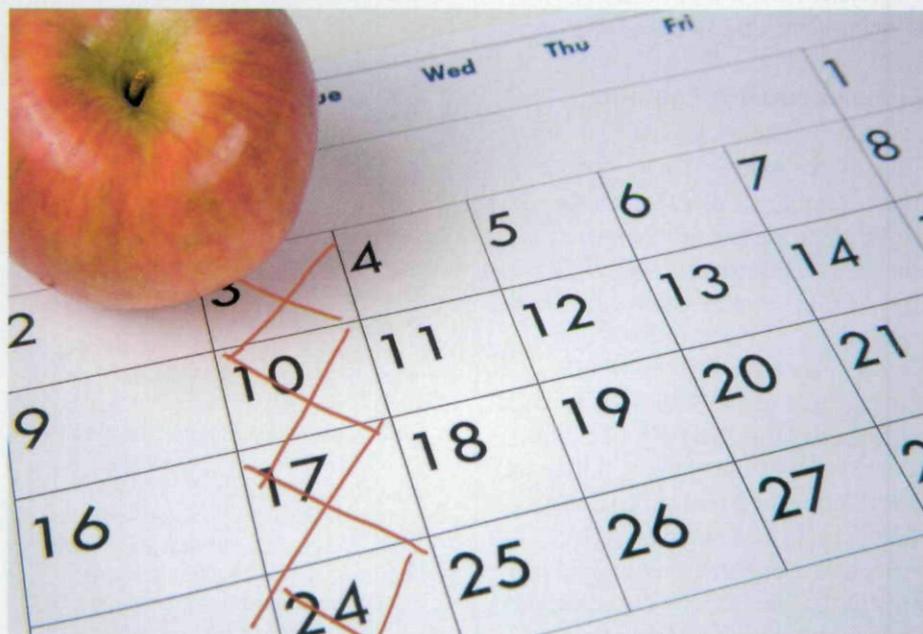
A rural school district finds that a four-day school week can make good schools even better.

**Rachel Yarbrough
and David Alan Gilman**

When school districts face financial difficulties, they often seek to reduce costs by cutting staff, closing schools, or paring down programs. But instead of having to choose among these unwelcome options, imagine that a school district could reduce costs and at the same time provide more time for planning and professional development, make more effective use of instructional time, and improve statewide test scores. Would the school community go for it? It depends. Our school district's strategy for accomplishing all these worthwhile goals required a major change in the status quo: changing from the traditional five-day school week to a four-day school week.

Responding to a Financial Crisis

The Webster County Public School System in rural western Kentucky comprises four K-8 schools and one high school, with a total enrollment of



1,800 students. The district's student population is predominantly low-income. In recent years, local tax revenue has deteriorated because of a declining county population and the closing of several local coal mines and small businesses. Combined with a reduction in state funding, these conditions created a financial crisis for the school district. To avoid being identified as a deficit district, Webster County had to cut approximately 20 percent from its budget. After reviewing many options, the board of education decided in 2003 that implementing a four-day school week would be the most effective response to the financial crisis.

Because most state holidays are observed on Monday, we established a Tuesday-through-Friday school week. The new calendar consists of 163 instructional days (with 6 1/2 instructional hours each day), 12 mandatory teacher planning days, and 4 professional development days. This conforms to Kentucky's requirement that students attend school for 1,050 instructional hours each year and for a minimum of six instructional hours each day.

What Experience and Research Show

Before making the decision to implement a four-day school week, we

compiled data from other rural school districts that had made such a move. Results from these other districts showed that despite some concerns, the four-day week can work.

More than 100 school districts in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Louisiana, Wyoming, Michigan, Kansas, Kentucky, and Wisconsin have switched to a four-day calendar—most of them small, rural districts (Chmelynski, 2003; Durr, 2003). The trend toward the four-day week is most popular in Colorado, where 52 of the state's 178 districts had adopted this model by 2004 (Chmelynski, 2003; Colorado State Department of Education, 2004; Rankin, 2003).

