A four-day school week (4dsw) is becoming more common, especially in areas across the western United States. States with large rural areas are spearheading this change. For example, Colorado, Idaho, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota have more than 500 districts using a 4dsw.

Champions of the shorter week contend that it saves money, improves student attendance, and helps recruit and retain teachers to rural districts by offering them an extra day off each week.

The transition to the 4dsw and the debate over its effects have taken place largely in the absence of empirical evidence. To address this knowledge gap, a team of researchers from the RAND Corporation conducted a large-scale study of the 4dsw using data from 36 districts across Idaho, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. They also used administrative data from these states, as well as from Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota (Figure 1). The team analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to compare experiences with a 4dsw and a five-day school week (5dsw).

The study addressed two overarching research questions:

- **How is the 4dsw implemented?** How do school districts and schools with a 4dsw structure their weeks, and how do students, teachers, and staff use their time on the day off?
• **What are the benefits and drawbacks of the 4dsw?** How does the 4dsw affect key outcomes, such as cost savings, student attendance and achievement, teacher recruitment and retention, and stakeholder satisfaction?

### Implementation

How did schools structure their four-day week?

- Students in districts with a 4dsw had longer days than students with a 5dsw did: 7 hours and 55 minutes compared with 7 hours and 6 minutes.
- However, districts with a 4dsw had 25 fewer school days per year than districts with a 5dsw did: 146 days compared with 171 days.
- Overall, in districts with a 4dsw, students spent 58 fewer hours in school over a year.

How did students spend their extra day?

- On the fifth day, most districts offered practices for sports or other competitions; some districts held clubs or student activities. Schools rarely offered academic enrichment activities on the fifth day.
- Although most teachers reported doing school-related work on the fifth day, school staff reported that only occasionally were they required to come to the school.
- Most teachers reported that the day off was a mix of work (such as grading papers) and personal activities (such as attending doctor’s appointments and doing chores).
- Eighty percent of high school students and 90 percent of elementary school students reported that they spent the fifth day primarily at home—for example, doing chores or homework (Figure 2).

### Outcomes

Did school districts save money?

More than any other factor, the desire to save money motivates districts’ choice of the 4dsw. One presumption is that one less day of school can translate into up to 20 percent in savings. However,

- Most school costs—salaries and benefits—do not vary by the length of the school week. Existing empirical estimates suggest that switching to a 4dsw would save districts less than 5 percent.
- In interviews, some district administrators reported larger savings than the empirical evidence suggests is possible.
- Some district officials stressed that even small savings were meaningful because they allowed districts to retain staff or preserve or invest in other instructional supports.

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**FIGURE 2**

How Students Spent Their Extra Day Away from School
Did the 4dsw reduce student absences?

- Interview and focus group participants expressed the perception that the rate of absenteeism for students in districts with a 4dsw was less than the rate for students in districts with a 5dsw.
- Although, in absolute terms, students with a 4dsw missed fewer days than students with a 5dsw did, the proportion of missed school days over the course of the academic year (which tends to include more days for 5dsw districts) was similar between the two groups.
- Time-series analysis found no statistical difference between the absenteeism rates of students in 4dsw districts and 5dsw districts.

How did the 4dsw affect student achievement?

The analysis estimated the impact of the 4dsw on student achievement. The weight of evidence indicated that student achievement improved in 4dsw districts, but the improvement was slower than it would have been if the same schools had maintained a 5dsw. Moreover, these effects of the 4dsw on student achievement would accumulate over time. For example, by eight years after adoption, the 4dsw student achievement in English language arts was between 0.145 and 0.229 standard deviations lower than student achievement in similar 5dsw districts, and 4dsw achievement in math was between 0.144 and 0.189 standard deviations lower. The sizes of these differences are considered meaningful in the educational context and are larger than the average effect sizes of most educational interventions.

Did the 4dsw improve teacher recruitment and retention?

- District and school leaders, school board members, and teachers believed that a 4dsw was advantageous for recruiting and retaining teachers.
- Interview and focus group participants perceived that teacher attendance was higher in 4dsw districts compared with 5dsw districts.

How did stakeholders perceive the 4dsw?

- Survey results indicate high levels of satisfaction with the 4dsw among parents and students.
- Parents and students in 4dsw districts overwhelmingly reported that they would select a 4dsw over a 5dsw (Figure 3).
- Other stakeholders expressed similar enthusiasm.

**FIGURE 3**

Elementary Parents’ Preferences Between a 4dsw or 5dsw

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitely five days a week</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably five days a week</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably four days a week</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely four days a week</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This figure presents results from the elementary parents survey (N = 766). Respondents were asked, “If you were to have the choice between a four-day school week or a five-day school week, which would you choose?”
Conclusions

The results point to trade-offs in the 4dsw model. Analysis of data from five states—Idaho, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota—indicates some evidence of educational harm: The test scores for 4dsw districts improved but did so more slowly than they would have if the same schools had maintained a 5dsw. On the other hand, families and students in 4dsw districts—which are primarily in rural communities in the Western United States—reported highly valuing the extra time that the four-day schedule allowed the family to spend together.

This study, the largest of its kind to date, presents findings that can help inform choices by school, district, and state education leaders about the 4dsw model and develop policies or guide change as needed. Although this research can help promote understanding of how much the 4dsw affects outcomes, each community must ultimately decide how to weigh which outcomes matter the most.