When Five Days Becomes Four

By Swathi Kolli | October 24, 2019

When students are only in school four days a week, they lose access to critical services, including subsidized lunch.

Just over a year ago, Colorado school district Brighton 27J permanently switched to a four-day school week. This district, which serves nearly 18,000 students northeast of Denver, is now one of 560 districts nationwide that have adopted this model. The trend, unheard of in many East Coast schools, is spreading rapidly through the South and West as local school boards attempt to mitigate the effects of teacher shortages, costly utilities, and strained budgets.

Although the new schedule seems like a good solution to these growing problems, it disserves students in the long run. By cutting the number of days spent learning, the schedule increases the burden placed upon students to comprehend material outside of class. Furthermore, a four-day school week also undercuts the social functions of school as a form of daycare and a source of meals for low-income families, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities. In order to limit these measures that widen the achievement gap among students, it is imperative that the federal government sets national educational standards that equalize educational experiences among different districts.

Tighter Budgets, Creative Solutions

In Colorado, the home of Brighton 27J, the cause for these shorter school weeks can be traced to declining education funds. In 2016, the state ranked 39th among the 50 states and Washington, D.C., for per-pupil spending in public schools, trailing about $2,000 behind the national average of $11,762 per student. In an interview with NBC News, Brighton Superintendent Chris Fielder anticipated that cutting the school week would...
save about $1 million per year. However, experts agree that the four-day school week does not save a considerable amount of money for school districts, and a study by the Education Commission of the States found that districts that made the switch saved only between 0.4 and 2.5 percent of their budgets.

In addition to potential monetary savings, the shorter school week has been praised as a strategy to retain teachers. Prior to implementing the changes, District 273 suffered “the lowest teacher salaries in the Denver area” and had a turnover rate of 22 percent. As a result, local schools fell victim to chronic teacher shortages. Fielder viewed the four-day school week as a way to attract qualified teachers wanting another day off, a method that has so far proven successful: once the change was implemented, the job fair attracted 500 applicants as opposed to the 200 of the year prior.

However, this solution only puts a bandage on top of the real issue of depressed teacher salaries. In Oklahoma, for instance, many districts made the switch after seeing teachers leaving the state for better-paying jobs. One district in the state, Newcastle, was able to save about $110,000 from its $12 million annual budget, but teacher salaries still did not change. Oklahoma as a whole still falls 49th in the nation for teachers' salaries. The four-day school week, then, only superficially addresses the funding and staffing problems, while ignoring the underlying issues.

**Unintended Outcomes**

Although the shortened school week has resulted in certain gains, the new schedule has broader implications that must also be considered. Some, for instance, have pointed to an improvement in academic performance resulting from the change, but this can be a red herring. Despite apparent temporary gains in performance, other studies have found that the change has resulted in broader consequences that often go overlooked in the debate over the measure’s immediate effects. Tim Tharp, Montana’s deputy state superintendent of education, studied the long-term effects of the four-day schedule and found that while students made academic gains in the first year, attainment declined over the next four or five years.

Furthermore, the four-day schedule has proven to have especially pronounced negative effects in underserved school districts. The reduction in school days places a strain on low-income neighborhoods, where families depend on a five-day school week for meals and daycare. A study conducted by the University of Oregon’s Department of Economics found that the adoption of the four-day week in the state had “detrimental impacts” on student achievement, especially among low-income students. This has the effect of increasing the educational attainment gap and inequality within public schools.

**Another Way**

The only way to mitigate these negative effects is to ensure that all students are in school five days a week; in fact, the answer to improving student performance is likely more school, not less. In 2016, the Boston Public School System implemented a program known as Expanded Learning Time, which lengthened all five school days by 40 minutes. A two-year study on its academic effects found improvement in mathematics and language arts among students. It also helped bridge the achievement gap between students of different demographic groups, showing a positive impact on the performance of Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students, and English language learners. Clearly, equalizing the educational experience begins by increasing the time and frequency of schooling.

In order to implement such changes in rural districts with dwindling funding, it is necessary to increase education spending and set federal and not just state education standards. As Michael Goldstein argues in The New York Times, having national education standards can benefit at-risk students and equalize educational practices across state lines. In this way, standardizing the five day school week will ensure that all students have access to a consistent education. National standards must also be set to ensure that teacher salaries are high enough to attract qualified professionals without having to cut down the school week. If greater funds were allocated to schools from the national budget instead of local sources, the quality and length of a school week would not vary so much from state to state.

By adopting these changes, the national government can ensure that all state education systems are adhering to the same standards, without allowing for students in money-strapped communities to fall through the cracks.

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