

Four-Day School Week Report

in Montana Public Schools
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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Montana Code Annotated	1
Districts Operating Four Days per Week	2
Survey	3
Information from States in the Region	8
On-line Resources	8
Accreditation Reminders	10
Initial Conclusions/Recommendations	11
Four-Day School Week Survey	Appendix A

*This report was prepared by the Office of Public Instruction, Accreditation Division
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Introduction

The 2005 Montana Legislature passed a bill that changed the pupil instruction time during a school fiscal year from a required minimum of 180 school days to a required minimum number of aggregate hours.

SB170 was introduced by Sen. Jeff Mangan: AN ACT PROVIDING FLEXIBILITY TO SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN SETTING THEIR SCHOOL CALENDARS BY ELIMINATING THE REQUIREMENT THAT A SCHOOL DISTRICT CONDUCT AT LEAST 180 SCHOOL DAYS DURING EACH SCHOOL FISCAL YEAR; DEFINING "MINIMUM AGGREGATE HOURS"; REQUIRING A SCHOOL DISTRICT TO CONDUCT SCHOOL FOR A MINIMUM NUMBER OF AGGREGATE HOURS EACH SCHOOL YEAR; REQUIRING SCHOOL DISTRICT TRUSTEES TO SET THE LENGTH OF THE SCHOOL TERM, SCHOOL DAY, AND SCHOOL WEEK; MAKING THE REVISIONS NECESSARY TO REFLECT THE ELIMINATION OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR 180 SCHOOL DAYS;

Since the passage of this legislation, 31 public school districts and one nonpublic district (Two Eagle River) are operating a four-day school week. This report provides information, through surveys conducted during the springs of 2009 and 2011, of why districts changed to a four-day week, the benefits of the change, and the pitfalls they have encountered. The report also contains trends from states in our region concerning the four-day school week issue. It is the hope of the Office of Public Instruction staff that this report will give districts guidance to make an informed decision when considering changing to a four-day school week.

Montana Code Annotated

The following are the primary codes affected by SB170:

MCA 20-1-301. School fiscal year. (1) The school fiscal year begins on July 1 and ends on June 30. At least the minimum aggregate hours defined in subsection (2) must be conducted during each school fiscal year, except that 1,050 aggregate hours of pupil instruction for graduating seniors may be sufficient.

(2) The minimum aggregate hours required by grade are:

(a) 360 hours for a half-time kindergarten program or 720 hours for a full-time kindergarten program, as provided in [20-7-117](#);

(b) 720 hours for grades 1 through 3; and

(c) 1,080 hours for grades 4 through 12.

(3) For any elementary or high school district that fails to provide for at least the minimum aggregate hours, as listed in subsections (1) and (2), the superintendent of public instruction shall reduce the direct state aid for the district for that school year by two times an hourly rate, as calculated by the office of public instruction, for the aggregate hours missed.

MCA 20-1-302. School term, day, and week. (1) Subject to [20-1-301](#), [20-1-308](#), and any applicable collective bargaining agreement covering the employment of affected employees, the trustees of a school district shall set the number of days in a school term, the length of the school day, and the

number of school days in a school week and report them to the superintendent of public instruction.

(2) When proposing to adopt changes to a previously adopted school term, school week, or school day, the trustees shall:

(a) negotiate the changes with the recognized collective bargaining unit representing the employees affected by the changes;

(b) solicit input from the employees affected by the changes but not represented by a collective bargaining agreement; and

(c) solicit input from the people who live within the boundaries of the school district.

Districts Operating Four Days per Week

The following are the 31 public school districts and one nonpublic school (53 schools in all) that are currently operating on a four-day school week schedule:

Beaverhead County

Reichle Elementary

Blaine County

Bear Paw Elementary

Carter County

Alzada Elementary

Choteau County

Warrick Elementary

Custer County

Cottonwood Elementary

S.H. Elementary

S.Y. Elementary

Spring Creek Elementary

Flathead County

West Glacier Elementary

Garfield County

Sand Springs Elementary

Jefferson County

Jefferson High School

Lake County

Arlee K-12 Schools

Swan Lake-Salmon Elementary

Two Eagle River High School (Accredited Private School)

