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Managing the four-day school week: Essential insights for primary school administrators

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In an era of rapidly escalating teacher shortages, primary school administrators are increasingly confronted with the dual challenge of maintaining operational efficiency and upholding educational standards. In response to this new reality, many school administrators across Europe have devised innovative strategies to restructure education without compromising on its quality. Probably one of the most promising yet challenging initiatives to date is the introduction of a four-day school week. However, several questions linger about the essential factors primary school administrators should consider when implementing a four-day school week. To help them in this quest, we will delve into the conditions under which the four-day school week might be successful, and describe the benefits it may offer to teachers, parents, and school administrators.

What is a four-day school week?

Put simply, a four-day school week entails completing all teaching-related activities within a four-day timeframe. As such, this initiative aligns well with other measures aimed at reducing workload, such as the recently initiated Dutch pilot program “Instructional Time” in secondary education (cf. Cijvat and Snoek, 2023) and flexible working within schools in the United Kingdom (Department of Education, 2023). Such trials initially encourage experimentation with the flexibility of the number of lessons (e.g., from three to two hours of math per week) and their (normative) duration (e.g., from 50 to 45 minutes). The idea is that the (fragmented) time made available can be used by teachers for lesson preparation or professional development. Yet, our proposal of the four-day school week takes scheduling as its focal point: Not just all instructional activities, but also other tasks—whether it be grading, meetings, or parent-teacher conferences—should occur across four days instead of five. Evidently, this requires a number of specific conditions that determine whether the implementation of a four-day school week is feasible.

Effective coordination

First, successful implementation of a four-day school week hinges on efficient coordination, involving the clustering of regular activities across four instead of the traditional five days. In this setup, the fifth day is fully scheduled off for both teachers and students. Of course, we are not naïve. We do not expect to hear immediate positive reactions on the schoolyard, as parents might voice worries about their children’s progress and understandably feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of organizing extra childcare during this time of labor scarcity (e.g., Baker, 2024). Furthermore, on a broader scale, national and local policymakers often seem to perceive the four-day school week as a significant threat to educational quality. Yet, to what extent are these concerns valid?

Let us first explore the assertion that a four-day school week might hamper the quality of education due to a decrease in instructional time. Many European countries have legal requirements ensuring a minimum number of instructional hours per week. In the United Kingdom, for instance, primary school students are legally entitled to receive a minimum of 32.5 hours of schooling per week, including lunch periods, breaks, teaching sessions, and mandatory enrichment activities (Long, 2021). Despite such regulations, primary schools retain some autonomy to determine their specific schedules and structure. Whereas most schools adhere to the mandated minimum hours, some offer additional instructional time. Hence, the absence of a maximum limit on the number of educational hours per day or week at least provides the flexibility to implement a four-day school week.

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At the same time, however, such flexibility may raise legitimate concerns about where the line in reducing instructional time could be drawn, without compromising on educational quality. A handful of large-scale studies from the US may offer some insights. These empirical studies suggest that students in schools with a four-day school week perform at least as well in English and math as students in schools with a five-day school week (e.g., Thompson et al., 2023). Furthermore, both parents and teachers who have transitioned from a five-day to a four-day school week do not notice any difference in the quality of education (Turner et al., 2018, 2019).

Notably, in schools where students seem to struggle in English and math, it is not the number of days they attend that seems to matter most, but how many hours they spend on learning. Results from Thompson and Ward (2022) indicate that only students in schools with a four-day school week with less than 29.95 hours of instructional time per week show a slight decrease in their mathematics and language performance compared to students with a five-day school week. However, this slight downward trend was no longer visible when students received more than 31 hours of teaching per week. Although other important factors such as instructional quality have not been considered in these studies, it seems that scheduling the fifth day off does not immediately raise concerns about the quality of education. Evidently, though, school administrators must allocate sufficient instructional time to ensure their students can master basic skills (Yeşil Dağlı, 2019).

