



Should School Districts Shift to a Four-Day School Week?

By Educator Barnes – December 10, 2021

School district leaders strive to provide the best educational environment for their students. This could involve adopting new curricula, implementing new research-based teaching practices, or adjusting the academic school calendar. Adjusting the calendar could involve the start and end times of the school day or adjusting the days of the week when school takes place. Now, some school districts want to shift to a four-day school week. Should they?

Teachers in Portland, Oregon are proposing a four-day week for high school students. The fifth day would be a self-taught day with teachers being available for part of the day to help with school work. A recent study found that half of the states in the US have at least one four-day week school. Three states, Maine, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, used to have at least one four-day week school but do not any longer. What was most startling about the study was the negative impact of a four-day week.

Four-day school weeks tend to reduce instructional time. Some schools might redistribute the hours from the fifth day by lengthening each day during the four-day week. For schools that switch to a four-day school week and instructional time is lost, the study showed that “student achievement drops when schools switch to a four-day schedule, and that those negative trends continue so long as five-day schedules are not restored.”

Four-day school weeks tend to happen in western states. Another study focused on a few of those states. After an eight-year period of time, the study showed the student achievement began to increase; however, the achievement was still lower than schools that had a five-day school week.

During the pandemic, the four-day school week has been floated as an idea not for the students but for the teachers. Teachers have reported low morale and mental health issues. Since the great resignation also includes teachers, school district leaders are trying to find solutions to retain staff. Is this the answer? What is the impact on families?

If teachers' mental health is plummeting the root cause should be addressed. Having less time with students may not address the issue.

Secondary students may be able to stay home alone, but this is not best for our younger elementary students. School districts would need to partner with organizations that could provide childcare while parents are at work.

If school districts meet the minimum number of school days and required instructional hours for each content, switching to a four-day week could be an option. School district leaders would also need to set academic benchmarks they would like to meet under a four-day school week. Most importantly, it should be clear what teachers should be doing on the fifth day and district leaders should make sure parents support the shift.

Each school district will have to determine if the pros outweigh the cons for their students. The decision should be based on what is best for students not teachers. Yes, teachers matter, but they knew they signed up for a five-day school week. They should be more concerned about addressing their mental health without impacting their students' academic achievement.