Lewis and Clark County

Lincoln K-12 Schools

Madison County

Alder Elementary
Sheridan Public Schools

Meagher County

Lenep Elementary

Mineral County

Alberton K-12 Schools

Missoula County

Sunset Elementary

Musselshell County

Melstone Public Schools

Phillips County

Saco Public Schools

Powder River County

South Stacey Elementary

Powell County

Gold Creek Elementary
Ovando Elementary

Ravalli County

Victor K-12 Schools

Rosebud County

Ashland Elementary
Birney Elementary

Sanders County

Hot Springs Public Schools
Noxon Public Schools

Sweet Grass County

Greycliff Elementary

Yellowstone County

Custer K-12 Schools

Survey

During the 2010-11 annual data collection cycle, 31 public school districts and one accredited nonpublic district (Two Eagle River) indicated operating on a four-day week. Since the publication of the *Four-Day School Week Report in Montana Schools: October 2009*, Lima K-12 Schools and Trail Creek Elementary returned to the five-day week, while 15 new districts joined the ranks of four-day schools, increasing the number of individual schools operating on four-day weeks from 29 to 53. Nineteen

districts are small rural schools administered by county superintendents. The smallest of these has 2 students. Districts over 100 students include Alberton, Arlee, Hot Springs, Jefferson High School, Lincoln, Sheridan, Two Eagle River, and Victor. Arlee is the largest with 402 students. Surveys were sent to all 32 districts and all responded, although 2 districts did not respond to every question.

2011 Survey Results (a copy of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A)

1. How long has your school operated on a 4-day school week?
 - 4 districts completing 6 years
 - 6 districts completing 5 years
 - 2 districts completing 4 years
 - 5 districts completing 3 years
 - 10 districts completing 2 years
 - 4 districts completing 1 year
2. What were the reasons for the district to adopt a 4-day school week?
 - 19 districts wanted a decrease in absenteeism to maximize instruction effectiveness and improve test scores
 - 16 rural districts' families wanted to cut travel time and fuel costs due to long distances and bad roads
 - 9 districts desired cost savings
 - 10 rural districts' families desired a Friday "go-to-town day" for medical appointments and for ranch and farm-related business and competitions
 - 3 districts hoped to improve teacher applicant pools and curb decreasing student enrollment
 - 2 districts reported they needed more collaborative teacher time
3. Since the change to a 4-day school week what benefits has the district seen?
 - 20 districts noted dramatic improvement in attendance and discipline
 - 15 districts felt cost savings were worth mentioning in one or more of the following areas: transportation, utilities, substitute pay, lunch budgets
 - 10 districts reported that Fridays, besides providing a scheduling cushion for snow days and holidays, provide more productive time for curriculum work, collaboration, school visitations, PIR and in-service
 - 8 rural districts reported significant cost savings to families and staff for travel
 - 16 districts noted improved morale and that students and teachers are better rested and more enthusiastic
 - 4 districts said their teachers are better prepared
 - 8 districts reported teachers feel instructional time is more productive
 - 5 districts are experiencing improved grades and higher test scores
 - 2 districts have larger applicant pools, and 1 high school reported increased enrollment due to an influx of students needing Fridays for gainful employment

4. How has the extra day during the week been used?
 - 17 districts provide no instruction
 - 15 districts have a modified 4-day week for students, using some or all Fridays for field trips and other extra-curricular outings, P.E. ski days, rural education fairs, job-shadowing, guided help sessions, lab/library make-up, special projects, disciplinary days, and a regular school day due to a lost day for weather, etc.
 - 21 districts schedule a number of Friday staff days for term grade reporting, professional development, in-service and workshops, parent-teacher conferences
5. Before the change what concerns did the community have?
 - 10 districts felt school days would be too long for elementary students and too long with activities and increased homework for secondary students
 - 5 districts had worries about covering the curriculum requirements
 - 15 districts were concerned about academic performance and retention rates
 - 12 districts were worried about day care
 - 7 districts thought too much free time could result in youth delinquency
 - 2 districts worried about the loss of a day's lunch program each week
 - 9 districts reported parents and staff were on board from the start with no concerns
6. After the change did the concerns in item 5 come to be realized?
 - Every district responded "No" to this question with few caveats: one district said they are still having problems soliciting a good pool of teacher applicants; 3 districts said one or two parents are still struggling with child care issues; one district said some parents think teachers are lazy; and one district said some parents occasionally complain about too much homework
7. Does the district offer full-time kindergarten?
 - 28 districts offer full-time kindergarten. Of these, 4 said they ease their kindergartners into full time in increments; 1 district offers preschool two days a week.
 - 4 districts do not have full-time kindergarten, although 1 gives parents the option (one district is a high school)
8. Are the elementary and the secondary schools on basically the same beginning and ending daily schedule?
 - 13 districts responded "yes"
 - 18 districts responded "not applicable"
 - 1 district responded "no"

