


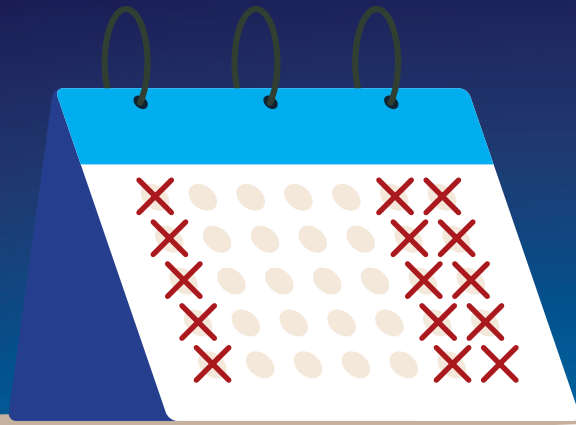
DOING LESS WITH LESS:

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How a four-day school week affects
student learning and the teacher workforce



KEYSTONE
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DOING LESS WITH LESS:

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INTRODUCTION

Reece Blincoe came from Texas to lead the tiny Dolores School District RE-4A in southwestern Colorado in the summer of 2021 and immediately realized he had a problem.

Many neighboring districts were operating on a four-day school week, but in Dolores, students attended school for five days. As a result, the district was having a hard time attracting and keeping teachers, especially with the low salaries it could afford to offer.

So Blincoe, who had previously worked in rural districts in Texas, moved quickly to do what other rural Colorado superintendents had concluded was the only sensible course of action: he switched the district to a four-day schedule.

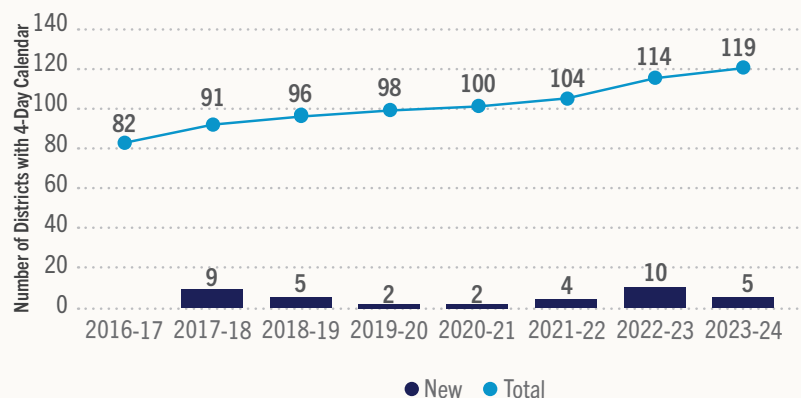
“The single reason we made this change was to try to retain teachers,” he said. “The pay was extremely low (\$30,000 for a new teacher when he arrived; \$37,000 now), and the board felt that giving those extra days off was a big way to try to recruit and retain teachers.”

Has it worked? Initially, Blincoe said, attrition seemed to slow. But then the following year, the nearby, larger Montezuma-Cortez Re-1 School District switched to a four-day week, joining Dolores, Mancos, and Dove Creek. Whatever recruiting and retaining advantage Dolores might have had all but vanished.

Of course, Blincoe said, there is no way to know how much worse the situation would have become had Dolores not switched to the four-day week. “So now we’re all just back to fighting over who can pay their people more and benefits and things like that,” Blincoe said.

Blincoe’s situation in Dolores is not unusual. In recent years, particularly post-COVID, the number of four-day districts has grown dramatically. In 2022-23, 64 percent (119 of 185) districts in Colorado were primarily composed of schools with four-day school weeks. In 2016-17 there were 82 four-day districts.

4 DAY DISTRICTS



The first four-day districts came online in the early 1980s, after the state legislature passed a law allowing more calendar flexibility for public schools.¹ Since then, the phenomenon has grown steadily, mostly in small, rural districts. Some districts have added hours to each school day to meet state minimum requirements of 1,080 hours in school per year. Others have pared down school time to be closer to that annual minimum.

The four-day trend shows signs of spreading to larger districts as well. Pueblo City 60, a district of 15,000 kids, went to a four-day week in 2018-19. And starting with that same school year, Brighton 27J, just northeast of Denver, with just over 23,000 students, became the largest school district in the country to switch to a four-day week.

In interviews with superintendents across Colorado, recruiting and retaining teachers emerged as far and away the biggest factor for switching to a four-day week. Almost no one said the change was necessarily in the academic interest of students. Some argued that the effect on academic achievement has been negligible, and said that the positive impact on student mental health has outweighed any academic concerns. Initial hopes that cutting the number of days would result in budget savings proved to be a chimera.

Brighton made the switch after failing six straight times to pass a mill levy override, which would have allowed the district to boost teacher salaries. “If you were to ask me if we would ever had gone to a four-day week had we passed the mill levy override in 2017, my answer would unequivocally be no, we would not have done that,” said Chris Fiedler, the Brighton superintendent for 12 years before retiring in the spring of 2024. “But when you’re trying to attract quality adults to work with kids in an incredibly competitive environment, we had to do something different.”

Since switching, Fiedler said, the impact on student achievement as measured by state tests has been “neutral – it’s not any better or any worse.” Graduation rates, however, have improved, he said.

Chris Gdowski, the superintendent in Adams 12 Five Star Schools, adjacent to Brighton, has thus far resisted moving to a four-day week. While he said he has talked to many students who believe a shorter week might help them with mental health pressures, Gdowski said he and some parents share concerns about the approach.

“Lots of students are going to get in this place of not being prepared to work a five-day-a-week job as adults, developing those kinds of work habits,” if they grow accustomed to four-day school weeks, he said.

This report will provide both a quantitative and qualitative examination of Colorado’s four-day school week phenomenon. The state trails only Missouri² in this practice and therefore it behooves local researchers to examine its impacts.

We will begin with a brief review of national research on the four-day school week movement. Next, using Colorado Department of Education data, we will delve into the impacts on student achievement, teacher talent, and enrollment. Next, we will explore how the four-day school week has affected districts in rural southwestern Colorado and in the Denver metro area, focused on Brighton 27J and its neighbor to the west, Adams 12.

Finally, we will discuss policy implications of our findings, as well as some recommendations.

The four-day school week has strong proponents and detractors, and (spoiler alert) the data in Colorado gives neither side a clear upper hand (although national research is more conclusive). But feelings run high. Philip Qualman, the superintendent of Eagle County Schools, which operates on a five-day calendar, has so far resisted the lure of the four-day week.

“

But when you’re trying to attract quality adults to work with kids in an incredibly competitive environment, we had to do something different.”

Chris Fiedler
Retired Brighton
superintendent

¹ <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/reducedacademiccalendar>

² <https://kdvr.com/news/colorado/4-day-school-week-colorado/>

“It’s a travesty. Colorado is among the leaders in the nation in the four-day week and I think we should be embarrassed by that,” Qualman said. But he was careful to blame the state’s low funding of education, and not superintendents and school boards, for the situation.

