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# THE FOUR-DAY SCHOOL WEEK IN RURAL IDAHO SCHOOLS

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J.A. and KATHRYN  
**ALBERTSON FAMILY**  
FOUNDATION



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## • ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS •

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) was launched by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation of Boise, Idaho during the summer of 2013. Since then, Bellwether Education Partners and a task force of experts led by Dr. Paul T. Hill have been working to foster a better understanding of the issues that affect rural education, inform policy discussions, and bring attention to the unique needs and circumstances of rural school children. The task force has published a series of papers on issues such as migration, technology, human capital, and economic development. A second series of papers, published in summer 2015, will focus on post-secondary transitions and challenges. Papers are posted online at [www.rociidaho.com/research-publications](http://www.rociidaho.com/research-publications).

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### ABOUT ROCI • RURAL OPPORTUNITIES CONSORTIUM OF IDAHO



ROCI brings together some of the nation's best thinkers to conduct research on the challenges of rural education and identify innovations, programs, and models to address them. This effort informs a national body of work on rural education and explores implications for increasing the educational attainment and economic competitiveness of Idahoans and Americans.

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The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation is a Boise-based, private family foundation committed to the vision of limitless learning for all Idahoans. Since 1997, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation has invested almost \$700 million in Idaho. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Family Foundation honors the legacy of Joe and Kathryn Albertson, founders of Albertsons grocery store, however it is not affiliated with Albertsons LLC. Grant-making is by invitation only. For more information, visit [jkaf.org](http://jkaf.org).

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## • INTRODUCTION •

**Though only one percent of school districts nationwide have adopted the four-day week, by latest reports, 42 of Idaho's 115 school districts have done so.**

During the recession of 2008, spending on K–12 schools in Intermountain West states grew very little, if at all. Schools, however, have faced continuing cost increases, due to longevity-based teacher salary increases and (until recently) escalating energy costs. Rural schools in places with fixed or declining enrollment have felt these changes acutely.

Seeking to cut costs, rural communities in Colorado and Oregon decided to adopt an idea that has been around for decades: eliminating one day of school each week. The idea has now spread to Idaho, Utah, and Montana. The recession has eased, but adoption of the four-day week has accelerated in Idaho. Though only one percent of school districts nationwide have adopted the four-day week, by latest reports, 42 of Idaho's 115 school districts have done so.

The idea is simple in theory: save money on transportation, heating, janitorial, and clerical costs by running school only four days (usually Monday–Thursday) each week. Add roughly 30-90 minutes to each day students are in school, and for the fifth day assign projects, point students toward online resources, and encourage parent and community groups to run study halls and offer enrichment activities. When possible, schedule daytime field trips and interscholastic sports on the fifth day. Teachers, whose time and

pay are not reduced, have a full day each week to collaborate, plan, and take professional enrichment courses. This should save money, increase teacher performance, and at worst, do no harm to student learning. Student and teacher attendance should improve, as medical visits and other family events could be scheduled for the fifth day.

Early adopters encountered some surprises: cost savings were hard to achieve.<sup>1</sup> However, teachers and some parents loved the new opportunities that the four-day week opened up. Student outcomes, at least when roughly measured in terms of average district-wide test scores and graduation rates, did not decline, and there was anecdotal evidence that some students used their free time effectively.

Some communities considered the idea and rejected it, fearing that the quality of schools might decline incrementally so that harm to students might become apparent only over time, when students applied for or entered college. Some also pointed out that rural students' performance in college (enrollment, ability to avoid remedial courses, course passing, graduation) was lower than that of urban students with similar high school grades.<sup>2</sup> Less time in school, critics feared, could put rural students further behind, even if their state achievement scores remained constant.

With this as background, the Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho started a quick-turnaround project to examine the experience of Idaho communities that had moved to—or considered and not adopted—the four-day week.<sup>3</sup> In early 2015 we interviewed district and school leaders in 20 Idaho districts, and followed our informants' recommendations to talk with leaders from a few Oregon and Arizona districts. The interview guide is included in the Appendix.