9. How was input solicited from the community?
- 26 districts utilized school board/open forum public meetings
 - 5 districts used newsletters and newspaper announcements
 - 15 districts conducted surveys to one or more of their constituents
 - 3 districts utilized teacher-parent conferences
 - 1 district utilized TV and radio announcements
10. Were there any difficulties in meeting the 225 minutes requirement for a unit of credit for 7-12 grade students?
- Of the 30 districts responding to this question, 28 said "no" due to lengthened day and longer class periods
 - 2 districts responded "not applicable"
11. How long did the decision making process take?
- 21 districts required 1 to 6 months
 - 7 districts required nearly a year
 - 2 districts utilized more than 1 year
12. Do the following constituents like the change to a 4-day week?
- All districts responded "yes"—a few districts said teachers and students liked the change once they adjusted to the longer days; 4 districts reported a small number of parents and students continue to oppose the plan for various reasons stated in survey question 5
13. Does the board of trustees plan to re-visit or re-consider the 4-day week in the near future?
- 16 districts said "no" unless concerns should arise from the various constituents
 - 7 districts revisit it annually as a board agenda item
 - 3 districts periodically survey constituents to keep a pulse on its success
 - 4 districts reported they adopted the plan on a one, two, or three-year basis pending data collection and survey results
14. Please show any general comments that may help other school districts who are considering a change to a 4-day school week.
- Advantageous to make on-site visits with constituent representatives and to invite guest speakers who can field questions from your constituents
 - Advantageous to begin with open-forum meetings soliciting and gathering input from all constituents, making the process as transparent as possible so that everyone gets on board
 - Requires substantial time to consider collective bargaining agreement and to negotiate with classified staff
 - Requires tailoring to meet your community and students' needs with lots of follow-up to measure the benefits and to keep it going in a positive direction
 - Requires patience during transition period while everyone adjusts to longer days
 - Allows uninterrupted and more productive instructional time with more flexibility for block scheduling
 - Offers flexibility to schedule make up days for bad weather and other lost days
 - Provides efficient and effective use of Fridays for in-service and professional development, collaboration, planning, and grading

- Allows for thorough cleaning and building maintenance during the school year
- Benefits other schools struggling to meet counseling/art/library accreditation standards by sharing FTE
- Suits today's needs of the farming and ranching communities extremely well
- Allows school and families to schedule virtually all extra-curricular activities on three-day weekends, which substantially improves morale and attendance in most schools
- Provides spectrum of savings in transportation, utilities, sub pay
- Increases teacher applicant pools in most districts
- Attracts students from five-day schools
- Creates long days for elementary students (advantageous to structure the more academically demanding subjects in the morning)
- May create additional day care issues
- Allows for addition of Friday programs such as private lessons, field trips, art and game days, and other experiences that students might not have had the opportunity to be part of in a five-day school week
- Creates environment for students and teachers to start and end the week more rested and energized
- Has improved test scores and GPAs in several districts

Survey Summary

Although schools changing to a four-day school week have experienced cost savings, they realize that student achievement and other benefits can outweigh the benefits of saving money. Schools have experienced a significant decline in absenteeism and disciplinary issues, an improvement in student and staff morale, and rising achievement scores. Almost every school feels the four-day school week fits its community like a glove and benefits everyone. Most would hate to return to the five-day week.

All the districts hold school Monday through Thursday. Schools that modify the four-day week use occasional Fridays for field trips and other activities that would otherwise interrupt the school week. A small number of schools are open on Fridays to supervise lab and library make up, project completion, and help sessions. Extra-curricular activities are scheduled on Fridays whenever possible. Most districts take advantage of Fridays for staff development and in-service programs. Some of the schools, particularly the very rural, do not schedule work activities for teachers on Friday. Most of the initial concerns from the community in regards to switching to the four-day plan relate to child care, lengthy days for early elementary children, teachers not being able to cover as much of the curriculum, academic performance and retention rates, and youth delinquency. After the change to the four-day plan, most of these concerns either don't coalesce or are outweighed by the benefits. No districts reported the curriculum not being covered; none of the districts had difficulties meeting standards and most exceed the 225-minute unit of credit requirement for grades 7-12.

All schools solicited feedback from constituents using a combination of board meetings, open forums, surveys, parent-teacher discussions, and newsletters; and most schools made the decision to make the change within a six-month time period. All districts keep an open-door policy regarding concerns or complaints and are prepared to re-visit or re-consider the four-day week. The survey

indicated that all schools and the vast majority of their constituents like the change to a four-day school week.

