

**Exploring the Advantages of a Four-Day School Week:  
Improving Learning, Wellness, and Work-Life Balance**

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## **Introduction**

6 o'clock is family dinner time, well at least it used to be. Now 6 pm has become synonymous with checking Google classrooms to see your grade from the last math test. The line between school and home life has degraded to such a point that the only difference between the two seems to be the kind of chair that students find themselves sitting in. It is inappropriate that there is such an overlap between school work and homelife, as it has been leaving students with much less time for themselves and their families to spend as they please. This major problem can be attributed to the use of innovations such as Google classroom, Canvas, and Blackboard.

A four day school week will allow this line that divides education and leisure time to be redefined. Four day school weeks will not promote laziness, but rather it will encourage higher expectations for the students by using a holistic approach to education. Four days of school work, means an extra day for enrichment in the community, self development, time to destress, and time that can be spent with family and friends. This will empower students to be more well-rounded and versed in a variety of life topics. We will also see a downward trend of mental health related diseases because students and teachers will be happier and more excited to learn. We will also experience much less education burnout than we currently see in the education system. In addition, a four day school week will give teachers better opportunities for professional development and lesson planning, which both have the opportunity to further enhance student outcomes. We are at an pivotal point in society where we have the opportunity to reevaluate and redefine the school system that has been standard in America for about 100

years. We are not the same society that we once were, and change is necessary in order for education to evolve with the current climate of society.

### **Stipulations**

A four day school week has great potential with regards to education and performance of both students and educators, but in order to be implemented correctly and have the desired outcomes there must be stipulations in this plan. There need to be options available to the children for the fifth day, including opportunities for enrichment, field trips to the community, athletics, or arts. The students should be given choices and be able to pick activities that are important to them. In educational philosophy, this would be considered progressivism. Progressivism explains that students should have a vested interest in what they are learning and also states that the lesson should be relevant to their individual lives. It is necessary that the students are productive on this fifth day, bettering themselves and learning new skills as mentioned earlier, not just wasting the day on social media. A day of enrichment makes this system more equitable for children who do not have the best home life, and would enhance not only their capability to learn, but also enhance the development of their personalities. As an added benefit of the program, working parents can rest assured that they will not have to find childcare on the fifth day if their child is at school being creative and experiencing other skills. Yet, if parents do choose to keep their child home for the day, they will be able to spend quality time with their children, rather than stressing about school commitments. It is important to note that a four day school week does not mean less education for the children, rather it is a different format for learning that will be much more conducive to the preparedness of the generations of

students to come. A four day school week allows students and teachers to focus on what's important, and produce more meaningful work.

### **The Politics**

Online, charter, and private schools are all becoming more sought after due to changes during the pandemic. It is time we call for action in the public system. We must reevaluate how public schools can become more desirable and offer equal opportunities to their counterparts. Most public schools are not focused on helping the student grow as an individual, just how to pass tests. Though, this is not necessarily their fault. If money was no issue, all schools, teachers, and principals would be providing ample enrichment, but most are economically constrained from doing so. There is a large disparity in opportunities between wealthy districts and not so wealthy ones, which allows schools in wealthy places to provide significantly more opportunities and enrichment. Additionally, most testing mandates are forced upon schools by politicians who don't actually care about student outcomes. We need to elect officials that can help make these changes, because a four day school week should be a nationwide initiative. This will allow all schools to offer more enrichment opportunities to adapt for the times and current societal values. Unfortunately, a four day week is not possible due to the current school structure and time constraints. Therefore we will need politicians, administrators and proponents of education to serve as advocates and lead this necessary change.

### **Proposed Structure**

In a perfect world there would be classes Tuesday through Friday, with Monday reserved for enrichment activities. This will ensure that everyone starts the week in a positive way, and

Fridays don't become a day to slack off. Starting each week on a high note will set students and teachers up to have a productive week and eliminate some of the anxiety and stress they are all experiencing. If families wanted to take a weekend trip to explore, or destress, they would be able to keep their child home on Monday without any repercussions. If the child's family was busy on Monday, they would have the option to participate in educational trips, discussions, and activities. The students could spend more time participating in theater arts, reading, bonding with classmates, building Rube Goldberg inventions, solving puzzles and brain teasers, learning about topics that interest them, meditating or playing sports. The possibilities are literally endless. The school systems could employ teachers who only want to work part time, college students, and even stay at home parents to chaperone these activities. This would be a great employment opportunity for many groups of people, and it would take pressure off teachers to plan all of these things. The fun parts of school are slowly being taken away, such as parties, crafts, and movies. While these activities may not be the most educational, they are vital in ensuring that students love school and are motivated to learn. Having Monday off from the classroom will provide a whole day for these activities, without sacrificing precious instructional time. Currently, the average school year is about 180 days long, spanning over 40 weeks- including holidays (O'Donoghue, 2019). If we shorten summer break to four or five weeks, instead of twelve, there would still be time for 180 school days, with plenty of time off for holidays. Obviously, teacher compensation must adjust accordingly.