## KEY FINDINGS

We provide detailed findings in the following five sections:

- How the Four-Day Week Affects Local Spending
- How Students' Learning Experience Changes
- What the Four-Day Week Means for Teachers and Administrators
- How Parents and Neighbors Respond
- What are the Apparent Consequences (Positive and Negative) for Student Learning?

## • HOW THE FOUR-DAY WEEK AFFECTS LOCAL SPENDING •

Though cost cutting was the original motivation for the four-day week, savings have been elusive in most localities. This is because so many costs are fixed. Teacher and administrator salaries and benefits are the single greatest cost, and these are untouched. Buildings, buses, and other equipment are either owned outright or leased; using them for one day fewer per week does not affect the bottom line.

If there are to be savings they must come from expendables (e.g., fuel for buses and heating, food for student lunches). Some districts also cut time for hourly employees (e.g., for bus drivers, clerical staff, teachers' aides, or food-service workers) and maintenance on buses. Others were reluctant to cut any payments to employees out of concern for their families and the local economy. Most localities have made detectable savings from these cuts, but overall savings are small because these items are not the main source of district costs.

Districts can also experience offsetting cost increases. School buildings kept open for teacher meetings, local libraries, community centers, or student study halls must still be heated. Children who spend 90 minutes more a day in school need afternoon snacks, which must be purchased and prepared. Away games and field trips use buses and drivers.

**After gaining experience, some districts ultimately accepted that the four-day week saved little or no money, but kept it for other reasons: to create time for teacher training, introduce a new instructional method, or improve student attendance.**

Some districts reduce these offsetting costs by shifting them elsewhere in the community, e.g., to churches or civic centers to house fifth-day student and teacher activities and run study halls, and to parents to provide snacks and transportation for fifth-day activities. In the end, however, only districts with unusual cost structures due to extremely long daily bus trips or high numbers of hourly staff can truly cut costs.

Recent adopters of the four-day week have been less optimistic about cost savings. After gaining experience, some districts ultimately accepted that the four-day week saved little or no money, but kept it for other reasons: to create time for teacher training, introduce a new instructional method, or improve student attendance.



## • HOW STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE CHANGES •

High school students in four-day districts can have longer class times, more time to meet with advisers, and more guided opportunities to use online resources and, for older students, to pursue dual-enrollment college programs. Teachers can give written assignments on the fifth day, and these can be checked, graded, and discussed. Students also have an extra day for enrichment activities like volunteer and service work, supplementary courses taken online or at community colleges, ACT/SAT prep, and college visits.

Longer school days can give elementary school students enhanced opportunities for teacher interaction. With extra time in school, they can also learn computer skills and gain experience with online instruction. Some localities also offered fifth-day programs for elementary-age students who were struggling with reading or other skills.

Of course, these benefits aren't automatic. At the high school level, teachers have to plan to use class time differently and give students valuable assignments for the fifth day. For this to pay off, teachers need to collect and comment on student work, and either teachers or parents need to think ahead about online courses and enrichment activities.

**Many agree with a teacher who said, “For many students, coming back after a three-day weekend is more like getting started again after Christmas break than it is like starting again after just two days off.”**

Superintendents we interviewed were often unclear about what work was assigned to students and whether teachers regularly returned it to students with comments. Some schools assigned older students homework packets to be completed sometime during the week, but these were not used to monitor students’ use of time on the fifth day. A few localities provided optional proctored study halls on the fifth day.

Even when teachers thought students might do extra work, some were concerned about major social-class differences in how students used their days off: families with strong college aspirations found great uses for the time, but other students (including children of newly settled migrant workers) were left out on their own to fill the time.

At the elementary level, teachers need to work differently, consider the possible effects of fatigue on primary-grade students, and schedule time for snacks and naps. Some educators we interviewed were concerned about whether younger students could learn well in the extra hours of school. Elementary teachers find it difficult to assign productive fifth-day work with any confidence that younger students will do it, and few even tried to do so. The vast majority simply relied on parental initiative.

