The Four-Day School Week
By Molly Chamberlin and Jonathan Plucker

Moving some Indiana schools to a four-day school week has recently been suggested as a strategy for reducing the state’s large budget deficit. Four-day school weeks are primarily used in seven predominantly rural states, with several larger states considering the change to address budget shortfalls.\(^1\)

As of 2002, 100 – 120 school districts across the nation, most west of the Mississippi, use the four-day school week (Richard, 2002). All of the school districts currently using the four-day system are located in small, rural communities. The districts serve, on the average, fewer than 1,000 students.

Reasons for Switching to the Four-Day Week

In most school districts, the four-day school week is used to save money. A few districts also considered the move to a four-day week because of athletic events usually being held on Fridays. School districts generally have not made the decision to move to a four-day week in order to improve student achievement, although a few districts use the fifth day for academic purposes. For example, in Saratoga, a 250-student school district in Arkansas, schools use Monday as a day for tutoring students with low test scores or other academic problems, to offer college classes on campus, and for Reading Recovery programs for elementary students.\(^2\)

Summary of Research on the Four-Day School Week

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The superintendent of one school district in Beauregard Parish, Louisiana, reports that the highest achievement in the district on standardized test scores has come from four-day schools. He also reported that last year’s ACT scores at the first school in the district to implement the four-day week were the highest ever.7

Cimarron, NM, schools have shown more academic gains on the four-day schedule than on the previous schedule.

Interestingly, a 1993 study done in a suburban Idaho school district found positive results in student achievement on standardized tests after one year of a four-day school week, and the study also found a decrease in student and faculty absenteeism and a reduction in costs; however, the program was discontinued after only one year, primarily due to a lack of public support.8

Critics note several potential problems with four-day school weeks:

• Longer hours may be very difficult for younger students.
• Professional development is required to help teachers transition to the use of innovative techniques to adapt methods and curriculum for the longer school day.
• Some political leaders and education reformers believe that shortening the school week sends a mixed message. These reformers generally recommend lengthening instructional time not shortening it. Technically, the four-day week can be comparable in contact hours to the five-day week.
• Many advocates for the four-day week are not convinced that the advantages would be realized in larger, less rural districts, with potential problems related to increased demand for child care, working with special needs students, and delinquency (Fager, 1997). For example, child care may not be a problem in small, rural communities, because families often know one another, and older children can care for younger ones. Yet caring for children who are not in school on a weekday may be difficult in larger, more urban communities.
• Substantial savings may not materialize if personnel pay isn’t reduced. Reducing teacher pay would run counter to the goal of attracting high quality teachers to Indiana classrooms.
Potential Financial Impact
Policy Center staff conducted a preliminary analysis of financial savings that could result from a shortened school week. The full text of the analysis is available at http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc/inpolicy. In brief, substantial savings are unlikely to be realized without reducing personnel costs. Reducing teacher, administrator, and support staff compensation would be very difficult, and unwise, if the total contact hours remain constant when moving from the five- to four-day week. In addition, increased child care costs are likely to offset any substantial savings from the four-day school week. These assumptions lead us to believe that the savings associated with a four-day school week will be substantially less than 20% of non-personnel costs, with the potential for very low savings in suburban and urban districts where child care programs would have to be created or significantly expanded.

Conclusions and Recommendations
The four-day school week is intuitively appealing at a time when Indiana faces major budget shortfalls. Although the four-day week has been used with limited success in small, rural districts in the western United States, the shortened instructional week has not been implemented in larger rural, suburban, or urban districts. Given the lack of research on the impact on student achievement and questions about the amount of money that would be saved, large scale implementation in Indiana does not appear to be warranted at this time. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that small, rural districts may benefit from shortened school weeks.

Footnotes
1 Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Colorado (47 of 178 school districts), New Mexico (18 of 89), and Wyoming (20 of 48) have the most widespread usage. Kansas and Utah also employ the four-day school week in a few of their smaller school districts. From Richard, A. (2002, September). Rural schools see dividend in four-day week. Education Week, www.edweek.org/ew/wstory.cfm?slug=04week.h22&keywords=dividends.
2 Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Virginia (also from Richard, 2002).
5 Colorado State Dept. of Education. (1999). The four-day school week, revised Feb. 1999, from EDRS.

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