



The Four-Day School Week: An Educational Quality Setback

A Leadership Call to Action

by Dr. Don Haddad, Superintendent, St. Vrain Valley Schools

The concept of a four-day school week has gained traction in various school districts across the United States, touted by some as a potential solution to budget constraints, teacher shortages, flexibility for families, student stress and fatigue levels. However, while the idea might seem beneficial on the surface, a deeper examination reveals that reducing the traditional five-day school week to four days can create significant educational drawbacks, particularly for the many students who rely on that crucial fifth day for learning, interaction, and overall well-being support. Over time, the negative impacts of this reduced schedule accumulate, undermining the quality, depth, and breadth of education that students receive.

The reduction in school days fundamentally limits the number of personal face-to-face touchpoints or opportunities for teachers to engage with their students. Even if the length of the school day is increased in an attempt to compensate for the lost day, the overall frequency of interactions between students and teachers decreases. These interactions are vital for reinforcing key concepts, addressing individual learning needs, and providing the continuous support that students require to thrive academically and emotionally. A four-day week disrupts this continuity, making it more challenging for educators to build and maintain the strong relationships essential for effective teaching and learning.

Moreover, extending the school day to make up for the lost fifth day poses significant challenges related to students' attention spans and fatigue levels. Research consistently shows that younger children, in particular, have limited attention spans and struggle with prolonged periods of instruction. Stretching the school day can lead to diminishing returns, as students and teachers may become fatigued and less receptive to learning as the day progresses. This fatigue can negate any potential benefits of the additional instructional time allocated daily within a four-day week, leading to a decrease in overall engagement, retention, and mastery of the learning material.

Another critical issue with the four-day school week is the aggregated effect of the lost instructional time. Education is a gradual, cumulative process where knowledge and skills are built incrementally over time. Missing out on a day of contact and interaction each week means that students can be deprived of a substantial amount of continuous instructional time over the course of a school year and beyond. This cumulative impact is similar to what many students experience during multiple summer vacations, resulting in extended periods of downtime from an instructional perspective. This loss is particularly pronounced in subjects that require continuous practice and reinforcement, such as mathematics, reading, writing, world languages,

music, and other subjects. Over multiple years, the gaps in knowledge and skills become more pronounced, potentially leading to significant educational deficits that are difficult to overcome.

Additionally, the reduction in school days can exacerbate educational inequalities. Students from lower-income families often rely on the structure and resources provided by schools, including meals, academics, counseling support, and a safe, interactive, and engaging environment. A four-day week reduces access to these essential services, potentially widening the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This disparity can have long-term consequences, affecting not only academic outcomes but also future opportunities for higher education and viable careers.

An often-overlooked consequence of the four-day school week is the potential message it sends to our communities, students, and families regarding the value of public education. By reducing the school week to four days, we risk conveying to the public that education is not as important as it truly is. In a society where students already have extended breaks—three months off in the summer, two weeks during the middle of the school year, a week for fall break, and a week for spring break—alongside weekends and other sporadic breaks, such as the Presidents’ Day extended weekend, inclement weather days, and more, further cutting school days by approximately one additional cumulative month can signal that education is a lower priority. This is a dangerous message to send, as it can result in undermining the perceived stability, quality, and respect for public education. Education is a critical and indispensable part of a child’s development and a major factor in our nation’s success, not an area where reductions in time can be easily made.

