

# FOCUS *on the School Calendar:*

## *The Four-Day School Week*

# SREB

Gale F. Gaines

When the economy weakens, heightened consideration is given to ways in which schools and districts can more efficiently use financial resources or make up for lost funding. Discussions about implementing four-day school weeks — with students attending school more hours each day — are surfacing again because of general economic pressures in the states and the increased cost of diesel fuel for school buses. While the need to balance the budget is real — and many districts across the region are facing static or even reduced funding in the coming year — the current focus on improving student achievement should continue to be central to state-level decisions impacting schools.

SREB's *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education call for the achievement of all groups of students to exceed national averages and for performance gaps to close. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* also requires improvements in student performance. SREB states have made tremendous progress in many areas in recent years; despite the softening of the economy, policy-makers should be vigilant so that educational progress does not stagnate.



The four-day school week is not a new issue. However, the vast majority of the nation's schools and districts remain on the traditional school calendar. The first schools to implement a four-day week were in New Mexico in the early 1970s, primarily as a response to an energy crisis that sharply increased the cost of transportation and utilities. A 2003 survey by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) indicated that districts in nine states (Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Michigan, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Wisconsin and Wyoming) were using a four-day per week schedule. It also showed that in Louisiana, some schools within one district used the alternative schedule, but not the entire district. Arkansas, too, had at least one small district using a four-day schedule for a few years.

NSBA currently estimates that about 100 districts in as many as 17 states — those mentioned above, plus California, Kentucky, Idaho, Minnesota, Nebraska and Utah — may be using the alternative schedule. Colorado's 67 districts and New Mexico's 17 account for most of the districts using a four-day week. Most participating districts are small and rural. Because these districts tend to be sparsely populated, students face long commutes to and from school.

The decision to implement a four-day school week has been based primarily on efforts to save or more efficiently use available funds. Presumably, if a school were to operate for four days each week and close on the fifth (shutting down utilities as though for a holiday weekend), reductions

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592 10th St. N.W.  
Atlanta, GA 30318  
(404) 875-9211  
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of up to 20 percent would be gained in some non-fixed expenditures such as motor fuel, cafeteria food, utilities and, perhaps, hourly workers. In reality, however, many schools reportedly don't close on the fifth day; they use that day instead for extracurricular activities, tutoring, special programs and professional development, resulting in reduced savings. In addition, these non-fixed expenditures are only a small part of overall budgets. The salaries and benefits of teachers, school leaders and administrators make up the largest part of school operating funds.

The actual magnitude of the potential savings of the four-day week is unclear. However, data in the 2007 *Digest of Education Statistics* suggest that student transportation — which includes more than just fuel costs — and food service each accounted for about 4 percent of operating expenditures nationally for elementary and secondary schools in 2004-2005. (Utilities are more difficult to estimate because they are combined with other operations and maintenance items.) A full 20 percent reduction in transportation and food service spending, which is not possible due to bus maintenance and other fixed costs within those expenditures, would result in savings of roughly 2 percent of the overall budget, based on national spending patterns. Diesel fuel prices, however, have nearly doubled since January 2006. Even with this rise in costs, the proportion of the budget affected by a four-day week would remain small. The savings would vary by district. Webster County School District in Kentucky estimated its savings in the first year of using a four-day week (2003-2004) to be about 3 percent of its operating budget.



## State laws and the school calendar

Generally, laws in most SREB states prohibit schools or districts from implementing a four-day school week because of language that requires a minimum number of instructional days per year — most commonly, 180 days. Variations do exist, as states may permit districts to petition for exceptions such as a national or civic disaster, severe weather or contagious disease outbreaks that prevent them from following the law.

Statutes in five SREB states (Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Louisiana and Virginia) permit schools or districts to implement a four-day school week. Currently, however, only Kentucky and Louisiana have some children attending school on this type of alternative schedule.

Delaware requires districts to provide most students with 1,060 hours of instruction during the school year instead of specifying a certain number of instructional days. In addition, districts must provide kindergartners with at least 440 hours and high school seniors with at least 1,032 hours.