Logistical concerns

Let us now consider the logistical worries surrounding the four-day school week. From an economic standpoint, effective coordination among various stakeholders—school leaders, teachers, parents—is a critical prerequisite for organizing regular educational tasks. Just as with part-time employment, a four-day school week may not yield sufficient returns if every educational professional can be scheduled off on any random workday (Gomes, 2021). Evidently, such uncoordinated arrangements not only present logistical hurdles for (working) parents and child-care but may also have implications for the school's effectiveness as a professional organization. For instance, studies suggest that a lack of coordination may lead to poorer team performance, delayed communication, and inefficient meetings (cf. Gomes, 2021). School administrators may address these issues by establishing concrete and transparent agreements about the clustering of tasks and designating a "lesson-free day". Indeed, research indicates that by teaching one day less, teachers have started making more efficient choices about their work (Turner et al., 2018). In practice, this may translate into a workforce spending less time on meetings and administrative tasks (Kellam et al., 2022; Naaijken & Bootsma, 2018). Hence, an efficient reallocation of time may free up more time for the primary educational process.

What may change for (working) parents? Probably not much. Data from national statistics offices across Europe

(OECD, 2023) show that people are increasingly opting for part-time work (i.e., working < 35–40 hours a week). Hence, most European countries already seem quite well-adjusted to a four-day school week. For instance, in the UK, nearly 40% of families with young children have the father working full-time and the mother working part-time, while close to 50% of single parents are employed part-time (Office for National Statistic, 2022). Similar work patterns can be found elsewhere, such as the Netherlands, where in two-thirds of families with young children, fathers work full-time and mothers part-time (CBS, 2023). Research from the United States also indicates that the four-day school week may have little impact on the traditional division of caregiving responsibilities for working parents (Ward, 2019). Even single parents reported that adjustments to their children's school schedules had minimal impact on their work patterns. If well-coordinated by school administrators, we feel that a four-day school week may be feasible.

Retention of working hours and salary

Another important prerequisite is the retention of working hours and salary for teachers. A four-day school week could only be successful if the number of hours worked on regular school days is not increased compared to the five-day school week (Churches & Fitzpatrick, 2023). Furthermore, we believe that a four-day school week requires a proportional payment for the fifth day. Is this a financial headache for school administrators? If we follow the reasoning of Henri Ford, probably not. From Ford's perspective, it would be foolish to "compensate" for a scheduled day off by making teachers work more at times when they are least productive—at the edge of the day and at the end of the week (cf. Gomes, 2021). Indeed, studies on police officers and nurses show a positive correlation between long working hours and low effectiveness and errors (e.g., Dembe et al., 2005). And, of course, we should also consider the financial consequences of the stress it might create for already overloaded teachers (Kellam et al., 2022). Last, we believe it must be feasible to deliver our lessons within a four-day school week, considering that the number of teaching hours provided by teachers in most European countries is, on average, 10% to 20% higher than in "success country" Finland, where students only receive 660 hours of education (OECD, 2023).

In addition to the more intangible cost savings a four-day school week might provide, there can also be material cost savings. In the context of the USA, it has been found that average savings of up to 14% can be achieved on both education and non-education-related costs, such as heating expenses, building rent, maintenance, and student transportation (Morton, 2021). Hence, in the long term, it is reasonable to assume that retaining teachers' working hours and salaries may not necessarily lead to increased costs.

Benefits for teachers

Thus far, our arguments have mainly centered on the conditions under which the four-day school week might be

successfully implemented. Now, we aim to highlight numerous benefits for teachers, including reflection time, benefits to well-being, and flexibility. First, teachers, whose job revolves around knowledge, need time to reflect, process information, create content, and develop professionally (Sallis and Jones, 2013). A four-day school week may not only allow for such reflection time, but also compels us to regard teachers as full-fledged knowledge workers, for whom time for wandering and generating creative ideas is essential. Additionally, clustering activities across four days can contribute to a sense of camaraderie among teachers. This can result in a positive work environment where collaboration is more effective and educational quality is maintained (Koffeman et al., 2023).

