



MORE SCHOOLS ARE ADOPTING 4-DAY WEEKS. FOR PARENTS, THE CHALLENGE IS DAY 5 - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on September 26, 2023 by HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH | Associated Press



Photo: Keegan Prunte, left, works with Laura Kilpatrick, right, during Keegan's piano lessons on Monday, Sept. 11, 2023, in Independence, Mo.

It's a Monday in September, but with schools closed, the three children in the Prunte household have nowhere to be. Callahan, 13, contorts herself into a backbend as 7-year-old Hudson fiddles with a balloon and 10-year-old Keegan plays the piano.

Like a growing number of students around the U.S., the Prunte children are on a four-day school schedule, a change instituted this fall by their district in Independence, Missouri.

To the kids, it's terrific. "I have a three-day break of school!" exclaimed Hudson.

But their mom, Brandi Prunte, who teaches French in a neighboring district in suburban Kansas City, is frustrated to find herself hunting for activities to keep her kids entertained and off electronics while she works five days a week.

"I feel like I'm back in the COVID shutdown," she said.

Hundreds of school systems around the country have adopted four-day weeks in recent years, mostly in rural and western parts of the U.S. Districts cite cost savings and advantages for teacher recruitment, although some have questioned the effects on students who already missed out on significant learning during the pandemic.

For parents, there also is the added complication, and cost, of arranging child care for that extra weekday. While surveys show parents approve overall, support wanes among those with younger children.

On this Monday, Brandi Prunte was home because Hudson had a mysterious rash on his arm. Most weeks, her oldest would be in charge, with occasional help from grandparents. She has no interest in paying for the child care option the district is offering for \$30 per day. Multiplied by several kids, it adds up.

"I want my kids in an educational environment," she said, "and I don't want to pay for somebody to babysit them."

Even then, the district-provided child care isn't as convenient because it's not in every school. And in other four-day districts, so many parents adjust their work schedule or enlist family to help that the day care has been discontinued because of low enrollment.

That is especially concerning for parents of younger kids and those whose disabilities can make finding child care an extra challenge.

In more than 13,000 school districts nationwide, nearly 900 operate on a truncated schedule, up from 662 in 2019 and a little more than 100 in 1999, said Paul Thompson, an associate professor of economics at Oregon State University.

The practice has taken off mostly in rural communities, where families often have a stay-at-home parent or nearby grandparent. But Independence, known best for its ties to President Harry Truman, is anything but rural, with 14,000 students, including around 70% who are eligible for government-subsidized meals.

The district offers meals on Mondays, but not at every school. Starting in October, struggling students will be able to attend school on Mondays for extra help. Superintendent Dale Herl said discussions with officials at other districts convinced him parents will figure out child care for the other students.

"You have to go back and look, you know, what do parents do during the summertime? What do they do over, you know, spring break or Christmas break?" he said, adding that schools already had weekdays off for occasions such as teacher conferences.

In Missouri, the number of districts routinely getting three-day weekends has more than doubled since the pandemic hit, from 12% to 30%. Some Missouri lawmakers have pushed back, arguing students need more time with teachers. One failed legislative proposal would have let students in four-day districts transfer or attend private schools, with their home districts picking up the tab.

Some turn to a shortened schedule to save money. An analysis by the Economic Commission of the States found such savings were modest, totaling 0.4% to 2.5% of their annual budgets.

For many school systems including Independence, which lengthened the other four school days, the hope is to boost teacher recruitment and retention. Some school systems making the switch are competing against districts that are able to pay up to \$15,000 more, with just 15 minutes added to the commute, said Jon Turner, a Missouri State University associate professor of education.

But when one district switches to a shortened school week, it gains a recruiting advantage over the others.

Other districts soon follow, making shortened schedules a "Band-Aid" solution with diminishing returns, Missouri Commissioner of Education Margie Vandeven said.

"If everybody becomes a four-day school week," she said, "that is no longer a recruitment strategy."

In some communities, a four-day week is better for families. In the Turner district in north-central Montana, taking Fridays off avoids situations such as basketball games played at districts three or more hours away that leave only a small number of students at school, Superintendent Tony Warren said.

The change also provides another day to work on family farms in the district with a little more than 50 students, Warren said, although he now also sees some larger districts adopting the schedule.

"They're making the shift to the four-day week because all the districts around them have adopted a four-day week," he said.

The effect on academics is murky, although some studies show the schedule doesn't hurt test scores if the other four school days are lengthened to make up the time, Thompson said.

However, the Rand Corporation found achievement differences in four-day districts, while initially hard to spot, became apparent over multiple years.

That worries Karyn Lewis of the research organization NWEA, whose recent study found students are not making up all the academic ground they lost during the pandemic.

"Now is not the time to do anything that threatens the amount of instruction kids are receiving," she said.

In Independence, the hope is that the soon-to-start off-day program for struggling students will help them catch up with their classmates. Older students, meanwhile, can take classes at a community college.

Only a few large districts have adopted a four-day week. The 27J district north of Denver made the switch in 2018 after several failed efforts to increase taxes to boost teacher wages. With surrounding districts able to pay more, teacher turnover had become a problem.

Superintendent Will Pierce said the district's own surveys now show nearly 80% of parents and 85% of teachers support the schedule. "Quality of life is what they're reporting," he said.

Demand for day care hasn't been huge, with fewer than 300 kids using the off-day program in the district of 20,000 students, he said.

Still, a study published this year found test scores dipped slightly in the 27J district, and that home values also took a hit compared to those in neighboring districts.

"Voters need to think about trade offs," said Frank James Perrone, one of the study's authors and an Indiana University assistant professor of educational leadership.

Teacher retirements have dropped in Independence and job applications have increased since switching the schedule. And that's all good, Brandi Prunte acknowledged.

"But," she added, "it can't be at the expense of the community or families of the district."

—

The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.