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A Creative Solution to the Traditional School Schedule

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Abstract: This article examines the current traditional school schedule and its effects on teacher retention, student engagement, morale, and overall academic success. This article also explores the pros and cons of a four-day school week and offers an alternative weekly structure.

Keywords: four-day school, teacher retention, burnout, schedule

Introduction

Forbes Magazine Contributor Nick Morrison (2019) states, “The teacher shortage is reaching crisis levels as the number of educators leaving after just one year in the classroom has hit an all-time high” (para 1). In America, the number of teacher resignations has climbed to a shockingly high rate and more than 200,000 teachers are leaving the profession each year (Podolsky, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). According to a Yahoo Lifestyle survey of 50 instructors (Hagiage, 2019), teachers are leaving the classroom due to budget cuts, classroom discipline issues including student violence, unrealistic and overburdensome teacher requirements, and standardized testing that squelches creativity in the classroom. These display only a few of our problems within the current educational system. It is time to explore some desperately needed solutions.

As a teacher for over 15 years, and an Academy Director for educationally challenged middle schoolers for three, I have tirelessly searched for a solution to solve the issue of student disengagement and teacher burnout. It was only after many years of observation and trial and error that I was able to find a possible solution to this problem, and the answer may shock you.

Traditionally, public school systems operate at a five-day school week schedule, roughly beginning at 8:00 a.m. and ending at 3:00 p.m. This is similar to an average adult’s work week, minus two hours – which is a tiresome schedule for young, energetic, and frankly, bored, adolescents in the classroom. Here we will look at the pros and cons of the four-day school week. Additionally, for those who need an alternative to this four-day solution, we will discuss the traditional five-day schedule when it is accompanied by an “Elective Friday.” In the same way adults look forward to “Casual Friday” or “Payday Friday” at the office, students and teachers will have a chance to feel a payoff for their hard work on the fifth school day.

Pros of the Four-Day School Week

It is no surprise that teachers are leaving the field of education at startling rates, and many schools are looking for solutions to their shrinking finances, lack of teacher retention, and increasingly negative student behavior. “Stress and burnout are pervasive among public school teachers” (Israel et al., 2020, p. 794). I believe implementing a four-day school week could be the answer we have been searching for.

The number of rural school districts switching to a four-day school week growing, and many districts have chosen the four-day school week including Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma and Oregon (Walker, 2019). In Colorado, 62 districts now follow a four-day schedule (Hewitt & Denny, 2018). In Missouri, 33 of the public schools have run on the four-day school schedule since 2010 and have seen impressive results (Hewitt & Denny, 2018). Many of these schools switched to a four-day week to improve the recruiting and retention of good teachers, increase professional development, and to balance their budget. Specialists have documented better attendance, improved morale, and less disciplinary problems since making the switch (Hewitt & Denny, 2018).

As a result, many schools have switched to a four-day week for financial reasons, to improve recruitment and retention of good teachers, and to increase time for professional development. These have resulted in a reduced number of student and staff absences, extra time for teachers to collaborate and plan, and a decrease in student disciplinary issues.

One positive outcome of the four-day school week was found that students were more engaged in extracurricular activities (Israel et al., 2020). Other positive outcomes include financial savings for the school districts (Yarbrough & Gilman, 2006). Contributors of the National Rural Education Association, Turner, Finch & Uribe-Zurain (2019), conducted a study of three rural school districts in the first year of the four-day school schedule. What they found was strong support for the four-day week from a high majority of the parents and positive responses from the students. Interestingly enough, in Merryville, Louisiana, students’ ACT scores rose, and the number of honor roll students doubled as a result of the four-day week switch (Turner, Finch & Uribe-Zurain, 2019).

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Cons of the Four-Day School Week

While this alternative schedule may present itself with numerous benefits, all students are unique learners and not every child is guaranteed to be personally benefited. I recommend a four-day school week based out of successful experiences with my own students over time. For instance, the impact of switching to a four-day school schedule was at the center of a study done by Hewitt and Denny (2018). They found that overall, the five-day schools scored slightly better than the four-day schools. Their data concluded that student academic scoring should not be the determining factor for starting a four-day school week.