“We have to acknowledge that our funding is so poor in this state that we’re simply not competitive in a market that is tighter than it has ever been in modern history for public school educators. We simply do not have adequate numbers of qualified applicants to fill our openings in Colorado.”

The practice has equally strong supporters. Jean Schneider, who teaches business classes at Prairie View High School in Brighton, said the four-day week gives educators and students alike time to take care of other issues so that they can focus intently during their four days together in school.

“It really has improved my personal quality of life, which makes me a better professional,” Schneider said. “And I have a lot of students who have to work to support their families, and so Mondays off from school gives them one more day to help with that household income and to get caught up on homework.”

Let’s examine what the data show about the impact of four-day school weeks on school districts first nationally, then in Colorado.

What national research shows

While this report focuses on the impact of four-day school weeks in Colorado, the topic has in recent years become the focus of significant academic research that is national in scope. Here are some key findings from the national research.

- Most studies found that four-day school weeks had a negative impact on student achievement and academic growth.³ There are also indicators that it can lower student graduation rates. However, the degree of impact varied based on a range of factors including school setting, gender,⁴ and amount of instructional time.⁵
- Several small studies suggest that moving to a four-day week can have a positive impact on teacher retention, although they also note that other factors including professional learning can be just as important.⁶
- Some reports also look at other potential impacts of four-day school weeks on students. One study suggests negative impacts on students’ physical health,⁷ while another suggests it leads to a decrease in bullying, which can improve student mental health.⁸
- Some studies suggest that four day weeks can have a positive impact on attendance,⁹ while another shows it may lead to an increase in chronic absenteeism among high school students.¹⁰

³ <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai22-630>

⁴ <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai22-630>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775721001138?via%3Dihub>

⁶ <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1086&context=dissertations;%20https://www.proquest.com/docview/2065075103>

⁷ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josh.13095>

⁸ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-interesting-effects-4-day-weeks-may-have-on-school-climate/2022/06>

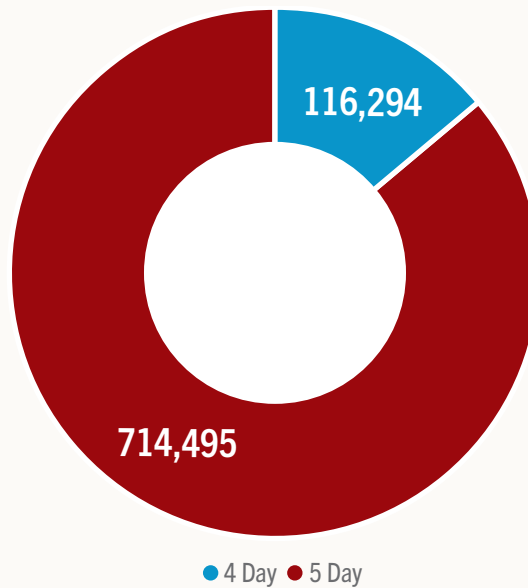
⁹ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-popularity-of-4-day-school-weeks-in-charts/2024/01>

¹⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09645292.2021.2006610>

Keystone research on Colorado impacts

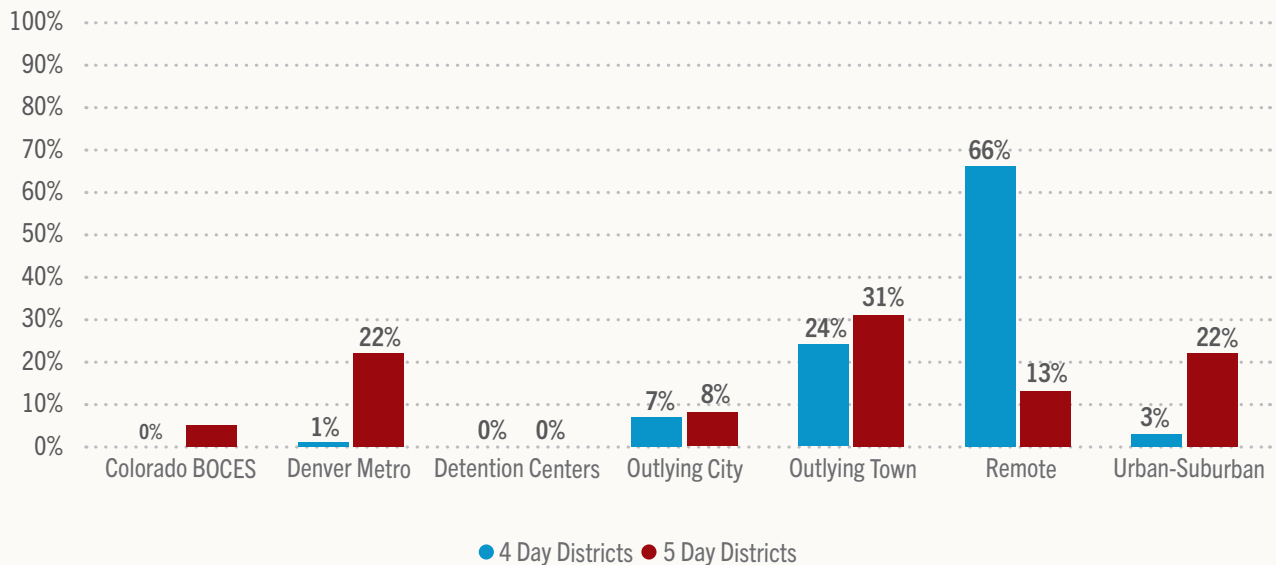
As mentioned in the introduction, while most Colorado districts have adopted a four-day calendar, they are not fully representative of the state’s population. These districts have historically tended to be much smaller and more rural than other districts, though those trends have begun to change. In 2022-23, despite more than 60 percent of districts being on a four-day schedule, only 14 percent of students attended one of these districts. The average four-day district is under 1,000 students, compared to almost 10,000 for five-day districts.

2023-24 ENROLLMENT



Additionally, while four-day weeks used to be an exclusively rural phenomenon, it has slowly begun to spread into urban/suburban areas. It remains, however, much more common in remote settings. Two-thirds of four-day districts are in remote settings, compared to only 13 percent of five-day districts.