Information from States in the Region

Implementation of a four-day school began during the Great Depression, experienced a resurgence in the '70s, and gained further popularity in the new millennium, despite any solid studies to evidence that four-day schools impact learning. In the *ECS State Note: Four-Day School Week* (2009), Molly Ryan notes: "As school districts nationwide struggle with funding cuts, the four-day school week has gained momentum as one way to save money[.] ... While the positives and negatives of the four-day week have been widely debated, research on the impacts of the schedule is extremely limited. Moreover, there is a decided lack of evidence how the schedule impacts student achievement."

Nevertheless, to date 20 states have altered their state requirements to allow for four-day schools. Many schools, most of which are small and rural, continue to implement the four-day week, not because they save money, but because they have resolved some of the ubiquitous problems inherent in five-day school weeks and because they believe it's good for kids (NCSL. *Four-Day School Weeks* <www.ncsl.org>).

Among the states in and around our region, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming have passed laws allowing for four-day schools; all have implemented the program except Washington. Information from area state education departments seems to indicate the same results as the 32 Montana districts that responded to the four-day school week survey in 2011. Most districts reported some financial savings and have witnessed other important benefits to the changeover. There has been an improvement in the attendance rates of both students and teachers. Schools have seen a decrease in dropout rates and disciplinary referrals. There are fewer classroom interruptions, fewer distractions from extracurricular activities, and improved student and faculty morale. Student achievement shows no significant improvement or decline. Child care issues have not been a significant problem.

On-line Resources

The following on-line resources, although not exhaustive in their scope, may be helpful when considering moving toward a four-day week:

Beesley, A.D., and C. Anderson. The Four Day School Week: Information and Recommendations. *The Rural Educator*, 29(10), 48-55. Fall 2007. Web. March 2011
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4126/is_200710/ai_n21137822/>

This overview discusses issues regarding the four-day school week, based on a limited number of studies and anecdotal reports from teachers and students. It provides a useful table of pros and cons and recommendations for districts who are considering implementing the four-day

school week. This Web page also provides links to other valuable articles discussing the four-day school week.

Chamberlin, Molly, and Jonathan Plucker. "The Four Day School Week." *Education Policy Briefs*.

Indiana Education Policy Center. Winter 2003. Web. March 2011

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ceep/projects/PDF/PB_V1N2_Four_Day_School_Week.pdf>

This succinct pamphlet summarizes research on four-day school week in which anecdotal evidence suggests that small, rural districts may benefit from shortened school weeks, though the anticipated 20 percent may be larger than what may be actually realized. It includes some usable tables of advantages and disadvantages.

Dam, Ai. "The 4 Day School Week." Colorado Department of Education. July 2006. Web. March 2011

<<http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED497760.pdf>>

Thirty-four percent of the 178 school districts in Colorado use the four-day school week. This 88-page ERIC document discusses the history of the four-day school week in Colorado. It also discusses the performance, financial, political, and day-care impact of the implementation.

Donis-Keller, Christine. "Research Brief: A Review of the Evidence on the Four-Day School Week."

University of Southern Maine. Center for Education Policy and Applied Research, February 2009.

Web. 20 March 2011 <<http://usm.maine.edu/cepare/pdf/CEPARE%20Brief%20on%20the%204-day%20school%20week%202.10.pdf>>

At present, the four-day school week is being used in more than 120 school districts across the country. Use of the four-day school week also extends beyond our borders to several provinces in Canada, France, and Britain. This research brief provides a history and presents a synthesis of the limited research base, focused on the implementation and impact of moving to a four-day school week schedule.

Idaho Department of Education. Current. Web. 20 March 2011

<<http://www.sde.idaho.gov/site/ruraleducation/>>

This Web page offers links to the current research and reports regarding the four day school week. A valuable go-to site for links to implementation ideas, schedule variables, financial implications, pros and cons, and more. It includes a list of Idaho schools using the schedule and data on average daily attendance and graduation rates.

McREL. "What High-quality Education Research Says about Four-day School Weeks." McREL Newsroom, *Education Hot Topics*. 2011. Web. March 2011

<<http://www.mcrel.org/Newsroom/hottopicFourDayWeek.asp>>

This article summarizes current research on potential benefits, drawbacks, financial savings and impact on student achievement related to implementation of a four-day school week.

National Council of State Legislatures. "Four-Day School Weeks." NCSL 2011. Web. March 2011
<<http://www.ncsl.org/IssuesResearch/Education/SchoolCalendarExtendedDayYearFourDaySchool/tabid/12934/Default.aspx>>

This article from the National Council of State Legislatures provides a summary of the history, research, pending and enacted state legislation, and perceived pros and cons of a four-day school week. This site includes several additional links for those wishing to read further and an insightful podcast discussing the subject.