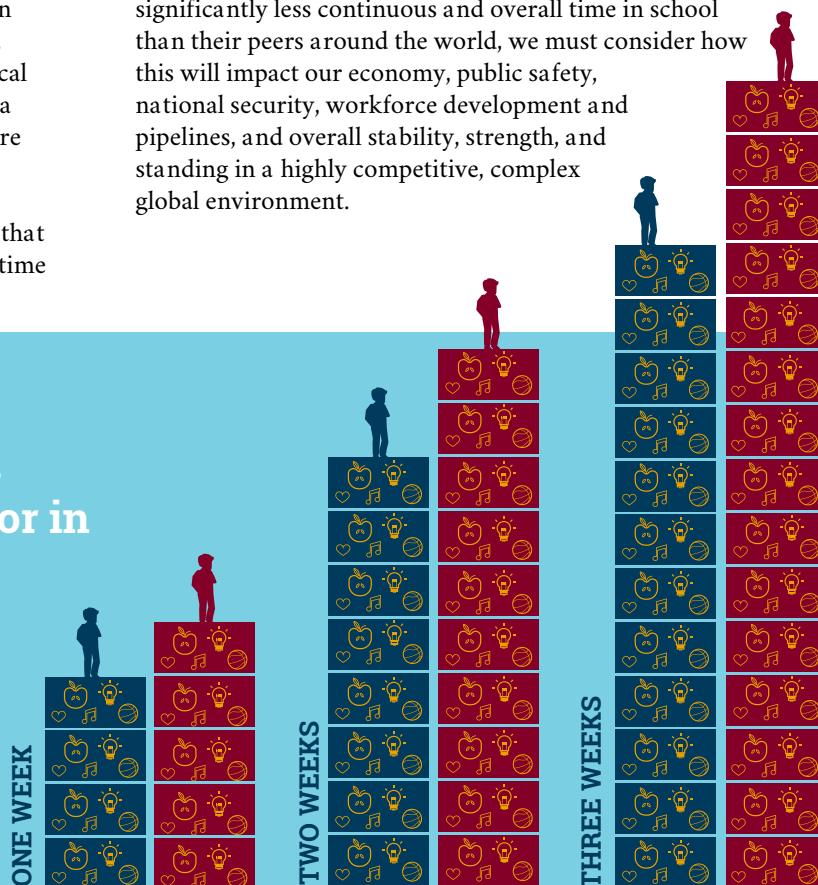
Some proponents of the four-day school week argue that it can lead to cost savings for districts, provide more time

for teachers to plan and collaborate, and give families more time for certain activities, appointments, and tasks. While these may be considered benefits by some, they must be weighed against the substantial educational drawbacks. The primary mission of schools is to provide a high-quality education to all students, and any policy that undermines this mission should be scrutinized carefully.

While the idea of a four-day school week may appear attractive to some, the negative impact on students’ education can be profound, with the full extent of the impact becoming more apparent as more years pass with the four-day school week in place. The reduction in effectively spaced instructional time in a four-day-a-week schedule, coupled with the challenges of maintaining student attention and the cumulative educational deficits, creates a scenario that has the potential to be extremely detrimental to student learning, well-being, and success. As we consider policies intended to enhance our education system, it is crucial to prioritize strategies that enhance, rather than diminish, the educational opportunities available to our children. The traditional five-day school week, despite its perceived challenges, remains a cornerstone of effective education, providing the consistent, structured, and comprehensive learning environment that students need to succeed.

The issue of high-quality, effective instructional time must also take into consideration America’s global standing as we strive to compete with other countries. As students in the United States currently spend significantly less continuous and overall time in school than their peers around the world, we must consider how this will impact our economy, public safety, national security, workforce development and pipelines, and overall stability, strength, and standing in a highly competitive, complex global environment.

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Specifically, here are summarized key points to consider regarding the potential negative impacts of a four-day school week:

Academic Achievement and Impact on Learning Outcomes

Studies have found that students in four-day school week districts often experience declines in academic achievement, particularly in mathematics and reading. The reduced instructional time can lead to less opportunity for in-depth exploration of subjects and a hurried pace that can leave some students behind. This effect can be more pronounced among elementary school students. Younger children, who are in critical stages of foundational skill development, particularly in reading and math, may suffer the most from reduced instructional days, especially as they accumulate years through their K-12 education.