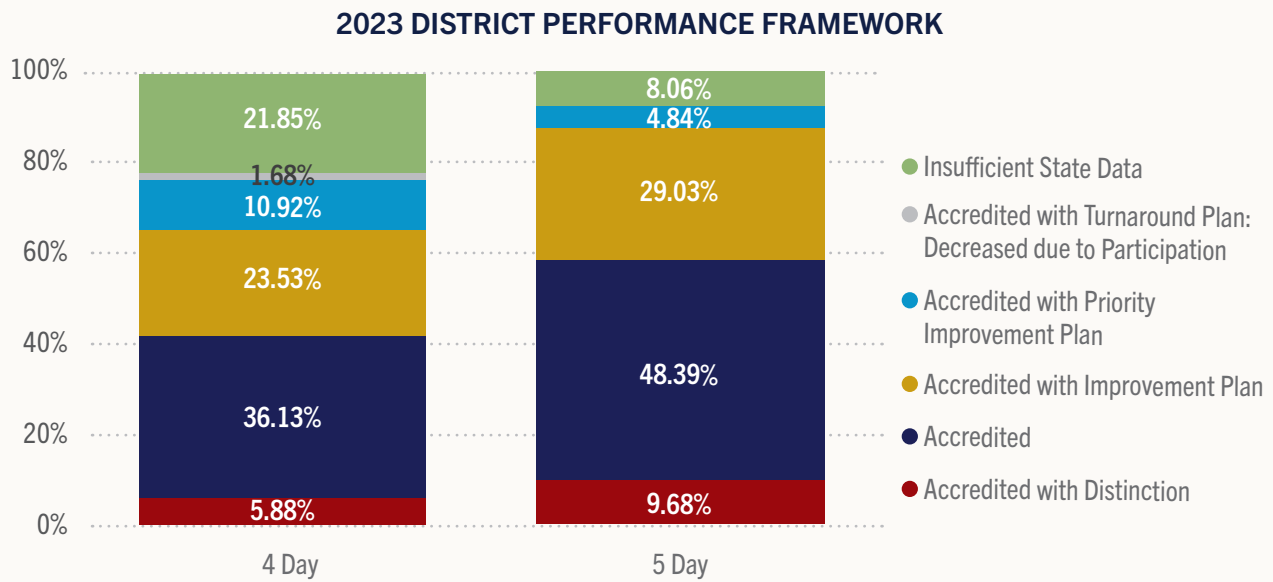
DISTRICT SETTING



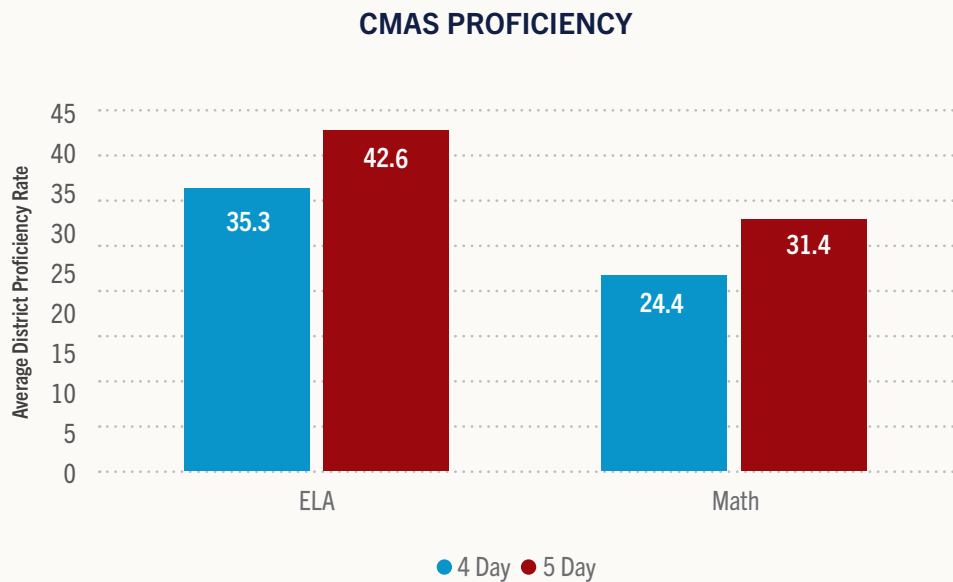
When studying the impact of a four-day calendar on students, academic achievement is of paramount importance. This section unpacks the differences in academic outcomes between four- and five-day districts. It is important, however, to remember that academic proficiency is often heavily correlated with demographics, so differences in student demographics must be taken into consideration.

In Colorado there are some areas where five-day districts outperform four-day districts though these gaps are not as significant as some of those found in national research. A range of factors could explain this, including how instructional time is used, how school-day off programs support student learning, and other policy and practice differences between these districts.

When looking at overall district performance as measured by Colorado’s District Performance Framework, five-day districts significantly outperform districts with a four-day calendar.

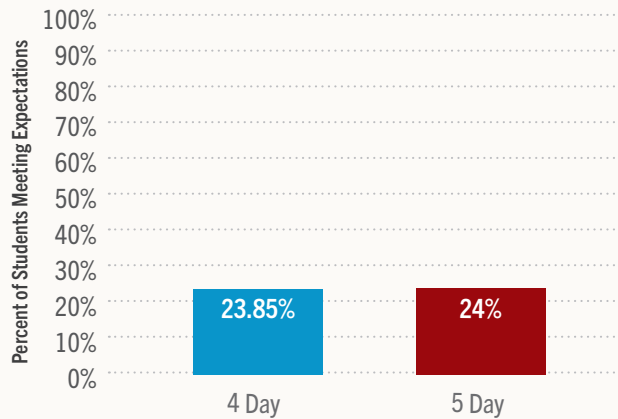


When looking at CMAS proficiency rates (a key input to the DPF), five-day districts also outperform their four-day peers.



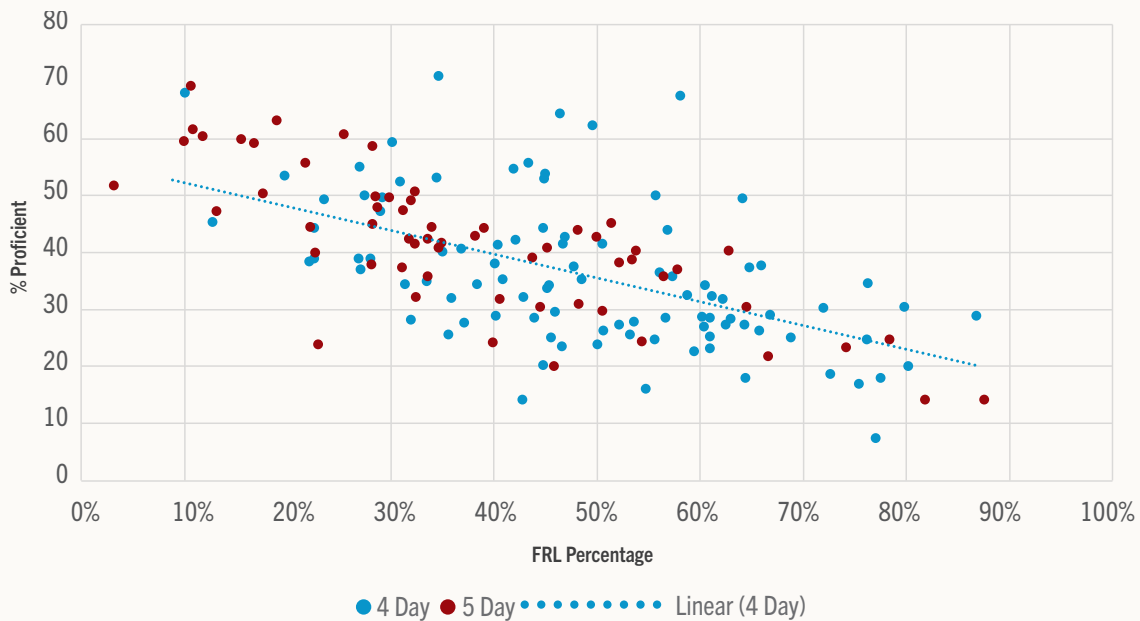
However, when looking only at the performance of FRL students the gap is largely insignificant. This suggests that much of the difference in proficiency rates might be a result of differences in demographics.