Kentucky also specifies the minimum instructional time required, but in a slightly different way. The statute requires “no less than the equivalent of 175 six-hour days.” Teacher contracts, however, are specified in days per year (185). In addition, the Legislature has funded two additional days of instruction in the budget without changing the statute, so that districts have had to add two days (not the equivalent number of hours) to whatever type of calendar they were following. In the past, only two or three districts had implemented four-day per week calendars. Currently, two of the state’s 174 districts are using the alter-

native calendar. Nine schools (0.5 percent of the state's 1,900 public schools), serving about 2,700 students (0.4 percent of Kentucky students), participate.

Statutes in Arkansas, Louisiana and Virginia specifically permit districts to use a calendar with a reduced number of days each week. In Arkansas, legislation passed in 1997 that authorizes districts to “initiate and maintain public school educational programs on a four-day school week basis, so long as planned instructional time is in accord with requirements established by the State Board of Education.” At least one small district did implement the adjusted calendar following authorization. This district later merged with another district after 2003 legislation passed that required the consolidation of districts with fewer than 350 students. As of the 2007-2008 school year, no districts were using the alternative calendar, but currently several are discussing the possibility for the future.

Louisiana passed legislation in 1982 that allows local school boards to implement the four-day schedule with approval of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, as long as the required yearly instructional hours are not reduced (equal to 177 days of 360 minutes of instruction). The law requires guidelines set by the state Department of Education to ensure that local boards consider the health, safety and attention span of the schoolchildren; provide for the maximum use of time for academic work; minimize disruptions of the educational process; and monitor the progress of children. The law also prohibits a reduction in the salary or benefits for any school employee. During the 2007-2008 school year, almost 13,600 students (2 percent of public school students) in 43 schools (3 percent of the schools statewide) in seven districts (10 percent of the state's districts) attended school four days per week.



Virginia's general statute requires at least 180 teaching days or 990 hours in the school year. Legislation passed in 2003 allows individual schools to petition the local school board to approve a four-day weekly calendar, pursuant to state Board of Education guidelines, as long as the minimum required instructional time is provided (the 990 hours, or 540 hours for kindergarten).

## Potential benefits and disadvantages for schools and students

There have been a number of articles published about the pros and cons of the four-day school week, but there is little research available on the practice. Much of the information available is based on surveys of stakeholders, such as teachers, students and parents, or on newspaper interviews with district superintendents. 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” where student achievement is concerned.

The list of pros and cons is long. The most common benefit listed is financial savings, although the reductions vary depending upon how the unscheduled day is used. Some districts reportedly found that as savings were realized, they were able to redirect the money to support efforts such as tutoring, reading programs, preschool programs, and summer programs for students needing additional help. Other common benefits include increases in the attendance rates of students and teachers, which in turn, reduce the need

for substitute teachers; declines in discipline problems; fewer hours per week spent commuting; and longer blocks of instructional time to complete lessons such as science labs.

Though surveys seem to indicate that schools and families participating in a four-day week have overcome the commonly expressed challenges, they do remain a consideration when schools adopt the alternative schedule. Common challenges include the length of the day for young students, particularly when long commutes are involved; maintaining the focus of students during the extended day; the impact on extracurricular activities; and the perception of “giving a day off” (even though instructional time is the same or greater) when national and state goals call for raising student achievement.

## Colorado’s experience

In Colorado, districts were authorized to pilot alternative calendars in 1980. In 1985, the Legislature amended statutes to require 1,080 hours of instruction per year. (Previously, it was 180 days.) In 2007-2008, 34 percent of school districts, serving less than 3 percent of the state’s students, used the four-day school week. The largest district using the schedule had 1,265 students; the smallest had eight students.

According to a 2006 state Department of Education report, characteristics of the schedules varied. For example, some schools scheduled 7.5-hour days for 144 days per year, compared with the regular school schedule of six hours per day for 180 days. Not all districts chose to utilize the four-day week for the full school year — some used it only during the winter months. Most often, the Colorado districts on the four-day week were rural, sparsely populated and had some students with long bus rides to and from school.

State Department of Education staff indicate that the four-day week has been very popular with students, parents and teachers. Reasons for the popularity include more time for family and family activities, use of the fifth day for teacher preparation, and the longer weekend break. Aside from the potential for financial savings, other issues addressed in the report include child care, instruction and student performance.