### **Effects of COVID-19**

Teachers and students will benefit from a four day school week because it will enhance student outcomes and provide solutions to the nationwide teacher shortage. Virtual learning has

made relaxing at home virtually impossible. The effects of COVID-19 and virtual life and learning has been taxing students' mental health. Online platforms such as Google classrooms and Blackboard have taken over the education field. They are marketed as a helpful education tool but they rely too heavily on students' commitment to education outside of school hours. Why has no one questioned how bizarre it is to have assignments due at 11:59? Nothing should be due outside of class hours because we are embedding the idea that completing assignments at midnight is reasonable. There is going to be a whole generation that has this idea ingrained into them. Dr. Douglas Harris, a senior fellow at the Brown Center on Education Policy, suggests that “A shift to some online tools could shift the role of teachers, making them more like coaches and mentors. They can point students to very good online lectures and then be there to provide guidance and feedback, and to make connections across topics” (2020). The possibility of this occurring scares me, and it should scare you too. Most people would say that one of their most influential role models was a past teacher. We should not be reducing them to pixels behind a screen. There are many ways to promote better teaching, but this is certainly not one of them.

COVID changed the school structure almost immediately and we were still able to manage, though it was at the cost of many individuals' mental health. Some students only went to school every other day, so school became just school and there were no opportunities to grow as a person or build relationships. Mental health and self care got pushed to the backburner, leaving students, parents and teachers struggling. This was the first change in the structure of education, probably ever. Although many of the changes were only temporary, they have paved the way for something bigger. Students and teachers were unreasonably stressed before COVID. The pandemic has only amplified this, we need to advocate for change now.

## **Benefits for Teachers**

Teaching is a passion driven field. It doesn't make sense that we are constantly experiencing a nationwide teacher shortage. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "at the master's degree level, the greatest numbers of degrees were conferred in the fields of business (192,000), education (146,000), and health professions and related programs (125,000)" (2021). Despite the abundance of individuals with a teaching degree, a majority of teachers leave the profession before retirement, and this problem is only amplified in Title 1 schools. Additionally, math and science teachers are 70% more likely to quit before retirement (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). Most of their frustrations stem from constantly changing curriculum, which forces them to prepare new lessons yearly. Effective and creative lessons take a long time to prepare, so most of this planning occurs off the clock. Because of the work teachers are expected to complete outside of contract hours, many experience inadequate compensation. While their salary may be sufficient for the school day, they are often earning less than minimum wage if you factor in all of the personal hours dedicated to making the school day more efficient. Additionally many new teachers feel ill prepared to have their own classroom, and most schools don't have a program to help these new teachers transition smoothly. Finally, sub-par administration is too common and only amplifies these issues. If implemented correctly, a four day school week can address the ever changing curriculum, low wages, poor preparation, and bad leadership. It is vital that the switch to a four day school week does not negatively affect teacher compensation. There should be four days of teaching and one day for planning and

professional development. This will ensure that teachers only have to work during contract hours and are not expected to grade and plan from their living rooms. Certainly if a teacher was very overwhelmed they could also take Monday off to destress, but I believe that it should fall under the same absentee policy that taking off any other day would. Canada once had similar turnover rates to the United States, but they have managed to boost teacher retention rates to 98% by implementing a four year program for new teachers (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). While they did not make the shift to a four day school week, a similar program in the United States could definitely benefit from the four day week because all of these issues could be addressed during the preparation day. The fifth day would be beneficial in promoting teacher and administrative development, while ensuring that work is only expected to be done while physically at work.

Four days of school will empower teachers to be better educators. Teachers are extremely creative and powerful individuals, the standard of teaching would only increase if they were given adequate time to develop innovative lessons that fit the current standards. As mentioned, a major problem in the teaching profession is the constantly updated curriculum and guidelines of best practices. This means that older teachers may not be equipped to deal with current student needs, because they do not have time to redesign lessons that they made years ago. They don't teach math, or any subject for that matter, the same way they did 20 years ago. Consequently teachers are expected to relearn how to teach with every change of curriculum. This is unreasonable and frustrating. While teachers should certainly be educated on the most up to date methods, they should not be expected to learn a new method of addition every three years **on their own time**. To make matters worse, they are tasked with reteaching themselves and creating



new lesson plans constantly. Having an extra paid work day without students will provide time for teachers to stay up to date with trends in education, without sacrificing their free time. This will encourage professional development and more accountability with lessons and planning. An extra day to plan will lead to more effective and less stressed teachers.