2023 CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY: FRL STUDENTS

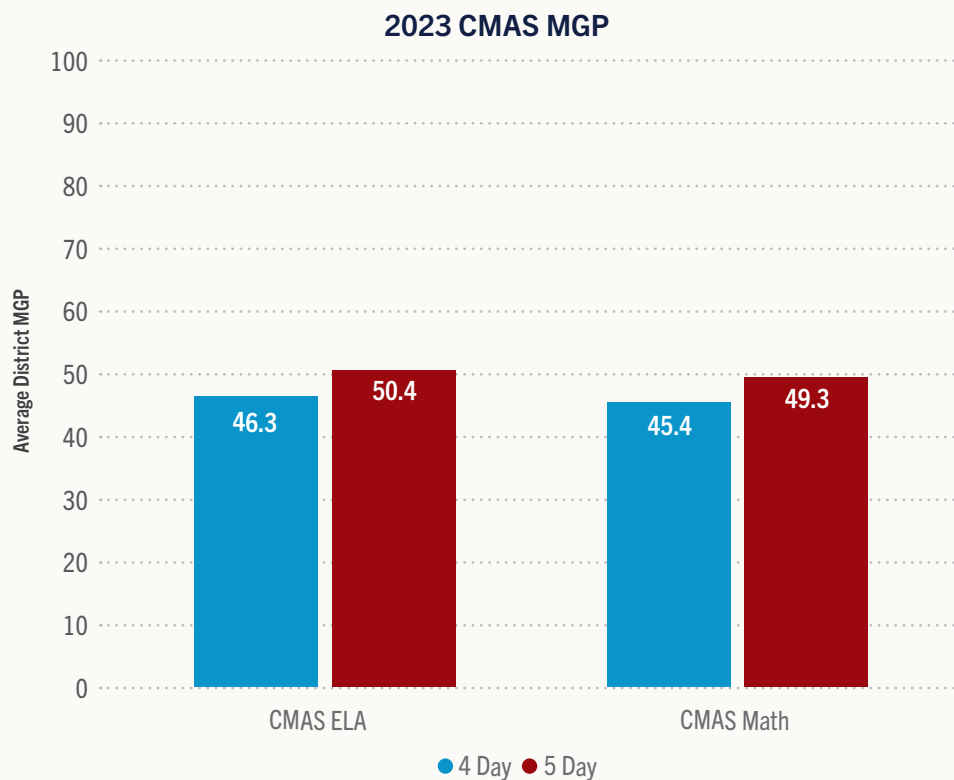


When looking at CMAS ELA proficiency and FRL percentage, there is a stronger correlation between the two in five-day districts ($r^2=.6067$) than in four-day ($r^2=.285$) districts. Four-day districts tended to have more outliers than in five-day districts.

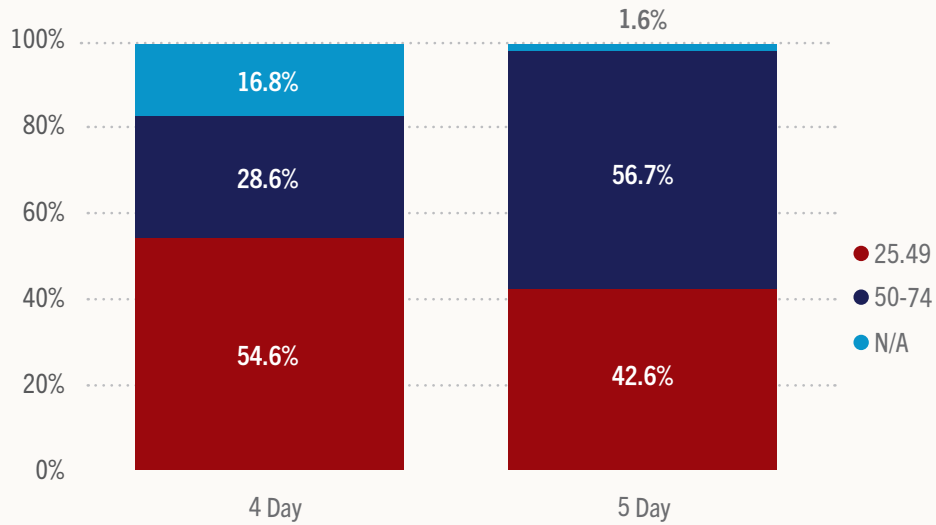
2023 CMAS ELA AND DEMOGRAPHICS



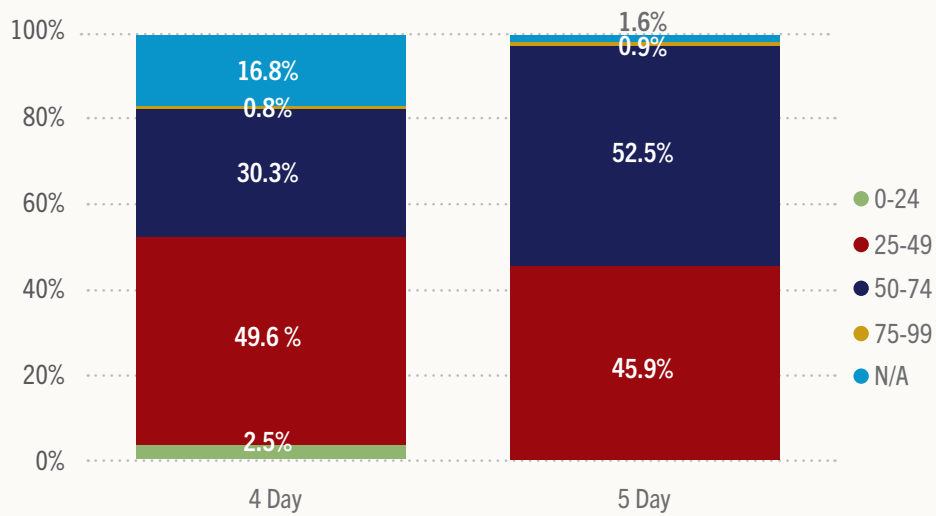
While proficiency is strongly correlated with demographics, student growth is less so. When looking at student growth data and comparing four- and five-day districts the evidence suggests that students in five-day districts are making more progress towards the standards than those in four-day districts, though neither group is making sufficient progress to reach mastery. Five-day districts have significantly higher Median Growth Percentiles than four-day districts, a trend that was similar in 2022 and in 2019 was true for math and to a smaller degree in ELA. Additionally, a greater percentage of five-day districts have CMAS MGPs above 50, indicating that their students are showing as much or more growth than their peers, while more four-day districts have MGPs that suggest students are falling behind their peers. However, in looking at the shifts in proficiency rates from 2019 to 2023 as another measure of growth, there is not a significant difference based on schedule which suggest both groups are not making large progress towards student mastery.