A research review by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Fager, 1997) noted both benefits and concerns. Some districts had experienced a decline in dropout rates, decreased disciplinary referrals, improved attendance, fewer class interruptions, more positive attitudes about school, better staff development, and greater participation in extracurricular activities—as well as financial savings on utility bills, substitute teacher pay, school bus transportation, and building use. But districts had also encountered problems in helping families deal with child care, keeping primary students engaged during the longer school day, accommodating the needs of at-risk students, meeting national and state school reform mandates, and gaining the commitment of the local community.

Joyce Ley, director of the Rural Education Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, commented,

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

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operating more efficiently, and they can maintain their programs, even when their resources have been reduced. (Reeves, 1999, p. 31)

A study on school schedules in New Mexico, Colorado, Oregon, and the Pacific Island region concluded that “in general, modified school innovations seem to be working” (Koki, 1992, p. 5), but that the four-day school week seemed to work better in rural areas than in urban areas. The study concluded that “teaching smart” or making more efficient use of available learning time could be the best way to promote effective learning (p. 6).

A 1990 study conducted in New Mexico (Reeves, 1999) examined testing data from the first 10 districts in the state to adopt the four-day week. This study compared eight years of test scores from these 10 districts and from districts with five-day schedules and found that the mean scores in four-day schools were higher, although the difference was not statistically significant. In addition, the New Mexico Department of Education reported that attendance for teachers and students improved, staff recruitment was more effective, and scores from achievement tests generally remained stable (Chaika, 2004; Reeves, 1999).

In the Beauregard Parish Schools in DeRidder, Louisiana, the superintendent saw improvement in student achievement at schools on a four-day calendar. He stated,

We gathered statistical information from the state departments of education, and we found the highest achievement scores for 3rd grade students came out of four-day schools. We've seen some phenomenal gains in our own schools. (Reeves, 1999, p. 33)

The Hot Springs School District in South Dakota operates under a four-

FIGURE 1. Comparison of Student CTBS Scores Under Five-Day and Four-Day School Week

Grade	Five-Day				Four-Day			
	Reading	Math	Language	Battery	Reading	Math	Language	Battery
3	55.65	56.72	55.03	56.64	57.92	60.93	56.93	59.62
9	49.68	51.32	48.59	50.32	55.38	53.85	54.04	55.01

Note: Five-day scores reflect the average scores for spring 2002 and spring 2003, before the school district adopted the new calendar. The four-day scores reflect the averages for spring 2004 and spring 2005, after the district had implemented the four-day week.

Teachers now realize that there was a lot of wasted time in the five-day calendar.

day school week that it implemented in September 2002 for its elementary, middle, and high schools. In a survey of parents and students in January 2003, 67 percent of parents stated that their child liked the new schedule, 60 percent of parents thought their child was doing well, and 82 percent of students stated that they liked the calendar (Hot Springs School District, 2005).

British Columbia School District #51 adopted its four-day school week in 2002 to reduce operating costs (Langley School District, 2003). The superintendent reported that students' behavior, attendance, and focus on learning improved. A secondary school principal reported that students were spending less time riding on buses and

had more opportunities for part-time employment.

Results in Webster County

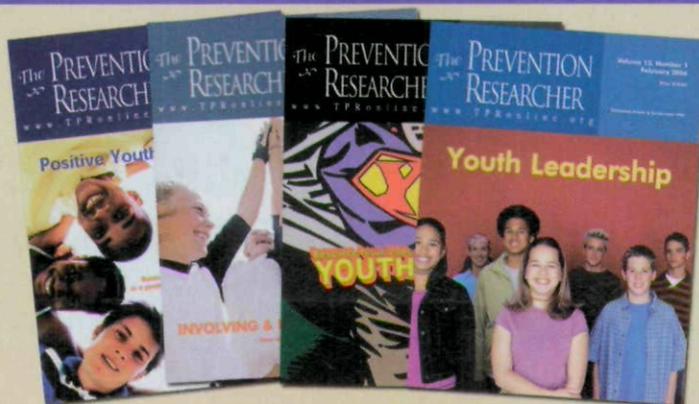
Since the Webster County Public Schools moved to the four-day school week three years ago, we have indeed reaped the expected financial benefits. We have achieved financial savings amounting to two percent of the school system's budget (or \$200,000 a year) from reduced transportation costs, reduced overtime hours for support staff, reduced workers' compensation costs, and less need for substitute teachers. In addition, we have found that this schedule offers some unexpected benefits and creates few problems.

