

DARK DAYS AT SCHOOL

Some States Allow School Districts to Shorten Week to Cut Costs

Local school districts in some states are dealing with escalating costs and decreasing state funding. In the face of those challenges, some states are allowing greater flexibility for school districts to adopt innovative approaches for greater efficiency. The hallmark of those approaches is the four-day school week. School districts across the country are moving to shortened weeks to save money, and some states such as Maine are pondering changing state laws to allow it.

By Tim Weldon



Unlike the vast majority of schools around the country, you won't hear the customary school noises on Monday mornings in Webster County, Ky. No banging lockers. No echoes of students stomping through the hallways between classes. No teachers instructing their students.

Most Mondays in this western Kentucky school district are an extension of the weekend for the district's 2,000 students. Here for the past five years a typical school week runs from Tuesday through Friday.

Although abbreviated school weeks in the U.S. date back at least to the early 1970s, more school districts have expressed an interest in adopting alternative calendars in recent months. Those districts are primarily in isolated, rural counties, where the cost of transporting students is disproportionately high. According to a study by the National School Boards Association, an estimated 100 school districts in 17 states have adopted four-day school weeks. Five years ago, schools in just nine states had condensed their school weeks to four days. Clearly, the soaring cost of energy is igniting interest in shorter school weeks, experts say.

However, student transportation costs played little role in Webster County's decision. At the time it reduced its number of instructional days in 2003, diesel fuel cost the district less than \$1 a gallon, according to Superintendent James Kemp. Nevertheless, the district faced a projected \$350,000 shortfall, and Kemp recalls local school leaders faced a choice of cutting the school week or slashing either programs or personnel—perhaps both—to balance its budget.

Shortened Week Pays Dividends for Kentucky District

Webster County opted for a modified version of the four-day school week,



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*—James Kemp, superintendent
Webster County, Ky., Schools*

under which schools are in session nine Mondays during the current school year—mostly in April and May to allow students to prepare for and take the state achievement tests.

The school calendar in Webster County includes just 165 instructional days this year, fewer than the 177 days at most Kentucky schools. Each school day is lengthened by less than half an hour to compensate for the loss of instructional days. Kentucky law gives school districts the option of providing at least 1,050 hours of instructional time as an alternative to the 177 instructional day requirement.

During its first year, the four-day schedule saved Webster County schools more than \$250,000, according to Kemp. That figure is expected to grow this year to more than \$300,000. In addition to savings from fuel costs, the district spends less money to heat and cool school buildings, hire substitute teachers and pay salaries for classified staff, such as custodians, cooks and bus drivers. However, Kemp said most classified staff received pay raises to compensate for loss of salary from shortened work weeks.

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Social studies teacher Bev Hart explained a lesson to students at Webster County, Ky., High School. (left)

Between classes, students packed the school's hallways, much like other high schools around the country. However, unlike most schools, they receive extended weekends most weeks, attending classes Tuesdays through Fridays to cut costs. (center)



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School leaders in Webster County have redirected the savings from the four-day week into a variety of programs, most notably full-day kindergarten, something Kemp said his district could not have afforded with a traditional five-day schedule.

In addition to saving money, Kemp touts other benefits of the four-day school week, including higher attendance, increased morale and better performance on state achievement tests. Before the four-day school week, Webster County ranked 115th among Kentucky’s 174 districts on state test scores. Last year, the district improved to 61st. Kemp credits the calendar changes as one factor for Webster County’s improvement.

“We would never have had the monetary or time resources to do anything (to increase test scores),” he said. Kemp explains that by condensing the school calendar by one day each week and making better use of instructional time, the district removed wasted time from the school day and created an infrastructure for greater efficiency. Teachers meet each Monday for professional development and planning, and students are able to use Mondays to complete projects and prepare for classes.

Students and teachers alike give the four-day calendar high marks.

Trevor Turner, a senior, uses his extra day off each week to complete homework assignments and to practice tennis.

“It makes the week seem so much short-

er,” he said. “You might get a little more homework during the weekend, but you have that extra day to do it.”

Another senior, Kirstie Jones, agreed. “It helps me do projects and get organized. It seems with a four-day week, that school flies by,” she said.

Kemp insists one of the keys to the success of the four-day week in Webster County was involving students, teachers and parents in the decision-making process. “You want (them) as stakeholders,” he said.

Other Districts Fall In Line

Colorado and New Mexico account for more than half of the school districts currently using a four-day school schedule. However, districts in other states are also jumping on the bandwagon.

