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Staffing, Retention, and Expenditures in the Four-Day School Week

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A four-day school week (4DSW) is a schedule in which students attend school four days a week instead of five, usually with Fridays off and longer school days on the remaining four. The policy has spread quickly. Nationally, more than 2,100 schools in 850 districts used a four-day calendar in 2023, up from 1,600 schools in 650 districts in 2018-19, and roughly half of states now have at least one district on a 4DSW schedule.

District leaders usually adopt the four-day week for two reasons:

1. Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Leaders hope a shorter week will make their district a more attractive place to work and help them recruit and keep teachers, a motivation that grew stronger after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Decreasing Operational Costs: With one fewer day of operations, districts expect to save on bus routes, meals, and building upkeep, a motivation that became more prominent after the Great Recession.

A growing number of studies have examined how the 4DSW affects teachers, and most find that it does little to improve teacher recruitment or retention. Studies of district budgets have similarly found only small savings, typically 2 percent or less of operating costs. Far fewer studies have looked at non-teaching staff, such as paraeducators, central office administrators, principals, counselors, custodians, and food service workers, even though these employees make up about half of the public school workforce and are central to the cost savings districts expect. Only two prior studies have examined non-teaching staff, and both found little change in their turnover.

The 4DSW may affect non-teaching staff differently than teachers, and differently across roles. Most non-teaching staff, such as paraeducators, bus drivers, and food service workers, are paid by the hour and may lose earnings when districts drop a day, since bus routes and meal service do not grow with a longer school day. Much of the savings districts expect comes from these reduced hours, which could push hourly staff to look for better-paying work elsewhere. Salaried staff, such as principals and central office administrators, typically keep the same pay while working fewer, longer days. For these employees, who often face heavy workloads and burnout, the extra day off could make the job more sustainable and encourage them to stay.

This study examines these questions using data from Missouri, one of the fastest-growing 4DSW policy adopters in the country. The study addresses three research questions:

1. **Do 4DSWs improve non-teaching staff retention?**
2. **Does 4DSW adoption change staffing ratios in districts?**
3. **Does a 4DSW reduce expenditures? If so, where are those savings concentrated?**

STUDY AND METHODS

The researchers drew on two main sources of data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The first was a record of every public school employee in the state from 2008-09 through 2023-24, which allowed them to track whether each person stayed in their district, moved to another Missouri district, or left the state's education workforce from one year to the next. The second was the detailed annual financial report each district submits to the state, which breaks spending down by purpose (such as transportation, food service, or instruction) and by type (such as salaries, supplies, or payments to outside providers). They linked these data to the list of districts using a 4DSW schedule and the year each district first adopted it.

To estimate the effect of the transition to a 4DSW, the researchers used a difference-in-differences research design. They compared how outcomes changed in districts after adopting a 4DSW with how the same outcomes changed over the same period in districts that remained on a five-day week. Looking at changes over time within each district accounts for stable differences between districts, such as size or location, and comparing against five-day districts accounts for statewide trends that affected everyone, such as the pandemic or shifts in the labor market. Because Missouri districts adopted the calendar at different times across 14 school years, the researchers used a version of this method designed for staggered adoption, and they limited the comparison group to rural districts, since nearly all adopters were rural and closely resembled other rural districts on enrollment, staffing, and student demographics.

KEY FINDINGS

RQ1: Do 4DSWs improve non-teaching staff retention?

1 Average turnover among non-teaching staff did not change meaningfully after districts adopted a 4DSW.

- Non-teaching staff were 1.5 percentage points less likely to leave the Missouri public education workforce entirely than similar staff in comparison districts, about 11 percent below their pre-adoption exit rate of 13 percent. This is a statistically significant but small effect that the authors do not view as practically meaningful.

2 Central office staff were slightly less likely to leave the education workforce after 4DSW adoption, though the effect faded after about three years.

- Central office staff were about 3 percentage points less likely to exit the workforce than central office staff in comparison districts. The authors interpret this cautiously, since central office staff are often the people championing the switch and may be staying to see their own initiative through.

3 Paraeducators were more likely to move to another district after 4DSW adoption.

- Paraeducators in 4DSW districts were 1.8 percentage points more likely to move to another Missouri district than paraeducators in comparison districts, a 41 percent increase over their pre- 4DSW adoption rate of 4.4 percent.
- The authors connect this to pay: paraeducators are usually hourly, so a shorter week can mean lower earnings, giving them a reason to look for work elsewhere.

RQ2: Does 4DSW adoption change staffing ratios in districts?

4 Staffing levels, measured as full-time staff per 100 students, stayed essentially the same for non-teaching roles overall.

- The authors take this as a sign that districts are keeping their existing staffing arrangements after 4DSW adoption instead of using the new calendar as an opportunity to rethink how staff time is used.

RQ3: Does a 4DSW reduce expenditures? If so, where are those savings concentrated?

5 Total per-pupil spending did not change. Underneath that total, the detailed budget data show two forces that offset each other:

- **Small savings on operational costs.** Districts spent less on operations and maintenance salaries, transportation supplies, and food service. Each estimate is only marginally significant, and together they come to roughly $66 per pupil, or about 0.4 percent of total spending.
- **A larger increase in tuition payments.** Tuition and conduit payments rose by about $111 per pupil, driven mostly by payments to other districts, private schools, and virtual programs. This was the strongest and most consistent finding in the study. Adopting districts also became about 8 percentage points more likely to pay another provider for special education services.

6 The most likely explanation for this spending pattern is that some families responded to the 4DSW adoption by enrolling their children elsewhere, with the home district paying the tuition, and that some of these students receive special education services from their new provider.

- Students whose tuition is paid elsewhere still count in their home district's enrollment, so the shift appears in the budget as outgoing payments rather than as lost enrollment. District-level increases arrived in rough multiples of $10,000, consistent with full tuition for individual students.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

1 **Districts should not expect a 4DSW to improve retention among non-teaching staff. For hourly employees like paraeducators, it may actually decrease retention, potentially because of lost earnings.**

- The authors suggest that policies acting directly on working conditions and compensation are likely a better match for the staffing problems that usually motivate 4DSW adoption.

2 **Districts should not expect a 4DSW to save them money. In this study, the small operational savings were more than offset by new out-of-district tuition payments.**

- The authors recommend that prospective 4DSW adopters budget for the possibility that some families will enroll their children elsewhere at the district's expense. They also point out that even the clearest savings come with tradeoffs: lower food service spending means fewer meals served, which is a cost to food-insecure students that does not show up in the budget.

3 **The rise in out-of-district tuition may signal that some families are dissatisfied with, or worried about, the education their children receive under a 4DSW.**

- The authors connect this to prior research showing achievement declines after 4DSW adoption, suggesting families may be leaving because outcomes have worsened or because they expect them to.

4 **Use the 4DSW calendar to rethink how staff time is organized.**

- The off day and longer school days create time that strategic staffing approaches could put to new uses, but this study shows no sign of this happening in a way that can be picked up in administrative data.

FULL WORKING PAPER

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