



ARE FOUR-DAY WEEKS BAD FOR STUDENTS?



The 50-odd students of the tiny Olfen Independent School District in rural West Texas are the first in the state to regularly have Fridays off. Like approximately 560 districts in more than 20 states, Olfen has transitioned to a four-day school week. Most of these districts are like Olfen: rural and thus serving students spread out over a large geographic area. But some urban or suburban districts have also switched to a four-day calendar. For instance, the 18,000-student 27J School District, located in the Denver metro area, went to a four-day week this school year.

Four-day weeks are nothing new, according to NEPC Fellow Kathleen Gebhardt. As a member—and incoming chair—of the Board of Trustees of the non-profit Rural School and Community Trust (which aims to improve rural education), she has for years followed discussions around the four-day calendar. Gebhardt is also President-elect of the Colorado Association of School Boards, serving a state where at least 87 school districts have made this change.

“In my conversations with some of the rural districts that have four-day weeks, I have learned that some have been doing it for many years,” Gebhardt said. In fact, the first three school districts to move to the four-day calendar in the state did so 38 years ago, in 1980.

Gebhardt noted that districts have made the shift for different reasons.

Some, she said, adopt the four-day week to save money. However, a 2011 analysis by the non-profit, non-partisan Education Commission of the States suggests that cost savings may be minimal. The six districts studied saved between .4% and 2.5% of their budgets by tweaking their calendars.

Colorado’s 27J adopted the four-day week to save money after a \$12 million mill levy override failed. The district expects the change to save \$1 million annually, which is equivalent to less than one percent of its budget.

Gebhardt says there’s an even more important reason that districts adopt four-day weeks:

“Many are doing it to attract and retain teachers.” A 2018 study published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Education and Training Studies* did not directly address recruitment and retention. But it did find four-day weeks were associated with better morale for both classified and certified staff.

Meanwhile, the Olfen District in Texas adopted the four-day week in order to offer students a non-required fifth day of tutoring and enrichment in an effort to improve student achievement.

“We think this is going to be something great for our students and something that can also benefit a lot of parents out there,” said Olfen Superintendent Gabriel Zamora *told the Texas Tribune*. “I just saw the possibility, once the law was passed and everything. I never thought I would be in the district that had the right circumstances.”

A 2015 article published in *Education Finance and Policy*, a peer-reviewed journal, studied test scores for elementary school students in Colorado and found “little evidence that moving to a four-day week compromises student academic achievement.” In fact, the results showed a generally positive relationship between four-day school weeks and “the percentage of students scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on math and reading achievement tests.”

It’s less clear how four-day weeks impact equity.

“Equity is an important question, and not one that I think anyone, that I know of, has investigated,” Gebhardt said. “Anecdotally, I am hearing this has a big impact on recruitment and retention, because many teachers like four-day weeks.”

Teacher turnover affects equity because it *disproportionately impacts students of color, those from low-income families and rural schools*.

Another equity-related concern involves students with disabilities.

“I do worry about the impact on special education students and how districts write their IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) to accommodate these...when highly impacted students might need care five days a week,” Gebhardt said.

If concerns do arise, it is important to address them before the four-day week is adopted: In Gebhardt’s experience, once they adopt the four-day week, districts rarely return to a five-day calendar.

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