This year marked the beginning of a four-day school week in the MACCRAY district in rural western Minnesota. The district is a consolidation of three communities. With only about 700 students in grades K–12 living within 350 square miles of the schools, school transportation costs were creating an enormous financial strain on the school system. Last year, the expense of heating school buildings and transporting students increased \$200,000 over the previous year, according to Superintendent Greg Schmidt. “We’re just not big enough to be able to absorb that,” he explained.

Compounding matters, the district’s general fund budget was reduced by \$750,000 in the 2007–2008 school

year—an 11 percent cut—and by another \$300,000 this year.

Like Webster County, the MACCRAY district operates a modified four-day calendar, with school scheduled on nine Mondays during the school year. Although the school year was condensed by 23 days compared to the 2007–08 school year, the district increased the length of the school day with no loss in instructional time, according to Schmidt.

The White Pine School District in Nevada began operating a four-day calendar at one K–12 school three years ago. Now facing rising student transportation costs and a 14 percent cut in state funding, the White Pine district is considering expanding the four-day week to include all schools in the district next year.

Students in the eastern Nevada district currently ride buses to schools as far as 75 miles away each day. Traveling to sporting events on Fridays can easily take most of a day, according to Superintendent Bob Dolezal. He said closing schools on Fridays would allow students to travel to ballgames on the road without having to miss instructional time. He adds that since the school in Lund, Nev., began operating only four days each week, student attendance has increased by 40 percent and teacher attendance by 50 percent.

School districts frequently are constrained by state laws that require a minimum number of instructional days. Schools that have moved to a four-day school week are located in states that allow a minimum number of instructional



Senior Trevor Turner gives the district's four-day week high marks, saying it gives him more time to complete school projects and practice tennis. (right)

Photos by Tim Weldon

hours—not days—or that provide waivers for districts wanting to initiate four-day school weeks.

Webster County, Ky., is just one example of a school district that under state law was allowed to make the switch to the four-day school week.

Other states are considering more flexible state laws with an eye to how the state's local school districts can use that flexibility to save time and money.

Under current law, schools in Maine are required to offer at least 175 instructional days per year. However, State Sen. Nancy Sullivan announced plans to introduce legislation to change the requirement to a minimum number of hours instead, opening the door for four-day school weeks in that state.

In New York, Assemblyman Peter Rivera has proposed legislation that would require school districts to develop plans for a four-day week, though it wouldn't require districts to adopt those plans. Other states are reportedly examining whether to alter school calendar laws to allow districts to adopt four-day school weeks.

Potential Challenges

The movement toward a four-day week is slowed in many places due to a variety of concerns. Among the most frequently cited criticisms:

- A four-day school week may cause child care difficulties for some working parents;
- Some educators are concerned that the four-day week may seem incon-

sistent with a growing demand for more time in school;

- In some districts, teacher contracts may have to be restructured; and
- Attending school for a longer school day may be difficult for some students, particularly those who are younger or have special needs.

Concerns like that come from Tamara Huey, a mother of a 5-year-old in the Hazleton Area School District in Pennsylvania. She is leading a campaign to stop the district from adopting a four-day calendar, which she asserts will result in school days that are too long to hold children's attention.

"I have a kindergartener and I already struggle with the concept of full-day kindergarten," she explained. "Increasing the school day from six hours to seven and a half or eight hours for a 5-year-old seems absurd." Huey said she believes high school students would have difficulty adapting to longer school days, which also would cut down on time for jobs and sports.

In gearing up for a possible fight over four-day school weeks in Maine, Sullivan, the state senator, acknowledged that some parents are concerned about increased child care costs or perhaps added challenges for sports teams that practice after school. However, the middle school teacher countered, "I'm tired of the tail wagging the dog. We should be about educating."

Dolezal said some concerns parents had in his Nevada school district, such as

increased child care costs, did not materialize. "People find solutions for (child care)," he said.

Schmidt acknowledges school districts that typically engage in "hostile negotiations" with unions might face special challenges in adopting a four-day school week. Although teachers and principals are unionized in the MACCRAY school district, Schmidt said no problems surfaced with either union when his district adopted a four-day school week.

In at least one case, creating a four-day school week led to unforeseen problems. In October 2005, Jackson County Public Schools in Kentucky initiated a four-day week hoping to reduce operating expenses. However, because a large percentage of students qualified for free and reduced lunches, some of those students might not have been able to eat breakfast or lunch on Fridays when they weren't in school. The school district decided to transport those students and feed them during off days. Consequently, local officials discovered they were not saving as much money as they had expected and abandoned the four-day week just three months after creating it.

Months into its own four-day calendar, Schmidt says he doesn't expect anything happening that would cause MACCRAY schools to shift its course. "I don't see us going back unless the wheels fall off the wagon somehow," he said.

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