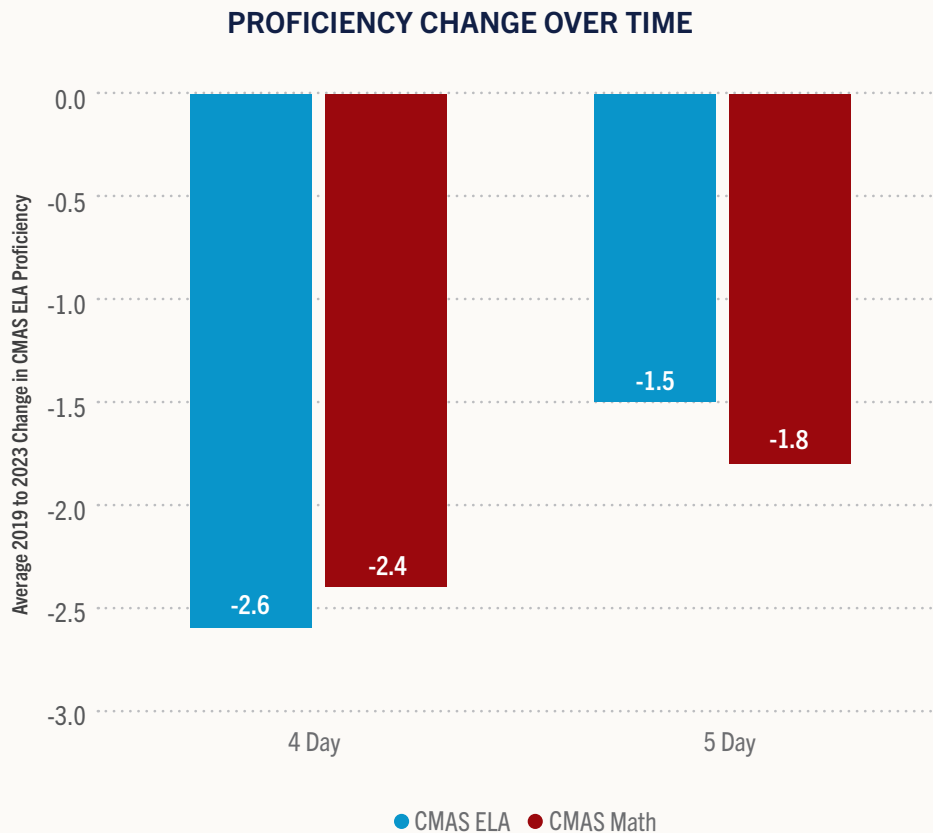


2023 CMAS ELA MGP DISTRIBUTION



2023 CMAS MATH MGP DISTRIBUTION



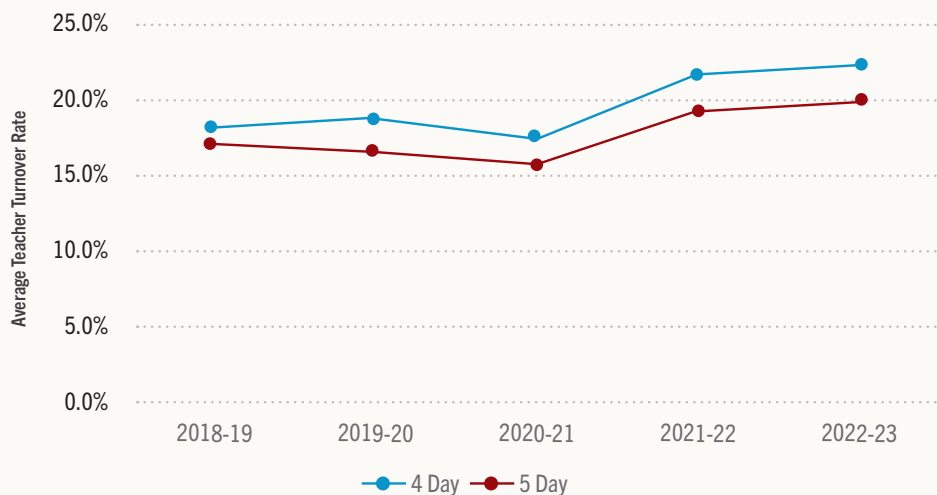


While this data is mixed on the impact of a four-day week on student achievement, it is important to remember that this does not mean a four-day calendar is beneficial for students, but rather that more research needs to be done into how instructional time is being used across all districts.

One important factor cited by many districts in the move to a four-day calendar is the impact on staff recruitment and retention. Given this commonly cited factor, this report wanted to dive into what impact the shift had on staffing. Overall, while there is some impact it is not evident that this shift drastically improves staff recruitment and retention.

Most importantly, teacher turnover is not meaningfully different based on number of school days and, in many districts, teacher turnover did not improve when they made the shift from five- to four-day calendars despite this being an explicit goal of the shift.

TEACHER TURNOVER



The only other readily available talent data is around teacher salaries, but these are challenging to compare given the wide variation across the state regardless of calendar. This is a place for further exploration through both quantitative (i.e., teacher satisfaction surveys) and qualitative research to truly understand the impact.

In addition to talent and academics, the shift to a four-day calendar could affect other important components of districts. One key area to look at is enrollment: Does shifting to a four-day schedule impact enrollment because families prefer a five-day calendar? While the data is not conclusive, there is not a consistent theme in terms of choice-out behavior based on number of school days when comparing districts with four- and five-day school weeks. This could in part be due to the remote nature of four-day districts, limiting parents’ ability to choose another option even if they are unhappy about the shift.

When looking at five-year (2019-20 through 2023-24) change in enrollment :

- On average, four-day districts have seen a 3 percent increase enrollment while five-day districts have seen a 1 percent decrease in enrollment.
- In aggregate, five-day districts have seen a 4.9 percent decrease in enrollment, compared a decrease of only 2 percent in four-day districts.

Again, though, because these districts vary so widely this cannot be directly linked to the school schedule, but should be investigated further.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Brighton 27J and Adams Five Star Schools

For many years, Brighton 27J tried to pass mill levy overrides to boost its public school funding beyond what the state and baseline local property taxes provide. Time and again, until 2022, those efforts failed. This left Brighton as the lowest-funded school district among the 15 in the Denver metro area.

Early in 2018, following its sixth consecutive failure to pass a mill levy measure the previous fall, Brighton’s school board decided to make the switch to a four-day week. “It has been a game-changer for us and it’s the only thing that has kept us relevant,” said Superintendent Chris Fiedler. Stories in the media about Brighton’s switch attracted job applicants from other states, and Brighton has also hired teachers away from nearby five-day districts, Fiedler said.

According to data compiled by education news website K-12 Dive,¹¹ Brighton, despite having a median teacher salary of \$54,900, the lowest in the metro area, had among the lowest teacher turnover rates between 2018 and 2023 – 14.6 percent. By contrast, Sheridan, with a median salary of \$57,100 and a five-day week, had a turnover rate of 35.9 percent. Boulder Valley School District, with the highest median salary – \$83,000 – operates on a five-day week and has a turnover rate of just 10.8 percent.

Brighton finally passed a mill levy override in 2022, allowing the district to boost teacher salaries to current levels. But it still left them last in the metro area. “You don’t really want to make a campaign slogan out of that,” Fiedler said with a laugh. ““Hey, if we pass this mill levy, we’re going to go from last to last.””

