**Local News**

**Small school districts say move to 4-day week helps attract, retain teachers**

Six years ago, Jon Turner began researching four-day school weeks. There were only 12 school districts in Missouri that had them.

*by Layne Stracener Jan. 26 2020 @ 12:05am*

New Bloomfield Board of Education members share their views on the proposed four-day school week during a meeting Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020. Ultimately, the plan passed 4-3. Photo by Helen Wilbers / News Tribune.
Six years ago, Jon Turner began researching four-day school weeks. There were only 12 school districts in Missouri that had them.

Now, there are 61.

Last year, Turner, assistant professor of educational leadership at Missouri State University, visited all but one of the then 33 four-day districts in Missouri to observe the schools and talk to the leadership teams.

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"I hit the road over about a three-month period, and I put over 4,000 miles on my car," Turner said. "So when we talk about these districts, I've been in them, and they run all the way from the Iowa border to the Arkansas border to the Mississippi River to the Kansas state line. So they're in every corner of the state."

This year, the number of four-day schools has grown again; 28 Missouri school districts have switched to a four-day week.
Turner has visited nine of them, but his goal is to visit each one this year, he said.

Next year, 20 more Missouri school districts will switch to four-day schools, bringing the total to 81.

**Why are districts switching?**

The top reason school districts are switching to four-day weeks: difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers.

Since 2010, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined by more than one-third in the United States, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This means approximately 340,000 fewer students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in the 2016-17 school year — the latest year for which data are available — compared to the number of students who enrolled in 2008-09. Turner said he doesn't see this improving anytime soon.

From 2012-17, the number of new teachers in Missouri declined by 30 percent, according to Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Salary is one reason behind the decline in those entering the teaching profession.

"The other opportunities in the marketplace right now, as far as salaries, are outpacing what we pay teachers," Turner said. "I just don't think that the field of education, as far as salaries, has been able to be competitive enough when a young person is looking at a career."

Most of the districts with four-day weeks are small, rural districts that often lose teachers to larger districts that pay higher salaries, have more resources and are often closer to the teachers' homes.

Smaller districts, which don't receive enough funding to compete with the larger districts, are leading the charge to four-day schools. Out of the 61 four-day districts in Missouri, about 10 have an enrollment of more than 1,000.

Since they've switched to four-day weeks, they've been able to recruit and retain more teachers, from people right out of college to teachers who have been in the profession for a long time, Turner said. Non-certified staff such as custodians and bus drivers also strongly prefer the four-day week, even if it lowers their salary, according to one of Turner's studies.

**Effect on academic performance**

Initial concerns about four-day schools revolved around whether schools would lose instructional time by dropping one day of the week.

But the school day is generally longer in districts with four-day weeks, so these schools typically don't lose instructional time. Previous to this year, Missouri measured a school year by the number of school days. Now, it requires 1,044 hours per year.
The effect of moving to a four-day school year on academics is unknown in Missouri at this time. Missouri’s assessment system changes so often it is impossible to measure the effect four-day weeks have on academic performance, Turner said. For the first time in about seven years, the assessment system has not changed. Unless it stays consistent, it won't be possible to measure the effect.

But other states — such as Colorado — have more consistent assessment systems, and they have found four-day weeks do not affect academic performance. Colorado has more school districts on four-day weeks than any state in the country.

Fourth-grade reading and fifth-grade mathematics test scores from the Colorado Student Assessment Program show there is generally a positive relationship between four-day school weeks and academic achievement, so there is little evidence it harms student performance, according to the Association for Education Finance and Policy.

In Oregon, four-day school weeks had a negative effect on academics, because school districts in Oregon are not required to lengthen the hours in the school day, so instructional time is lost, Oregon State University professor Paul Thompson said. He found math scores declined between .044-.053 standard deviations, and reading scores declined between .033-.038. Earlier school start times and lost instructional time of nearly 31/2 hours a week are the main reason for this, he found.

Pros and cons of four-day week

Teachers and district leaders are attracted to a four-day school week because it allows them to do professional development once or twice a month on the additional day, Turner said. This gives the teachers a full day for professional development, rather than a half-day right after teaching, which is what districts without four-day weeks often do.

"It gives people more time to do engaging professional development on a more consistent basis," Turner said. "They come to professional development and training with more energy and enthusiasm."

Leaders in almost every four-day district said the students and teachers are now more enthusiastic and engaged, Turner said. Students often have activities on the weekend, so the additional day allows them to refresh.

There is anecdotal evidence that suggests attendance among teachers and students improves when districts switch to four-day weeks. Preliminary results from the Association for Education Finance and Policy also suggest four-day weeks improve attendance. Officials at four-day districts often encourage teachers and students to make appointments on the day off, Turner said.

The only disadvantage Turner regularly hears about the four-day week concerns children with difficult home lives, he said. The concern — mostly raised by teachers — is that those children have an extra day at home.
"Those kids that may not come from the most supportive families are missing the opportunity to be in the caring, supportive, nurturing environment that they may be missing that day," Turner said.

Districts have tried to offer solutions for these students as well as those whose parents are at work. Four-day districts often offer child care at first, but by Thanksgiving, only a couple of students show up, Turner said.

Clinton County School District is the only district in Missouri that offers child care on the additional day off, but some districts partner with other organizations such as local churches or the Boys & Girls Club to provide child care. Parent surveys show 90 percent of parents or more are not concerned about their child being left alone.

"Everybody talks about child care, but then when it actually rolls out, it never ends up being a major issue, and people just don't show up," Turner said. "Everybody was worried about someone else's child, but they weren't worried about their own. They figured out a solution for their own."

**Local school district reactions**

In Mid-Missouri, the New Bloomfield R-3 and Linn R-2 school districts are moving to a four-day week for the 2020-21 school year.

Both are small districts that can't afford to match salaries with Columbia or Jefferson City, so they are moving to four-day weeks to attract more quality educators.

The New Bloomfield Board of Education authorized the move Jan. 16, and Linn R-2 approved it in October.

The Maries County R-1 Board of Education in Vienna is also considering switching to four-day school weeks because the district has had a difficult time recruiting and retaining qualified teachers over the past few years, Superintendent Mark Parker said.

The week of Jan. 20, surveys were sent to Maries R-1 parents, staff and students in sixth through 12th grade. Parker said he hopes to have enough results for the board to discuss it at Monday's meeting.

The Cole County R-1 Board of Education in Russellville was considering moving to a four-day week but decided not to because surveys found the majority of district teachers and parents opposed the idea.

Bigger schools in the area are taking a wait-and-see approach.

Jefferson City School District Superintendent Larry Linthacum said he might consider switching to a four-day school week in the future if it is proven to increase academic success.
“We're always looking at how we can better educate our kids and better prepare them to be successful citizens upon graduation and ensure that they do graduate,” Linthacum said. "So we're open to considerations, but not at this time."

Blair Oaks R-2 Superintendent Jim Jones said the same thing.

"We're always into seeking methods to improve student learning, and if four-day school weeks are going to improve student learning, I think that would need to be considered," he said.

To view the studies referenced in this article and to learn more about four-day school weeks, visit sites.google.com/view/four-day-school-week/home.

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