University of Minnesota. "Does a Four-Day School Week Make Financial Sense for My District? One of a Series of Fact Sheets on Economic Issues for Communities." University of Minnesota/Extension. 2010. Web. March 2011
<http://www.apec.umn.edu/prod/groups/cfans/@pub/@cfans/@apec/documents/asset/cfans_asset_213433.pdf>

This is current research, (largely anecdotal) written from the perspective of stakeholders in Minnesota, but it does provide a thorough examination of all sides of the issue.

Accreditation Reminders

Due to reports that additional school districts were considering a change to a four-day school week for the 2009-10 school year, the Accreditation Division of the Office of Public Instruction sent an Official E-mail to all districts on March 17, 2009.

Districts considering a change to a four-day week will need to consider the following:

- For high schools and 7 – 8 programs that are funded at the high school rate, the equivalent of at least 225 minutes per week for one school year must be allocated for each unit (credit) of study.
- Districts should pay particular attention to the time allotted for the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades. These grades fall under the 1,080 hours requirement but because of later start times, morning and afternoon recesses, and longer lunch periods, these grades may not meet 1,080 hours.
- Lunchtime may not be counted toward meeting the standard school day nor minimum aggregate hours required.
- Unstructured recess periods may not be counted as part of the mandated hours of pupil instruction. However, recess periods, for which there has been an identifiable effort to provide guidance and structure, and which are directly or indirectly under supervision of the certified

teacher, may be counted as pupil instruction under MCA 20-1-101(11), 20-1-302 and ARM 10.15.101(41). The OPI defines structure as having daily planning for activities at recess and all students are expected to participate.

- Although passing time between classes may be counted toward meeting the standard school day and the minimum aggregate hours required, passing time may not be counted as instructional time needed to meet the requirements of a "unit" of time. (ARM 10.55.902, 904-906)
 - This information can be found in Appendix D-1 of the **Montana School Accreditation Standards and Procedures Manual**.

Initial Conclusions/Recommendations

Data does not confirm that the change to a four-day school week is best for all students. Almost all schools have reported an increase in attendance rates. Most schools have enforced fundamental rules to protect "instructional time" during the four days of school and hence have seen an overall increase in instructional time. Less instructional time is used for extracurricular activities as well. Morale has improved and discipline referrals have declined in the schools that have made the change to a four-day week. Academic achievement has remained about the same level for schools that have changed. The parents of the schools that have changed to a four-day school week overwhelmingly like the change because it allows more time with their children.

There appears to be concern for high-risk students, students with disabilities, and young students because the longer days may not be beneficial to them. The OPI must consider the "turnaround schools," schools that have been designated by ESEA/NCLB as in need of restructuring because of their continued failing status. Research shows that more instructional time is necessary, not less, for the at-risk student. If four-day schools become more predominant in the state, the Office of Public Instruction may consider "rules" for the "turnaround schools."

To date, most of the Montana districts that have changed to a four-day week have been the small, rural schools. The change appears to be beneficial to the rural schools due to the remote characteristics of these districts.

For districts considering a change to a four-day school week, the Office of Public Instruction recommends the following:

1. Take enough time to make an informed decision.
2. Research the issue thoroughly.
3. Make a point to visit and talk to districts that have made the change. Seek comments from a variety of people (students to community members).
4. Communicate, communicate, and communicate. Use various forms of communication to dialogue with all the different constituents in your community.

5. Make the process as transparent as possible. Do not surprise anyone.

For further information please contact the Accreditation Office, (406) 444-1852.

Appendix A
Four-Day School Week Survey

The 2011 Survey Questions are:

1. How long has your school operated on a four-day school week?
2. What were the reasons for the district to adopt a four-day school week?
3. Since the change to a four-day school week, what benefits has the district seen?
4. How has the extra day during the week been used?
5. Before the change, what concerns did the community have?
6. After the change, did the concerns in item 5 come to be realized?
7. Does the district offer full-time kindergarten?
8. Are the elementary and the secondary schools on basically the same beginning and ending daily schedule?
9. How was input solicited from the community?
10. Were there any difficulties in meeting the 225 minutes requirement for a unit of credit for 7-12 grade students?
11. How long did the decision making process take?
12. Do the following constituents like the change to a four-day week?
13. Does the board of trustees plan to re-visit or reconsider the four-day week in the near future?
14. Please show any general comments that may help other school districts who are considering a change to a four-day week.

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