At all levels, teachers report difficulty restarting instruction and focusing children’s attention after a three-day weekend. Many agree with a teacher who said, “For many students, coming back after a three-day weekend is more like getting started again after Christmas break than it is like starting again after just two days off.” Some teachers also said it took extra time to bring themselves back up to speed on Mondays. We heard of, but could not find, districts in Oregon that run schools Monday–Tuesday and Thursday–Friday to minimize the “long break” problem and ensure that teachers would know immediately if students did not complete assigned work on their day off. As the next section will show, factors other than instructional effectiveness drive the preference for a four-days-on, three-days-off schedule.

## • WHAT THE FOUR-DAY WEEK MEANS FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS •

The transition to the four-day week puts significant burdens on rural school superintendents (often the only paid administrators in their districts), who must explain the idea to parents and local leaders, gain teacher cooperation, rearrange bus and activity schedules, adjust the hours and pay of non-salaried workers, and track spending closely to wring out financial benefits. District leaders normally work 24/7, so the move to a four-day week has little effect on the number of hours they put in.

One burden that local administrators apparently did not take on was preparing teachers for the transition. Few administrators or teachers said their districts provided any teacher training or planning templates before moving to the four-day week. Teachers were left to invent or discover the changes they made in use of in-class time and student work assignments both in class and on the fifth day.

The previous section explained many of the potential burdens on teachers to find productive ways of using longer days and the no-school fifth day. All districts ran at least occasional professional development programs on the fifth day (e.g., on implementation of the Common Core) and hoped that teachers would also take advantage of fifth-day opportunities to work with other teachers and explore professional intellectual and artistic interests. Others said everything depended on teacher initiative, and that many used the fifth day as an opportunity to schedule doctors' appointments for themselves and their children and do errands that normally crowded the weekend. In Idaho districts near mountains and fishing streams, teachers also liked the fifth day as an opportunity to spend quality time in the outdoors or take more time with family.

**Some teachers were worried that they couldn't do the best for children on a four-day schedule.**

Though we could not measure the number of hours worked on the fifth day, it was clear that teachers, having met their work-hour obligations in the four extended days, seldom put in a full fifth day of work. In some localities, teachers had to be paid extra for

mandatory fifth-day work. Teachers who helped the district make the decision to adopt the four-day week were more likely to feel professionally, if not legally, obligated to work the fifth day than were teachers who joined the district later.

Finally, some teachers were worried that they couldn't do the best for children on a four-day schedule. Some struggled to get through all of the materials in high school courses in four longer days. Many were concerned that the children who depend the most on schools for their learning were the most likely to suffer. Others admitted being fatigued and less effective in the extra time added to the four school days, but hoped to adjust so that students would learn in proportion to the time spent in class.

## • HOW PARENTS AND NEIGHBORS RESPOND •

The four-day week presented parents with many new issues. Longer hours in school meant that children's days more nearly matched adult workdays, a convenience for working parents. On the other hand, the fifth day presented new problems of child custody and planning for positive uses of children's time. How the fifth day affected families depended heavily on whether one parent is normally at home every day.

Families also varied on how aggressively they plan and oversee children's use of the fifth day. Ironically, professional families that want their children to attend competitive colleges often welcomed the chance for enrichment activities, while children from low-income and limited-English families depended on district-sponsored programs. Whether or not families saw the fifth day as an opportunity for outdoor recreation does not depend on social class.

Communities differed in whether churches or civic groups had created fifth-day learning or recreational activities. This was more common in larger towns with facilities and organized groups, and infrequent in tiny, remote communities. We did not hear of anyone who resented providing these services, picking up responsibilities and costs previously borne by the schools. When the four-day week was proposed, business owners in some communities expressed concerns about the behavior of students at loose ends on the fifth day. In practice, however, there were no problems with student behavior, though some district leaders expressed concern that disadvantaged children were likely to suffer most from being out of school.