Some rural schools in the United States have already made the switch, “The popularity of a shorter school week has increased over the past decade. Now, over 560 districts across 25 states have at least one school running a 4-day week! And the number is growing. Over in the UK, over 200 schools are following the trend, or actively consulting on it” (Teach Starter, 2021). A four day week is the future of education. Since student achievement and teacher satisfaction are so highly correlated, we should be doing everything in our power to help teachers succeed. If we give professionals the space to become creative teachers, they will inspire their classes to be future leaders. If the most rural communities can make a four day school week work, then suburban and urban communities should be able to follow suit.

### **Benefits for Students**

This system is better for students too. Have you ever seen the social media post that a current high-schooler is more stressed than a psychiatric patient 60 years ago? It turns out this is actually true. Psychologist Robert Leahy states, “ The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950’s” (2011). A four day school week will help alleviate some of the rising stress levels in our students, while aiming to enhance student, teacher, and parent mental health. It will help provide better opportunities, allow for time to strengthen families, and shift towards student-centered learning. There are only

a few studies on how a four day week affects test scores, but since the data pool is so small all of the results conflict. While it is not known exactly how structure this will affect student test scores, it is reasonable to assume that given the same amount of instructional time the scores will go up due to happier students and more prepared teachers.

## **History**

The structure of a 5 day work week is a centuries old tradition that originated in New England mills and factories. We are no longer a society focused on production, so the school calendar is based on nothing but tradition. According to an article in The Atlantic, “The seven-day week, however, is completely man-made. If it’s man-made, can’t man unmake it? For all the talk of how freeing it’d be to shave a day or two off the five-day workweek, little attention has been paid to where the weekly calendar came from” (Sopher, 2014). Changing the school week is the first step, but overtime other industries may also be inspired to reevaluate the work-week. In schools, a whole month is usually spent in the beginning of school getting kids readjusted to school and relearning what they forgot over the summer- shorter but more frequent breaks can solve this. Does this system actually make sense to anyone, or is this just the way it's always been done? There has always been a push to change the workweek, and the pandemic has given us the perfect opportunity. COVID has turned the school system on its head, but it has provided the opportunity to reevaluate the system in accordance with the current state of society.

## **Looking Forward**

A few schools in the United States have already shifted to a four day school week, but their system is flawed. They have the students doing four 8-9 hour days. This does not address

the mental health issues that modern schools are giving to students. They should be extending the school year, instead of the days. This will increase the number of guaranteed meals for students who depend on school breakfast and lunch because students could be sent home with an extra meal for the long weekend, or get a fresh one during their enrichment activities. A longer school year will also decrease the unnecessarily long readjustment and review period that occurs at the beginning of every school year. Despite the flaws, studies have shown that schools operating under a four day week experienced “decreased absenteeism for teachers and students, a drop in student discipline referrals, and a decline in the student dropout rate” (Hedtke, 2014). In these schools, a four day week stemmed out of the need to cut costs, because they decreased teacher contract hours to only four days of the week. They also have not implemented any programs for students and working families, which is inequitable. These schools are doing the bare minimum and still seeing significant results. A four day school week with more funding and guidelines would only amplify these results. As a country, we must prioritize and reevaluate all education systems. We owe it to our children.

A four day school week may help encourage change needed in the workforce. According to an article in Forbes, “Approximately 50% of workers are now considered Millennials. Many companies are struggling to attract and retain these individuals” (Alesso-Bendisich, 2020). Millennials and Generation Z do not live to work in the same way that some of the older generations are known to. Their perspectives regarding work do not align with centuries old norms, which is leading to a nationwide teacher shortage, because younger teachers are more likely to leave unpleasurable workplaces. They want flexibility, and a four day school week can give them that. They will not be expected to take work home with them, because the fifth day

can be used for the grading and planning that would normally take place in their living rooms. These generations can be the change we need to restructure the school week. This may even inspire other industries to re-evaluate their outdated practices.

## **Conclusion**

Education is arguably the most important part of society, because those that are able to think for themselves and have an interest in their own betterment and learning are the ones that are able to change the world. Today we see burnout in students at an unprecedented rate, home life is just a continuation of the schooling students had all day prior, and students are losing the ability to think critically. We are constantly re-evaluating school curriculums to try and make education easier, but we have never reevaluated the structure as a whole. We are hurting ourselves as a society and diminishing the prospective future by allowing students to give up on their pursuit of knowledge. A structural change to schooling would not only allow for students to be more focused on course work and excel in the classroom, but we could also give them ample opportunity to work on their character and the skill sets they may hold. The only thing preventing a four day week is the lack of funding, and the stigma of change. Change is never easy in a large society, but if we were to have a leader to bring about the idea, maybe we can work together to help our children and all future generations learn in a more personalized and efficient manner. We must demand change in the realm of education to ensure a brighter future for all.

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