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What Savings are Produced by Moving to a Four-Day School Week?

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Moving To a Shorter School Week

Due to the current economic downturn, policymakers have been looking for budgetary options that allow for reductions in expenditures without impacting student achievement. One cost-cutting policy that some states and districts have adopted is to keep instructional time the same but shorten the school week. A recent [policy](#) brief from ECS found that approximately 120 districts in 17 states have made the move to a four-day school week. But the question still exists — what cost savings, if any, are produced? This report shows what savings a district might realistically expect to realize when moving to a four-day week.

The perception by some is that if the school week is reduced by one day, or 20%, school expenses will also be reduced by 20%. This assumption is far from the reality. When a school or district moves to a four-day week, it adjusts staff schedules so that each employee continues to work the same number of hours over a four-day period instead of five days. So what are the real cost savings that a school or district can expect when moving to a shortened week?

How Much Can Districts Save?

Because of the unique characteristics of school districts, it is impossible to produce a cost savings estimate applicable to all schools. However, using national finance data supported by information from individual districts, ECS has determined that the average district could produce **a maximum savings of 5.43%** of its total budget by moving to a four-day week. In addition, it was found that districts that moved to a four-day week have experienced actual savings of only between **0.4% and 2.5%**. While these savings might seem small, they have often proved large enough for districts to make the move and reduce their school week by one day.

Bisbee Unified School District

The experience of the Bisbee Unified Schools in Arizona is typical of most districts that use a four-day week.

The district's forecasting showed that a four-day week would produce a savings of 17.7% for utility costs, 17.4% for student transportation costs and 16.7% for custodial costs. The total predicted cost savings to the district was \$154,000 annually, or 2.5% of the district's total budget.

The district's superintendent acknowledged that the savings might not be as large as some had anticipated, but the 2.5% in budgetary savings were large enough to justify the districts continued use of a four-day week.

What are the Maximum Cost Savings?

Common sense would lead you to believe that teacher salaries and benefits would be greatly reduced by moving to a four-day week, but that is not the case. In fact, ECS found that the cost savings to teacher salaries and benefits was a paltry 0.03% (for a full description, see the section entitled “Instructional Costs”). ECS analysis found that the largest savings could be produced by reducing operations and maintenance, school administration, student support, transportation and food services costs. Transportation costs could be reduced by a maximum of 20% by eliminating a single day of school busing. Operations and maintenance costs could be reduced by approximately 14% by reducing janitorial and energy costs by 20%. Savings could be produced in school administration (18.9% reduction), student support (17.6% reduction) and other support (13% reduction) by reducing all of the schools non-teaching positions by 20%. Combined, this would produce a maximum savings of 5.43%.

Budget Item	Percentage of Total Expenditures	Costs Reduced by a 4-Day Week?	Maximum Potential Savings to a District's Overall Budget
Operations & Maintenance	9.74%	Yes	1.36%
School Administration	5.59%	Yes	1.06%
Student Support	5.40%	Yes	0.95%
Transportation	4.25%	Yes	0.85%
Food Services	3.79%	Yes	0.76%
Other Support	3.22%	Yes	0.42%
Instruction	60.82%	Yes	0.03%
Instructional Staff Services	5.00%	No	
General Administration	1.96%	No	
Enterprise Operations	0.23%	No	
Total	100.0%		5.43%
<p>Note: To determine cost savings, ECS reviewed federal educational expenditure data in conjunction with information from districts that had moved to a four-day week. For information about educational expenditure, ECS used data from the U.S. Department of Education's 2010 Digest of Education Statistics. This publication contains information from the 2007-08 budget/school year.</p>			

Why Does the Four-Day Week Not Produce Larger Cost Savings?

Educator pay and benefits are the single largest expense in public education, accounting for 65% of all education spending. A common misunderstanding is that when a district moves to a four-day week, they will be reducing teacher pay and benefits by one-fifth. That has not been the case.