Superintendents in several small towns told us that the four-day week had reset the pace of community life. Adults quickly adjusted to having children out of school on a weekday, and some business owners adjusted by closing or working only part of the fifth day.

Teachers in many places now consider the fifth day an amenity, and some superintendents told us that the four-day week made the locality more attractive to teacher candidates. The lifestyle is apparently attractive to families and businesses that, according to some we interviewed, migrate to communities with four-day schools.

## • WHAT ARE THE APPARENT CONSEQUENCES (POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE) FOR STUDENT LEARNING? •

No district that had adopted the four-day week had rigorously assessed the effects on student achievement. Only one district had formally set out criteria for assessing the four-day week after a few years' experience, and provided in advance for a return to five days if results were disappointing. Several district leaders said student and teacher attendance had improved in the first year of the four-day week, but they had not assessed whether these results persisted over time.

**At present, however, no one in the districts or in the state of Idaho is trying to analyze student outcomes or the results of students' fifth-day experiences rigorously enough to measure the effects of the four-day week, either overall or for particular groups of students.**

Most, of course had only one year's or a few years' experience and could not anticipate long-term consequences like college attendance and success. But none had done more than track district-wide averages on achievement (which are affected by many factors, including family mobility in and out of the district), and could not say for sure whether individual students gained more or less. None could say for certain whether some students had benefited at the expense

of others, though some expressed concern about low-income and recently arrived Hispanic students.

Some educators who had considered but rejected the four-day week were concerned that any negative effects might be seen only after several years, particularly among disadvantaged groups and younger students. Their concern—that younger children are less likely to benefit from longer school days and extra days for enrichment—is plausible but hasn't been tested. Some also reasoned, to quote one superintendent, "If we can get the same results in a four-day week as we are now getting with five days, why should we be content with them? I feel an obligation to rethink the use of a five-day week to get better results."

At present, however, no one in the districts or in the state of Idaho is trying to analyze student outcomes or the results of students' fifth-day experiences rigorously enough to measure the effects of the four-day week, either overall or for particular groups of students. How effective is the academic enrichment program? How effective are voluntary events like College Fridays? Do the enrichment programs really broaden the rural curriculum for low-income families, as some districts say? Is it worth having those extra professional-development days?



## • OUR ANALYSIS •

We have been candid about the limits of our evidence. The educational consequences of the four-day week are essentially unknown; without serious causal analysis, effects on student achievement are not measurable in the short run. The immediate consequences for rural communities—for family lifestyles and ability to exploit the advantages of rural life—appear to be positive.

In some of the localities whose leaders we interviewed, superintendents, principals, families, and teacher leaders have reached strong agreements to make sure the extra hours in the four days of school are used for teaching and learning, and that students use the fifth day productively. Possible uses of the fifth day—for supplementary and remedial instruction, dual-credit college courses, experimentation with online instruction, internships, and educational field trips—are all plausible and could be productive. Similarly, teachers might use the fifth day for real learning and problem solving. All of these things are happening in one community or another, but they are far from universal.

However, the long-term consequences for rural students' education are unknown, and the stakes are high. Even before the introduction of the four-day week, rural students in Idaho were more likely than rural students nationally to graduate from high school, but ranked below students in 46 states as to the proportion who entered college. From this perspective, an initiative that stabilizes but does not raise student readiness could, in the long run, make Idaho's rural communities less viable.

As analysts from a big city, with no skin in the game, we finished our work uncertain how the four-day week would turn out; concerned that many communities had adopted

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it because of its benefits for adults and had not arranged to monitor the results for children closely enough; and worried that, regardless of the results, the four-day-week policy would be extremely difficult to reverse. This is so because it is now baked into community life, and reinstating the five-day week would almost certainly require negotiation with teachers and enhancements to their compensation.