The issue of arranging child care was deemed a “wash.” Students in school for the longer day often arrive home about the same time as their working parents. This has served to diminish the “latchkey” issue for older students and the need for after-school care for younger ones. Because schools are closed on the unscheduled day, more babysitters (such as high school students) are available, and communities have responded with services. Also, families in many of the communities involved, which are primarily rural, are more likely to have at least one parent working in the home. Child care issues may be more of a concern for urban districts where parents are more likely to work outside of the home.

The report notes that instructional time — and making the best use of it — was a hurdle initially as teachers had to rearrange lessons to accommodate the longer day. Diligence in reducing interruptions and making full use of time was an important factor, just as it is when schools move from a traditional to a block schedule. (The fifth day can be used for personal appointments that often remove students and teachers from school; however, if an instructional day is missed, the student or teacher loses 20 percent more time than in a traditional six-hour day.) Concern was expressed about the length of the day, particularly for younger students, but the report indicates that students and parents were able to adapt.

Student performance was not a significant issue in the decision of Colorado districts to use a four-day week, according to the report, and there are no conclusive studies on the impact. However, state Department of Education staff say that students do no worse than students on a traditional calendar.

## Potential Benefits

- Savings on fuel, food, utilities and the salaries of some workers
- Longer blocks of time available to complete lessons such as science labs
- Use of the unscheduled day for professional development, planning, tutoring, special programs, or to make up lost days due to inclement weather or other disruptions to the regular schedule
- District's use of the unscheduled day to plan athletic events, limiting disruptions to normal instructional time
- Students (particularly in sparsely populated areas) having fewer long commutes
- Lower absenteeism of students and teachers
- Fewer substitutes needed because teachers can schedule appointments on unscheduled days
- Students generally arriving home at the same time as their parents, diminishing the need for after-school child care and supervision

## Potential Challenges

- Collective bargaining
- Unpopularity of reduced salaries for cafeteria workers and bus drivers
- Child care and supervision of students on the unscheduled day
- Length of day for young students, particularly when long commutes are involved
- The extended focus required of students during the longer day
- Student safety during winter months when daylight hours are fewer
- Twenty percent more instructional time lost when a student or teacher misses a day
- Impact on extracurricular activities and their schedules
- Teacher preparation for the change in schedule to assure the maximum use of instructional time
- Difficulties with students (especially at-risk and special-needs students) retaining subject matter during the extra day off
- The need to run utilities during the unscheduled day to prevent mold due to heat and humidity, thereby offsetting savings
- The perception of "giving a day off," although instructional time is the same or greater

## Summary and further considerations

SREB states have made significant educational progress by focusing on student achievement and what it takes to raise performance levels. Generally, the decision to move to a four-day week has been made for financial reasons and not as a means to improve student achievement. The potential savings, however, appear to be a small percentage 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.

The school calendar and instructional time have changed little during the lifetimes of current policy-makers, yet expectations for students and teachers have increased significantly. Policy-makers should ask how a change to the school calendar can support today's focus on raising student achievement. Further, any significant change in current practice should include well-designed research to determine the impact on student achievement over time and whether the benefits of such a change outweigh the disadvantages.



The following questions should be considered as state leaders and educators debate the pros and cons of implementing a four-day school week:

- Is a four-day week educationally sound for all students and for all groups of students, including young children, those with special needs and at-risk students?
- Do the benefits of implementing a new calendar offset the disadvantages? How will education leaders know?
- How can a calendar change be used to continue progress in raising student achievement and closing gaps? Can the reallocation of savings support new or reorganized activities to better address student educational needs?
- Would changes to the school finance formula be required so that districts would not lose funding for lowering the number of instructional days per year?
- What would be the impact on federal funds received by schools due to the reduction of state spending for programs such as the school lunch program?
- What changes to school calendar and teacher-contract statutes would be needed to facilitate implementation of the alternative schedule?

## Resources

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*For more information, contact Gale Gaines, SREB vice president, State Services, at (404) 875-9211 or [gale.gaines@sreb.org](mailto:gale.gaines@sreb.org).*

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