Attention Spans and Fatigue During Extended School Days

Although some districts attempt to compensate for the lost day by extending the remaining four days, longer school days can lead to student fatigue. Students' attention spans often diminish as the day progresses, resulting in lower engagement and reduced retention of information taught during the latter part of the day. Cognitive load theory suggests that as students become more fatigued, their ability to process and retain new information decreases. This can lead to superficial learning, where students may only memorize facts for short-term recall rather than understanding deeper concepts.

Educational Inequality and Socioeconomic Disparities

Students from low-income families are likely to be

disproportionately affected by the shift to a four-day school week. These students may rely on school for meals, a safe environment, and additional academic support, all of which are reduced with fewer school days. This can exacerbate existing educational inequalities. Additionally, access to enrichment and co-curricular activities may be negatively impacted, further exacerbating inequities. Specifically, middle- and upper-income families often have the resources necessary to compensate for the lost school day by enrolling their children in enrichment activities, tutoring, or extracurricular programs, whereas lower-income families may not have the resources to do so. This can potentially further widen the achievement gap and contradict our often-stated commitment to equity.

Long-Term Educational Impact and Cumulative Learning Loss

The cumulative effect of reduced instructional days over multiple years can lead to significant gaps in learning. Students may miss out on key, strategically administered instructional time essential for mastering complex subjects, resulting in long-term deficits that are challenging to remediate. Consequently, students who attend four-day school weeks may be less prepared for college and viable careers due to gaps in foundational knowledge and skills that accrue over time.

Teacher/Parent Perspectives and Teacher Burnout

While some argue that a four-day week can reduce teacher burnout, there is also the potential for increased stress and fatigue resulting from longer school days, which can lead to higher levels of stress and burnout among teachers. Additionally, some parents, particularly those who struggle financially, express concerns about childcare and the impact of the four-day school week on their children's education. They worry that the reduced school week limits their children's learning



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It is essential that our elected officials, state leaders, and education leaders pay close attention to the concerning trend in Colorado toward four-day school weeks. Approximately 70% of Colorado's 178 school districts operate on a four-day week, with an additional 5% having at least one school on a four-day week.



opportunities, disrupts a parent's work schedule, and exacerbates financial stressors related to childcare and other household family needs.

It is essential that our elected officials, state leaders, and education leaders pay close attention to the concerning trend in Colorado toward four-day school weeks. Approximately 70% of Colorado's 178 school districts operate on a four-day week, with an additional 5% having at least one school on a four-day week. While the four-day school week may offer certain benefits, there is ample information demonstrating the potential for significant drawbacks in terms of academic achievement, student attention spans, educational inequality, long-term educational outcomes, and overall well-being.

Accordingly, St. Vrain Valley Schools has prioritized providing additional, high-quality, continuous instructional time through our after-school AAA program (Advancing Academic Achievement), with an emphasis on reading, writing, and math. Additionally, we have extended learning through our Project Launch Learning Program, which allows students to continue attending school throughout the entire month of June with smaller class sizes, engaging in 20 additional days of high-quality, continuous learning and interaction with their teachers and peers. We also offer our Jump Start programming, which provides students the opportunity

to begin the school year a couple of weeks early to get a head start on critical learning and preparation. These activities, coupled with numerous weekend and evening learning opportunities through Saturday School programming, robotics, athletics, performing arts, and more, significantly increase the amount of time our students are engaged in high-quality learning.

The concept of decreasing instructional opportunities as a result of a four-day week contradicts the widely stated priority of advancing student achievement, closing the achievement gap, and supporting our students' success and well-being. So, the obvious question that remains is, why? Why would we knowingly put our children's future at risk with what I believe is a knee-jerk, ill-conceived reaction to certain financial challenges that we may face in our public school systems? Why have we become so opposed to hard work? Why do we move so quickly to diminish our students' opportunities so dramatically? Unfortunately, I believe the answers to these questions center around politics, ideology, leadership in pursuit of the path of least resistance, and convenience. My concern is that by the time public education and families realize the full impact of the four-day week, it will be too late to restore the lost opportunities for an entire generation of students, and the weakening of our communities and nation as a whole.