In K–12 education, many adults who have the interests of children at heart also have their

own separate interests. That is true of parents and teachers, who have their own lives and obligations and don't always readily see conflicts with children's needs.

Parents and teachers in rural communities have their own reasons for liking the four-day week, and some have adopted it as if it were a sure-thing benefit for students. Half a century's experience with sure-thing interventions shows that few work unambiguously. Moreover, interventions that work are implemented with great discipline, based on thinking through all the contingencies. Only one or two of the rural communities we studied has approached the four-day week with a realistic caution or skepticism.

Good interventions also erode over time, as their originators leave the scene and are replaced by people with different understandings and motivations.

Moreover, some respondents say that new teachers and families are less committed to (or do not even know about) original ambitious intentions for the fifth day. In these circumstances, erosion of practice and less disciplined use of time (e.g., toward a fifth day off for everyone) is all but certain.

Most communities have adopted the four-day week as a permanent arrangement, and have not provided for its revision or reversal. A measured approach is more prudent: community leaders state expectations for all parties in advance, set baseline measures of student performance for all groups including those most at risk, and make room for objective assessment and upgrading or abandonment of the plan.

The state of Idaho has taken a hands-off approach, letting communities make their own decisions. But it can help, both by providing a set of process guidelines and decision criteria and by supporting rigorous assessment of student results.

## • ENDNOTES •

- 1 See Griffith, Michael. *What Savings Are Produced by Moving to a Four-Day School Week?* Education Commission of the States, May 2011. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/93/69/9369.pdf>
- 2 Despite the fact that rural students on average perform better in high school and graduate at a higher rate than students in big cities (79.9 percent vs. 64.1 percent), they are less likely to attend college (33.4 percent vs. 48.1 percent) and far less likely to enroll in graduate and professional programs (3.2 percent vs. 7.6 percent) after college. See Brown, David L. And Kai A Schafft, *Rural People And Communities In The 21st Century: Resilience And Transformation*, (Boston: Polity Press, 2011), 66. See also Byun, S., Meece, J.L., & Irvin, M.J., "Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited," *American Educational Research Journal* 49 (2012): 412-437. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3839859/>
- 3 See the ROCI website [http://www.rociidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ROCI\\_4daybrief\\_final.pdf](http://www.rociidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ROCI_4daybrief_final.pdf) for a PowerPoint presentation on the four-day school week or YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Umgbyu-kv0&feature=youtu.be> for a webinar with the author.

## • APPENDIX •

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Thanks for agreeing to talk about your experience with the four-day week. My questions focus on what led your district to consider going to a four-day week, how it has affected teacher work and student experience, and how you assess the change in light of your experience.

My first question is about what motivated your district to adopt the four-day week. Others have cited cost savings, teacher morale, parent satisfaction, and other factors.

#### **What was the main goal you were seeking?**

*Cost savings*

*Teacher morale*

*Parent satisfaction*

#### **Can you tell me how the four-day week works in your district?**

*What days don't students come to school?*

*How many hours are students in school each day?*

*What students/teachers do on the fifth day?*

**We are particularly interested in how you organized the four-day week to attain particular goals. Can you tell me, for example, how the four-day week arrangement:**

*Saves the district money?*

*Ensures that students learn on the fifth day?*

*Expects teachers to work differently, and prepares them to do so?*

*Makes sure the fifth day isn't just a day off for everyone?*

**To this point, how do you assess the results?**

*Improvement or decline in learning or student outcomes?*

If yes, what do you think caused the change?

Have some groups of students done better than others? How about

- Elementary
- Low-income
- LEP

*Have you saved more or less money than expected?*

Did some costs rise?

How have you used or reinvested the savings?

*Who in your community is happiest with the arrangement? Is anyone unhappy?*

**Has anything surprised you, positively or negatively?**

**Is the four-day week arrangement permanent, or have you arranged to reconsider it at some time? What criteria would you use to reconsider it?**

**Can you suggest others in your district/other districts we should talk with?**

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