ECS was unable to find any district that moved to a four-day week and reduced either teachers' pay or benefits. This is because moving to a four-day week still requires instructional staff to work the same amount of hours per week — just spread over four days instead of five. In addition, no district has reported any substantial reduction in non-classroom staff, although some have reported reducing hours for some transportation and support staff. On average, non-educator staff salaries account for 15% of public education spending. This means that when moving to a four-day week, approximately 80% of education spending is essentially unaffected by the change.

What Costs Could Be Reduced by Moving to a Four-Day Week?

The following are the potential savings that a district could expect to achieve when moving to a four-day week:

- **Instructional costs** include teacher salaries and benefits, tuition paid to other schools/districts, and purchased services and supplies that are used directly in the classroom.
Potential budget savings: 0.03%

The only instructional costs savings that districts experienced when moving to a four-day week was a reduction in the costs of providing substitute teachers. Some districts estimated that they saved up to 20% of their substitute costs by moving to a four-day week — the equivalent of a **maximum total budget savings of 0.03%**. For a district to achieve these savings, it must experience a 20% reduction in the number of substitute teacher days. In addition, it must be able to find substitute teachers who are willing to work for approximately one hour more each day without additional pay.

- **Operations and Maintenance** are as the name suggests, the expenditures associated with operating and maintaining a school building. These can include heating and cooling costs, janitorial services and supplies needed to maintain the school.
Potential budget savings: 1.36%

If a district were able to go without maintenance staff on its non-teaching day, it could reduce its overall expenditures by 0.96%. In addition, if the school were not in operation on the non-teaching day, it could decrease its heating/cooling and electrical costs, thus producing an additional savings of 0.4%. Collectively, these operations and maintenance savings add up to 1.36%. Because most schools remain open and in operation on the non-teaching day, districts' reported fuel and electricity costs decreased by 10-15%, which would produce an overall budgetary savings of about 0.05%. In addition, districts reported little if any savings in maintenance costs. This could be due to the fact that they continued to have their maintenance staff work five-day weeks, or that they moved their staff to longer shifts over four days.

- **School Administration** includes costs associated with the principal's office, as well as expenditures for full-time department chairs and general graduation expenses.
Potential budget savings: 1.06%

If districts reduced their school administration staff's pay and benefits by 20% when moving to a four-day week, they could produce an overall budget savings of 1.06%. Districts did report some savings in administrative costs — but it appears that those cost savings were significantly less than the 1.06% saving. The reduced amount of savings was probably because only some support staff had their salaries adjusted,

while higher-level administrative staff (principals and vice principals) did not see a reduction in their compensation.

- **Student Support and Other Support Services:** *Student support services* are student educational expenses that exist outside of the traditional classroom setting and can include the costs for student guidance, health, attendance and speech pathology services. *Other Support Services* are the expenses that districts incur for the daily operations of the school system, such as planning, research and evaluation costs, IT expenditures and other support services.

Potential budget savings: 1.37%

If districts reduced the pay and benefits of individuals involved in these activities by 20%, this could produce an overall cost savings of 1.37%. However, like many of the other staff in the schools that moved to a four-day week, these individuals apparently continue to work the same number of hours — just spread over four days instead of five. Thus, little to no real cost savings are produced.

- **Student Transportation** represents all of the costs of transporting students to and from school and to extracurricular/sporting events.

Potential budget savings: 0.85%

If a district moved to a four-day school week, it could reduce its transportation costs by up to 20%. A 20% reduction in transportation costs would produce an overall budget savings of 0.85%. While some districts reported a reduction of up to 20% in transportation costs, ECS found the actual savings to be less.¹ Most districts reported that some school activities that required busing — such as extracurricular activities or special education programs — took place on the non-teaching day. Because of this, districts tended to reduce their transportation costs by an amount closer to 10% rather than 20%. A 10% savings in transportation costs would produce an overall savings of .43% of the district's budget.

- **Food Service** includes the costs of providing any food services to students during the school day. The largest single cost in this line item is the expense of providing low-income students with a free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast.