In a study on Midwest rural school districts (Turner, Finch & Uribe-Zarain, 2019), Missouri parents expressed concern for four-day school weeks regarding the lack of childcare for their elementary and special needs children on Fridays. Another concern was that children would not be provided lunches on Fridays if schools were closed. Another study done by Tharp, Matt, and O'Reilly (2016) found evidence suggesting that students of the four-day school week may not achieve the academic level of success as students in the five-day setting. Despite these concerns, the majority of the families who were surveyed remained supportive of the four-day schedule.

Personal Experience with the Four-Day School Week

Knowing the research presenting the pros and the cons of the four-day school week, I would now like to share what I have experienced and how I am achieving success within my academy for educationally challenged middle level students. For the first 15 years of my teaching career, I taught in a K-12 private school that followed a four-day week school. As a teacher and a mother of five children, I highly appreciated this schedule for many reasons, and it was clear that my fellow teachers preferred it as well. Many of us used Fridays at home for planning and grading, as well as taking our children to the dentist, doctor, and other necessary appointments.

Additionally, several times a year we were asked to attend professional development seminars or conferences, many of them being on Fridays and Saturdays. I noticed that, even though we attended workshops a few weekends throughout the year, teachers did not mind investing the extra time. I rarely experienced teacher burnout and often felt refreshed when Monday came around. My older children also attended a four-day school and especially benefited from the extra day to explore internship opportunities, attend lessons, or simply catch up on their sleep.

Alternative Solution to the Four-Day School Week: "Hands-On Friday"

At the academy I direct for educationally challenged students, we serve middle level learners who struggle to succeed in normal classroom settings and prefer to work in very small, tutorial classrooms. My academy offers core classes in a multi-sensory, project-oriented fashion. Before becoming the academy's director, I was a teacher at this academy Monday through Thursday, continuing my previous work schedule.

When I became director three years ago, I began to work the regular five-day school week because most of our parents preferred us to be open on the fifth day. Our students needed a day at the end of the week to not only apply what they have learned during the week, but to do it in a way that encouraged proper socialization, teamwork, and lots of fun! This was where I began to see that, even if a four-day school week is not feasible for an academy or school, there are still alternatives to the dreaded five-day schedule. I soon realized that our Friday classes could use a major facelift, so with a little creative thinking, I found the solution that has worked wonders for us.

I came up with the idea of a "Hands-On Friday." I wanted to bring the joy into our educational journey, which I believe I found with this new plan. On Fridays, we instituted a class called "Practical Math" which incorporates everyday activities to make harder subjects easier. Activities included following a recipe to understand fractions, grocery shopping to calculate sales taxes, and building blocks to visualize width and depth. We also go on traditional field trips, such as exploring local science museums. For our history class, students engage in hands-on projects and historical dramatizations. To allow our teachers a planning period and time for professional development, we outsource our Friday Science Lab, Taekwondo, and one elective.

I wanted to bring the joy into our educational journey, which I believe I found with this new plan.

Conclusion

It is my personal and professional recommendation that schools will benefit exponentially if they forego the traditional five-day week and adopt a four-day school week instead. "Stress and burnout are pervasive among public school teachers" (Bottiani et al., 2019, p. 36). If this alternative is not possible, my recommendation is to then consider adopting my "Hands-On Friday" program. At our Academy, we have found that our students now look forward to Fridays, instead of dreading yet another day in the classroom. Our teachers are also each given two free blocks on Fridays for planning and grading, which has successfully prevented burnout. As a result, our students have become confident middle schoolers who are project-oriented, and their attitudes toward school have changed for the better. Students feel more engaged, and teachers experience less stress as compared to the regular five-day school week. Though not every child will respond the same to a four-day school week – and teachers will come and go – I am confident that if we as educators do not change our aging routines and do what is best for our students, we will be doing a disservice, not only to students, but to the education field as a whole! Let us listen to the children – their struggles, desires, and tendencies – and give them the freedom to learn in a way they are excited about, not in a way they are dreading. It would behoove all educators, superintendents, and board members to be receptive to new ideas that may offer empowerment, encouragement, and increased engagement.

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About the Author



Lisa Rivera is a graduate student at USC and has most recently directed a private middle school for students who struggle in typical classroom settings. She has over 15 years of classroom teaching experience and specializes in working with students with learning differences using a creative and engaging approach.

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