The impact on teacher retention and student learning of the switch to a four-day week was marginally negative, pre-Covid, according to an in-depth 2023 study¹² conducted by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University:

“The stated motivation for 27J’s switch to a 4DSW was to attract and retain teachers. However, we find – at least in the short term – that it had the opposite effect on teacher retention. Specifically, we find that experienced teachers were 5 percentage points less likely to return to 27J after the school district switched to a 4DSW. This finding does not necessarily mean that teachers do not value a 4DSW. Instead, it suggests that the teachers that left 27J were unwilling to trade off the higher salaries offered by outside opportunities for the benefits offered by a 4DSW.

Finally, we also find that student performance decreased by 0.2 to 0.3 standard deviations on math and language arts standardized exams after 27J implemented the 4DSW.”

Overall, Fiedler said, the impact of the four-day week on student achievement has been “neutral – it’s not any better or any worse.” Regardless, Brighton student achievement is low, with just 23 percent of students demonstrating proficiency in math during the 2022-23 school year, and 32 percent demonstrating proficiency in English Language Arts.

An almost identical number of students choice into Brighton as choice out to other districts – roughly 3,000. But more than twice as many Brighton students choice out to Adams 12 and its five-day week – 972 – as Adams 12 students choice into Brighton – 406. But that imbalance has been the case for years – predating Brighton’s switch to a four-day week.

¹¹ <https://www.k12dive.com/news/staffed-up-4-day-school-weeks-teacher-recruitment-retention/710246/>

¹² <https://edworkingpapers.com/index.php/topics/k12-education#721> page 25.

As he hears whispers about other local districts pondering a change to the four-day week, Fiedler offers to provide advice, albeit reluctantly. “I tell them the same thing every time. I am happy to share with you our story and help you any way you’d like if you want to make that transition, but I don’t want you to do it. I don’t want to lose that competitive advantage,” Fiedler said.

Brighton schools don’t hold classes on Mondays. The district already had before-school programming beginning at 6 a.m. and after-school care extending to 6 p.m. Those programs now span those 12 hours on Mondays, Fiedler said.

As the district prepared for the switch to the four-day week, officials reached out to families to gauge interest in district-provided care, for elementary school students only, on Mondays. About 1,000 families responded that they would use those services. “But when the rubber hit the road that fall, the number that actually showed up was about 350, and it has stayed in that 350 to 400 range ever since,” Fiedler said.

Initially, the district planned to offer care at each of its 13 elementary schools. But when the demand turned out lower than expected, it switched to four geographic centers instead. Families pay \$35 for the full day.

When Mondays became non-school days in Brighton, the local Robert M. Shopneck Boys & Girls Club also began offering Monday programming for students of all ages. In addition, the municipal governments of Brighton and adjacent Commerce City launched programming at their recreation centers as well. But those were discontinued after a couple of years because of low participation, leaving the school district programming as the only option for families.

Districts across the state with four-day weeks report a similar phenomenon: Programs offered to fill the fifth day are frequently under-utilized. Families where one or more parent or guardian has the flexibility to work from home adjust to the new reality, and often use that extra day for doctor appointments or enrichment activities with their children.

Dani Jayne, a Brighton parent who does not work outside the home, said the Mondays off provide a predictability that many school districts lack, with various days off during the year for holidays, professional development, and early releases for a host of reasons.

“This is a lot more consistent and easier to work with,” she said.

But in a place like Brighton, what about parents who have inflexible jobs, say working a service job at Denver International Airport? Extended family networks and informal neighborhood arrangements typically fill the gaps. Or, for some families, kids are left home alone.

In Brighton the four-day week does not reduce student access to extracurriculars, another concern for some. Fiedler said in Brighton, theater rehearsals take place on Monday, as do sports team practices and some club meetings. “Our school buildings are busy places on Mondays,” he said.

Jayne and other Brighton supporters of the four-day week said it provides another benefit as well: Time for over-scheduled kids to decompress. “My daughter does competitive softball, my son does baseball and softball and my littlest does flag football so we are moving all the time all weekend long,” she said “Under this four-day week, we still get Monday to recover. They have to have that time to relax and decompress before starting the school week again and that’s such a benefit for them.”

Jaydn Ybarra, Brighton high school senior, said the third day off each week gives her time to catch up on schoolwork and rest. The longer school days Brighton put in place to make up for some of the time lost (extending middle and high schools to eight-hour days) was exhausting at first, but she and her friends have adjusted. It is important to note that not all four-day districts have similar extended days, which some research has indicated can be a key reason for differing impacts on student achievement.

“Mondays have become school- and work-related for us,” Ybarra said. “If I have a job I can get regularly scheduled on Mondays, or I can use it as a designated homework day. It is a change for the better. I really like the four-day week.”

Adams 12

Adjacent to Brighton 27J, Adams 12 Five Star Schools (enrollment just under 37,000) have resisted the switch to a four-day week, holding fast to the belief that, as Superintendent Chris Gdowski puts it “in the end you don’t want to sacrifice strong student outcomes to other factors” like teacher recruitment and retention.

But, Gdowski stressed, the district has looked seriously at making the switch, and will keep its options open going forward.

Last year, Adams 12 surveyed the community about support for a four-day week. Results came back mixed. Most educators favored it. Most parents opposed it. But the margins weren’t enormous. After analyzing the results, the district decided to stay with the five-day calendar.

But Adams 12 made some significant calendar changes effective with the 2023-24 school year, in direct response to the Brighton four-day schedule. Hoping to recruit and retain teachers successfully while maintaining a five-day week, the district added week-long breaks in October and February. These breaks are in addition to a longstanding, week-long Thanksgiving break, and the traditional Christmas and spring breaks.

Gdowski said something had to give, because other than Brighton, Adams 12 has the smallest amount of mill levy override money per pupil in the metro area. This affects teacher salaries, which means the district has to sweeten the pot to attract and keep teachers.

Brighton recently passed a mill levy override and has a four-day week and a growing student population. The St. Vrain School District west of Adams 12 has more mill levy money and a growing student population. Boulder Valley, farther north and west, is a wealthy district that pays significantly higher salaries.

All of this factored into the decision by Adams 12 to provide more frequent, longer breaks, Gdowski said. It seemed like a good compromise between doing nothing and going to four-day weeks.

The longer breaks have not reduced the number of hours Adams 12 students spend in school because the district eliminated its practice of releasing students early on Wednesdays for teacher professional development and work time.

Since the change is less than a year old, it’s too soon to know what, if any impact it has had on student achievement or educator retention. But Gdowski said that he is getting positive feedback from staff. Students he has spoken with would prefer a four-day week to longer breaks more often, he said. Students regarded the half-day Wednesdays as so low-key academically as to be almost like a day off, he said. And they’ve told him they miss those days.

“The students I talked to said that those weekly breaks are better mental health-wise than having a week off every six weeks or so,” he said. “So I think for us we’re really going to be heavy on data analytics for the next few years to figure this out.”