A four-day school week may also provide benefits for teachers' well-being. Numerous large-scale studies on work stress suggest that a four-day workweek has positive effects on sleep patterns, job satisfaction, and work-life balance (Gomes, 2021). Moreover, a shorter workweek may reduce feelings of stress and can decrease the number of reported burnouts by up to 71% (e.g., Lewis et al., 2023). We believe that this might be good news for primary school administrators who increasingly face (prolonged) stress-related absences and educational professionals leaving the field. Given that teaching requires a significant amount of emotional labor, a four-day school week may offer teachers the opportunity to have three days of rest. Evidence suggests that this may contribute to the recovery, well-being, and enjoyment of teachers, ultimately resulting in fewer absences (Turner et al., 2018). Finally, teachers—often females who combine teaching with caregiving responsibilities at home—indicate that freedom, flexibility, and workload are by far the most significant reasons for choosing part-time work and keeping the workload manageable (Van den Berg, 2021). Leisure time, rather than a higher salary, thus appears to be the most valued asset for teachers (Wood, 2019). Teachers who opt to work additional hours may not always do so purely out of free will. Financial considerations often come into play, with the need for additional income frequently being a decisive factor. Additionally, some teachers experience a certain level of guilt, fearing that too much work will fall on their colleagues or harm the development of their students. Paying for the fifth, scheduled day off could alleviate this problem, thereby retaining more teachers.

Benefits for parents

Generally, parents with children who have transitioned from a five-day to a four-day school week indicate that they are satisfied with the quality of their child's education and do not see significant changes in their child's development (Turner et al., 2018). However, the main benefit that parents highlight is that the four-day school week has positively contributed to their family life and strengthened the emotional bond with their child (Turner et al., 2019). In the long run, such high-quality parent-teacher relationships may evidently be beneficial for children's school adjustment as well (e.g., Zhang, 2020).

Benefits for school administrators

We already argued that a four-day school may come with several (indirect) benefits for school administrators, including potential cost savings such as reduced expenses on heating and travel. The biggest advantage, however, may be the chance for school administrators to reduce the growing need to hire freelance teachers, which is already straining school budgets. This issue is exemplified in countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, where, in some cases, hiring freelance teachers consumes up to a third of the school budget (ANP, 2024). Although freelance teachers may offer some flexibility and expertise, they can also pose challenges, including a lack of continuity in teaching and instruction, limited responsibility for student outcomes, and overall cost-ineffectiveness. Research suggests that a team of teachers with a structured day off exhibits great resilience, collaborates efficiently, and experiences high levels of job satisfaction, ultimately leading to fewer absences (Turner et al., 2018). Moreover, offering full-time salaries can incentivize colleagues currently working part-time to transition to a four-day week, resulting in additional savings on hiring costs (Kellam et al., 2022). For school leaders, this change may offer space for proactive planning, reducing their continual worries about staffing problems.

By embracing a four-day school week, we believe that primary schools can not only realize immediate cost benefits, but also cultivate a more cohesive and engaged teaching staff, fostering a conducive environment for student learning and holistic development. In light of evolving student needs, we even believe that the four-day school may offer opportunities for school administrators to meaningfully reorganize the way their students are taught. For instance, instead of a single teacher providing eight hours of direct instruction to meet the mandatory 32.5 hours of education, different professionals can be engaged to create a rich environment for playing, learning, and discovering. This approach, already implemented in countries like France, not only helps students adjust academically and socio-emotionally but also aligns with the changing demands of society.

Summary

Empirical research on the effects of the four-day school week on students, parents, teachers, and school administrators across European countries is evidently necessary. However, the findings thus far seem to suggest that the implementation of the four-day school week may offer various benefits for teachers, parents, and school administrators. Yet, we argued that two specific conditions must be met to ascertain its feasibility: Efficient clustering of activities within the four days and aligning the salary for a four-day school week with a full-time salary. Ultimately, we believe that this may help primary school administrators in their quest to adapt the teaching profession to better meet the needs of parents, students, and teachers. This may foster a more dynamic and responsive educational

system in which school administrators can maintain operational efficiency and uphold educational standards in an era of rapidly increasing teacher shortages.


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