Potential budget savings: 0.76%

If a district eliminated its food service on the fifth non-teaching day, it could produce an overall budget savings of 0.76%. However, most districts' food service programs operate on a break-even basis due to the fact that they receive government subsidies for low-income students, and other students are charged the cost of their food. That means that any reduction in costs would most likely be off-set by a reduction in revenue.

Costs Not Affected by Moving to a Four-Day Week

Three educational expenditure areas are not reduced when moving to a four-day week: instructional staff services, general administrative costs and enterprise operations.

- **Instructional staff services** include expenditures that schools/districts incur for curriculum development, staff training, library operations and media/computer centers. These expenses account for **5.0%** of public education expenditures.

Why these costs are not impacted

Costs such as curriculum development and staff training remain fixed regardless of the length of the school week. Other non-instructional costs such as library or media/computer center operations could be decreased by reducing staff pay to reflect fewer hours, but our analysis determined that districts did not reduce staff hours. They simply spread staff time for these services over four days.

- **General administrative costs** are district-level expenditures and include costs associated with the superintendent’s office and all school board expenses. These expenses account for just under **2%** of public education expenditures.

Why these costs are not impacted

While the schools may have been open only four days a week, central office functions continued to operate on a regular five-day schedule.

- **Enterprise Operations** are programs that take place on school property that provide services or goods to students (i.e. student-run stores). These expenses account for **0.23%** of public education expenditures.

Why these costs are not impacted

This absence of savings could be because enterprise operations are such a small budget item (accounting for less than one-quarter of 1% of all education spending) that even if cost savings were produced, districts might have determined that the numbers were insignificant in the scope of the overall budget to not warrant reporting.

What Are the Realistic Costs Savings?

To determine the realistic savings that a district could expect to achieve when moving to a four-day week, ECS reviewed financial data from six school districts that are either currently making use of a four-day week or are in the process of moving to a four-day week. These six districts estimated saving between 0.4% and 2.5% of their total budgets by moving to a four-day week. These actual savings are substantially less than the maximum savings that a district might anticipate by moving to a four-day week.

While several factors can account for potential and actual savings, one stands out: *Each district continued to make use of its schools on the fifth non-teaching day.* Reported reasons for schools to be open on the fifth day include teacher training, student extracurricular activities (including sports) and additional learning programs for at-risk students. Opening the school on the fifth non-teaching day decreases savings from reduced heating/cooling of the school, transportation and maintenance.

District	Estimated Savings Produced by Moving to a Four-Day Week	Savings as a % of the District’s Budget
<u>Bisbee Unified School District (AZ)</u>	\$154,000	2.5%
<u>Duval County Public Schools (FL)</u>	\$7 million	0.7%
<u>Lake Superior School District (MN)</u>	\$200,000 to \$250,000	1.0% to 1.2%
<u>North Branch Area Public Schools (MN)</u>	\$123,000	0.4%
<u>Pueblo County School District 70 (CO)</u>	\$1.1 million	2.0%
<u>Salida School District (R-32-J) (CO)</u>	\$167,000	1.9%

Without Large Cost Savings – Why Make the Switch?

If a change to a four-day week might only produce a realistic cost savings of up to 2.5%, why are districts still considering it as an option? While cost savings might not be large, they are cost savings none the less. In the Duval school district, moving to a four-day week produce only a 0.7% savings, yet that resulted in a budget reduction of \$7 million. That \$7 million could be used to retain up to 70 teaching positions. When faced with a choice of reducing the school week by one day or letting 70 teachers go, it is easy to see why some school administrators have chosen to go with the four-day week.

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ECS members can access the full data set used to make this estimate by contacting Michael Griffith at (mgriffith@ecs.org)

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¹ Stan Koki, *Modified School Schedules: A Look at the Research and the Pacific*. (Honolulu, Hawaii: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. November, 1992), <http://www.prel.org/products/Products/Modified-schedule.htm> (accessed September 13, 2010)