Gdowski said arguments students have made for a four-day week have caught his attention. “I’m a traditionalist in a lot of ways including school calendar and workweek, so some of the changes we’ve made here recently have given me some personal heartburn,” Gdowski said.

“But I think we’ve got to look beyond our theories to what data tells us about how kids respond to various scenarios, and if there’s that sweet spot that provides better mental health for kids and better academic achievement, and it’s a four-day week, we would have to give that serious consideration.”

Southwest Colorado

In the rugged, rural southwestern corner of Colorado, competitive pressure from neighboring school districts and nearby New Mexico (where teachers are paid more) spurred several districts to adopt the four-day week.

Interviews with district leaders in Dolores School District RE-4A, Mancos School District RE-6, and Montezuma Cortez RE-1 show that student academic performance was not a key driver in their decision to shorten the school week. As long as evidence shows the switch doesn't hurt student learning, district leaders felt compelled to do it. But the region's largest district, Durango 9-R, has steadfastly stayed with the five-day calendar, believing it best serves students.

Mancos

Todd Cordrey, who has served as Mancos superintendent since 2021, worked in school districts and charter schools along the Front Range for 23 years before moving southwest. He has experience in both four-day and five-day settings. Mancos has been on a four-day schedule since 2016.

“As someone who does keep a keen eye on student achievement, I have not seen a difference between the two calendars,” Cordrey said. “I do not see where the four-day school week increases student achievement, and I have not seen where the four-day school week has any detrimental effects on student achievement.”

Meaningful learning has less to do with seat-time than student engagement, Cordrey said. And in any event, he argued, the five-day week is not grounded in any way in brain science.

“The fact that we really don't know how learning happens in the brain is critical to this question for knowing what is the appropriate length of time,” he said. “We know that the formation of the five-day week had nothing to do with student learning and had everything to do with how best to organize a society to make it efficient,” and to align with parent work schedules.”

“Looking at the most important question, which is student learning, we should first approach it from an honest perspective. We first have to figure out how student learning happens and then craft a system around that as opposed to trying to evaluate existing systems and see how they do with the choices they've made,” Cordrey said.

Over time, the four-day week's impact on recruitment and retention has been nuanced. According to Cordrey, more Mancos teachers leave education for other jobs than leave Mancos for other districts. He said he has seen evidence that the four-day schedule has helped both with recruiting teachers to the district and in keeping teachers in teaching. He has not seen evidence that it keeps Mancos teachers from moving to other districts, primarily for higher pay.

The switch to a four-day week has allowed the district to double the number of professional development days during the school year to 21. “That's a major area where our industry is missing the boat. We do not give teachers the time they need to prepare effective lessons for students,” Cordrey said. “Teachers really crave those days to either work on their lessons, or have the opportunity to grow their skills.”

The Mancos district has seen a high level of family engagement with programming offered on Fridays, the off-day, unlike some other districts studied for this report. Many parents in the area work outside the home, and many work multiple jobs, so having somewhere for their kids to go on Fridays was essential.

The district has used federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grants to fund programs including science clubs, arts clubs, math clubs, coding clubs, drone clubs, as well as field trips, and trips to local recreation centers. These programs are either “extremely low-cost” or free, Cordrey said. They are staffed by district educators, who receive extra pay for the voluntary duty.

The district has also partnered with the local campus of Pueblo Community College to offer Friday Academy for high-schoolers. These are career-connected programs in fields like automotive repair and welding.

Cordrey estimated that once you include athletics, up to 70 percent of district students are engaged in district-sponsored Friday activities.

The local library also offers Friday programs.

“I have never seen such student engagement as I have experienced here in Mancos,” Cordrey said. “There’s just a strong cultural vibe here. It’s really different.”

Dolores RE-4A

Like his counterpart in Mancos, Reece Blincoe didn’t push his district to adopt a four-day school week because he thought it would improve student learning. He did it because the alternative was to hemorrhage staff to neighboring districts and New Mexico.

“If you just wanted to look at it academically, it would have been an extremely hard sell,” Blincoe said. “But if you look at the complete picture, it’s not as hard to sell and we think on balance it is beneficial.”

Blincoe came to Mancos from Texas early in 2021. By the start of the 2021-22 school year that August, the district was on a four-day week. As Blincoe said at the beginning of this report, competitive pressures and low district pay scales left him no choice.

After the switch, teachers initially had 18 fewer workdays per year than they had before the change, but their pay remained the same. This school year, the district took back four of those days, split them in half, and created eight half-day professional development sessions on Friday. Teachers receive extra pay for those mandatory sessions resulting in additional pay compared to before the switch, and with fewer work days.

Still, this leaves educators with ample Fridays completely free of school duties. And many people who live in the area, whether native-born or transplants, place a high value on having time to enjoy the ample outdoor recreation opportunities.

Similar to most other districts surveyed for this report, Dolores anticipated a surge of interest in Friday programming so that parents’ work lives weren’t disrupted. But that didn’t materialize.

Using federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Covid recovery funds, Dolores launched a “Friday Funday” program, but it was sparsely attended. Of roughly 450 families with children in district schools, “maybe 30 took us up on that,” Blincoe said.

How to explain the lack of interest? Blincoe speculated that most families reached out to extended networks to fill the gaps. “I think people still have grandma and grandpa hanging out and grandma and grandpa covered Friday’s for a lot of people.”

Academically, switching to a four-day week certainly didn’t help with recovery from serious Covid learning loss, Blincoe acknowledged. “I’ve read a lot of studies and I agree with the studies that say the four-day week typically has a negative impact,” he said. “We already needed to improve our instruction, but Covid without a doubt had a bigger negative impact” than the switch to a four-day week.

Given that the four-day week is here to stay, Blincoe said it is incumbent upon school districts to “tweak and refine” instructional practices to make the schedule beneficial to students and families. “I think we’ll get there,” he said.

Blincoe also said he advocates looking at the big picture, and that creating longer weekends for families can help strengthen family bonds. “It can be good for families, and we need to get back to family,” he said. “We need to get back to being able to spend time with our children and go outdoors, and this opens up opportunities to go to the mountains together.”

Montezuma-Cortez RE-1

The largest of the four-day districts in Colorado’s southwest corner with an enrollment of about 2,500, Montezuma-Cortez has an unusual history with the four-day week. In the early 2000s, the district’s school board decided to move to a four-day week, primarily in the belief (erroneous, as it turned out) that it would save money.

Then, in 2012, the district switched back to a five-day week when a new school board majority took power. “It was really changed back because of the political climate at the time, not necessarily with a ton of forethought or deep academic considerations,” said Jim Parr, the district’s Executive Director of Student Academic Services and District Assessment Coordinator.

Then, in the fall of 2021 major turnover occurred among district leadership, with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, human resources director and director of instruction all leaving the district within a few months of each other. And the new superintendent appointed lasted just a few months before running afoul of the school board and being forced to resign early in 2022.

That resignation coincided with a sudden decision by the district to return to a four-day week midyear, starting with the resumption of school after the holiday break. A rapid loss of educators to neighboring districts and New Mexico, where pay was higher, spurred the change. In an average year the district was losing 20 to 25 percent of its teachers.