More Efficient Planning Time

Mondays, when school is not in session, provide a unique opportunity to build a professional community. Twelve Mondays each year are devoted to teacher planning. The day is structured to include faculty meetings, collaborative team meetings, individual planning time, and lesson preparation sessions. Teachers are required to show

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that they use this time well. Principals provide teachers with sample schedules and are responsible for keeping all teachers on task.

Teachers now rarely need to meet after school. Planning Mondays provide time for grade-level meetings, research teams, committees, and groups planning multidisciplinary instruction.

An additional four Mondays are embedded throughout the school year for professional development. Kentucky mandates that all teachers participate in 24 hours of professional development each year. Webster County's professional days are strategically placed in the school calendar: in July, before school starts; in October, following the receipt of state assessment results; in February, to complete school plans mandated by the state; and in May, to prepare for implementation of a revised curriculum in the fall.

More Focused Instruction

Perhaps as a result of the schools' more efficient use of planning and professional development time, teachers say that instruction is now more focused than it was under the five-day week. In formal interviews and in comments during inservice training sessions, they report that "we have connected instruction and planning." Teachers have used the additional planning time to design a more efficient assessment system in reading, language, math, and science for grades 2–10 and to use the accumulated data to inform instruction.

Adopting a four-day school week, in combination with a state requirement that schools provide all students with access to the state's core curriculum every day of the school year, meant that the high school had to abandon its block schedule and return to a traditional seven-period day. During the initial weeks, it was hard for some

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teachers to get five days of instruction into four days. Returning to the seven-period schedule increased class size and paperwork. On the plus side, however, teachers learned to assign homework with a more precise goal in mind. Teachers now realize that there was a lot of wasted time in the five-day calendar.

In addition, the money saved by going to a four-day week has permitted us to hire retired teachers to provide students with instruction and remediation in targeted areas.

Improved Achievement

To assess the four-day school week's impact on student achievement, the district compared our scores on the

“Teaching smart” or making more efficient use of available learning time could be the best way to promote effective learning.

Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in spring 2002 and 2003, under the five-day school week, and in spring 2004 and 2005, after we had implemented the four-day week. Figure 1 shows scores for students in grades 3 and 9 on the total battery and on the reading, math, and language subtests. Scores improved significantly in all subject areas. Although scores had already been improving in recent years, this continu-

ation of the trend suggests that the four-day school week did not negatively affect student achievement and probably contributed to higher assessment scores.

Problems and Concerns

Our transition to the four-day school week was smooth. The only major concern was that some teachers believed that the longer day would be tiring for younger children. However, this did not prove to be a problem, and we now even have full-day kindergarten.

Originally, we feared that child care would be a problem. We found, however, that students often arrived home on school days just a little earlier than their parents did, which reduced or eliminated latchkey issues for many families. On Mondays, when school was not in session, more babysitters were available among high school students. In general, families found it just as easy arranging a single day of babysitting as arranging a couple of hours five days a week.

To assist the community with child care issues, we initiated a Child Watch Program. This program provided training in babysitting and CPR/First Aid for recommended high school students who were potential babysitters for families in the community. The Child Watch Program was a collaborative effort among the school district, family resource service center staff, the 4-H extension staff, and local community emergency responders.

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Although the majority of teachers have embraced the change to the four-day week, a small minority of high school teachers claim that the longer days require them to do more work than they are being paid for. However, this minority has not been vocal.

A Viable Option

In the Webster County Public Schools, our experience with the four-day school week has confirmed positive research findings in other school districts. The four-day calendar has not only saved money, but also, we believe, contributed to the continued improvement of student achievement in Webster County. The four-day school week model is a viable option for rural school districts struggling with limited funding and increasing performance demands. **EL**

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