“We were hemorrhaging people and it (switching calendars mid-year) was a drastic move I would not recommend in any way,” Parr said. The district extended the school day by about an hour to meet minimum state requirements, but had to apply to the state for a waiver from the 160-days of school requirement.

The impact on student achievement is difficult to measure, Parr said, “because traditionally we have struggled here as far as achievement goes.” But since testing has restarted after Covid, the district’s growth scores have been higher than they were in the past – 55 percent for math and 47 percent in ELA in 2022-23. This saved the district from going before the State Board of Education to face possible dissolution and reorganization.

But like his counterparts in other Colorado school districts, Parr does not see switching to a four-day week as a positive for students.

“We as districts are often forced into a position to make decisions that are not what I consider beneficial for the students. You won’t find a lot of empirical data that tells you that taking away seat time from a student is going to improve their academic performance. You can have pockets of success and do some good things, and we are trying to lean into that.”

“But ultimately, having a five-day versus a four-day week means you are giving yourself a better shot.”

Durango 9-R

Durango stands out from other towns in the southwestern corner of Colorado because it is home to Fort Lewis College, and is the biggest population center in the area. It is also the only district other than the resort town of Telluride that has stuck with the five-day week.

And, according to Superintendent Karen Cheser, that isn't changing under her watch. She said the district wants its students to "discover their ikigai," a Japanese word for "finding that perfect career that melds your passions, what you're good at, what the world needs, and what you can make a living at."

Cheser and her team believe that is more likely to happen attending school five days a week.

"Until we see that it is beneficial for students, we're not really entertaining the conversation," Cheser said. "And currently what we've seen is the districts, especially those that would be comparable to ours, that are implementing the four-day week. They're actually seeing declines in student proficiency."

Durango's goal is to have its graduates attain grade-level proficiency or higher in all subject areas, and also acquire the district's "portrait of a graduate" competencies like agile thinking and confident communicating. Decreasing the number of days kids are in school and making those days longer "isn't the appropriate setting for students to be able to acquire those skills and competencies," in Cheser's view.

Colleagues in four-day districts have told Cheser that because time is so tight, they're rushing to deliver content, and squeezing out other important aspects of schooling, like field trips, project-based learning, and independent study projects.

"It has just not been apparent to us in any way that the best thing for students would be to reduce the number of days," she said.

Durango, of course, has a built-in advantage over neighboring districts in that its tax base is higher and its starting salaries are more than \$10,000 above its neighbors. The district has increased teacher pay by 27 percent over the past three years, and now offers an average salary of just under \$60,000, compared to \$47,579 in Montezuma-Cortez and Mancos, and \$43,814 in Dolores. Starting pay for a new teacher in Durango is \$51,500, barely beating out New Mexico's \$50,000 ceiling.

But regardless, Cheser said, she has not heard from staff that going to a four-day week would be a fringe benefit they'd covet. "It is not only a hardship in our community, it's a hardship on our staff. Because if they do not have childcare, somewhere for their kids to go on a Friday, and yet they may have to work, that adds a tremendous burden on them."

Also, the district offers its teachers 10 days of personal leave every school year, and students are released an hour early every Monday so that teachers can plan together,

Durango has had no issue recruiting teachers, despite the four-day week, and in fact has seen some teachers from four-day districts move to Durango, as well as some families.

"People come here knowing it's very, very hard, very difficult work, because we have high standards and high expectations. But we have fantastic staff and leaders, and we don't lose many people."

PARTING THOUGHTS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Becky Medina has worked at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Pueblo County for 29 years, and currently serves as the organization’s chief operating officer. When the Pueblo 60 school district, serving the city of Pueblo, switched to a four-day week in 2019-20 (primarily to stave off competition for staff from the four-day Pueblo 70 district that surrounds the city), she saw an opportunity for her clubs to offer high-quality programming to students.

Asked recently whether she has seen positive, negative, or neutral impacts of the switch, Medina started off by saying neutral. After all, she said, it was good for teachers to have an extra day to prepare lessons, get training, or rest.

But as she spun out her thoughts in conversation, Medina began to have a change of heart. Sure, some kids were benefiting from the deeper experiences the clubs could provide during a full day of activities. But so many kids had not come to the extra programming her clubs offered on Fridays. That worried her. The most vulnerable ones were the ones not showing up. Where were they, and what were they doing?

“A lot of them don’t have the means. Whether transportation is the barrier or finances, they’re not getting those other experiences,” Medina said. “They’re the ones that are behind in school. Are they now falling farther behind?”

Medina worried about food insecurity and whether students not showing up for fifth-day activities were getting fed. “You know, come to think of it, I’m in the negative house,” Medina said. “Overall, this is not good for our kids.”

If deep down many educators know that the four-day week is at best a wash for kids, and possibly a detriment, then why are an increasing number of Colorado school districts choosing this path? The imperatives of staffing and finances are very real, and are not to be discounted.

But if the mission of schools, as Durango’s Karen Cheser says, is to prepare their students for a fruitful future, then what exactly are we doing here?

Policy implications and recommendations

One of Colorado’s overarching policy goals in public education is to prepare students for life after high school, be that higher education, vocational training, or employment. But, as the data and perspectives presented in this report show, the trend toward four-day school weeks in Colorado does not provide a net benefit to the state’s public school students. In fact, student achievement is not even the top consideration when districts make the switch.

And even that top consideration – teacher recruitment and retention – seems little affected by the altered calendar. Budget savings are also negligible to nonexistent.

Given these facts – that four-day weeks are not better for students and don’t demonstrably meet the goals of districts making the change – the Keystone Policy Center recommends that the Colorado Department of Education take a long, hard look at the practice as soon as possible.

CDE should create a panel composed of experts and stakeholders to investigate and provide recommendations to the Colorado Department of Education around the four-day school week. The panel’s work would be to ensure that all students whether in four-day or five-day school districts are receiving the support necessary to enable them to meet the state’s education standards.

This panel should also help policymakers gain a better understanding of the perceptions of parents, students and communities regarding four-and/or five-day weeks in their communities.

In addition to creating and convening the aforementioned panel, the CDE should:

- 1.** Create a rigorous process for state approval of four-day school weeks, with the core question being whether this change will improve student outcomes. The process should not, as is currently the case, be a rubber stamp without a review of the impacts on student learning.
- 2.** Study how instructional time is used to enable students to reach state standards in four- and five-day instructional settings. Are there best practices for use of instructional time for different grades and content in four-and five-day contexts? ? What are these and how are Colorado school districts using them?
- 3.** Provide examples of best practices and support in fifth-day programming for districts using a four-day week. Should districts be required to provide programming on the fifth day and should it be educational? If so, what are the standards for this programming?

Policymakers should also consider more substantive solutions to the challenge of recruiting and retaining a high-quality rural teacher workforce. Solutions to be considered should include a state-wide program to raise rural teacher salaries; teacher housing in districts with housing shortages or unaffordable housing; and any other means to ensure that districts are not choosing to go to four-day school weeks out of fear of being at a competitive disadvantage relative to higher-paying school districts.

A district's decision to have a four-day school week should be driven solely by evidence that it benefits students. To date, that evidence is lacking.

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