



Testimony

More Flexibility in School Scheduling

Senate Committee on Education
December 10, 2008



Senator Saland, other members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for convening this hearing to discuss alternatives to the current school schedule.

I am Robert Lowry, Deputy Director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

Our members must do what policymakers should do – balance what schoolchildren need with what taxpayers can afford. Superintendents also exercise the pivotal role in translating the statewide policies you enact into practices that can work for each of the communities you serve.

We solicited reactions from our members to the idea of authorizing schools to operate on a four-day per week schedule. I will summarize what we heard back, with a preface: we did not attempt to poll our leaders and formulate an organizational position. Most of the superintendents who chose to respond to our inquiries serve rural communities.

A few superintendents said they would welcome the flexibility to consider a four-day week. A couple said they thought a nine-day cycle made more sense – one day closed out of every 10 week-days. Most superintendents, however, were skeptical or very negative toward reducing the number of days in the school week.

Those who would welcome the flexibility to consider a four-day week envisioned savings in utility and transportation costs. At least one also foresaw improvements in student attendance and

New York State
Council of School Superintendents
7 Elk Street
Albany, NY 12207
(518) 449-1063
www.nyscoss.org

discipline – presumably because students could be more effectively engaged in learning if they attended for longer periods on fewer days. Some imagined they might be able to fit in more professional development for faculty and staff, using the fifth day.

One superintendent suggested that a four-day week might best be used during only part of the school year – during the heating season.

Again, though, most superintendents were dubious about condensing the number of school days, and some quite vehemently so.

Superintendents cited two reservations about reducing the number of school days more than any others – the impact on families and the impact on learning.

Superintendents noted that closing schools for one weekday each week would force families to make alternative child care arrangements for young children, and perhaps leaving middle and high school youths unattended.

One upstate superintendent said,

“A four day school week would be bad for kids, so we shouldn’t consider it. We have been encouraged over the years to develop child care and after school programs to give students a safe place to be. Now, to accomplish savings that would be, at most, very modest, it is being suggested that we turn all the kids loose on the world for another day in their week? It might make sense for farm families in North Dakota, but it doesn’t make too much sense for kids in my school.”

He added,

“This sounds like cost shifting onto mostly poor parents, and these new child care expenses will be the first things cut from a poor family’s budget leaving lots of kids alone at home with no one there...”

Several superintendents expressed a similar concern about what would happen to children on that fifth day.

Another superintendent of a poor upstate district said,

“Additionally, a four day week means one less day that many students will receive a nutritious breakfast and lunch. Long, cold weekends with substandard living conditions and lack of access to a variety of social services because of unreliable transportation would become that much longer. Many, if not most, of our parents work and would need to make child care arrangements that are often costly.”

A few superintendents questioned the capacity of younger children to handle the longer school day that would be required to compensate for the lesser number of school days.

Apparently, the research on the educational impact of a four-day week is inconclusive. But most superintendents responding to us were skeptical. One wrote,

Reducing an academic week by a day, even if the time were attached to the remaining four days, creates a much larger disruption each week in the learning process of a child – particularly an at risk child – than currently exists. Three days out of school for every four in school undermines the continuity that is particularly important to struggling students.

This superintendent went on to note that some widely-praised charter schools have emphasized expanding instructional time – lengthening each school day and opening for part of Saturday – offering a five and a half day school week.

It is also worth remembering that the U.S. education system is frequently criticized for providing less instructional time than is common in other industrialized nations. In some past years, adding instructional time has been the leading collective bargaining goal for New York State school districts, according to surveys by the State School Boards Association.

If a condensed school week became entrenched, it could become harder to expand instructional time in the future.

Currently, time can grow by adding or extending days. It would seem easier to add time to each day than to add whole days to the calendar, but with a condensed week, each day might already be as long as is practical.

Apart from the consequences for instruction and families, condensing the school week would pose significant logistical challenges.

One urban superintendent explained,

The four-day work week would create a tremendous burden on every district administrator to implement including, in my case negotiating with [more than half a dozen] bargaining units, restructuring every service such as transportation and nutrition, and figuring out a way to fit all the other state mandates into fewer days.

Several superintendents noted complications would arise in conducting athletics and other extracurricular activities. Addressing these complications might either reduce the savings that can be realized or force districts to curtail some of these activities. For some students, participation in these programs is what keeps them engaged with school.

A few also raised a political concern: schools already face criticism because teachers are seen as working only 180 days. A condensed school week might reduce that figure to less than 150 days.

Comparisons of the work time demands of teachers and other professionals are often simplistic and unfair, failing to take into account the time that teachers must spend away from students, grading papers and preparing lessons. But they are one of the perceptions with which schools continually contend. Superintendents note that residents are commonly surprised to learn that they do not have summers “off.”

Finally, it was suggested that movement to a four-day week would ideally be implemented on a regional basis, to accommodate students participating in BOCES programs.

That last observation points toward a recommendation that should be considered in any event. Region-wide school calendars could reduce some school transportation costs, whether or not a condensed school week is adopted. Regional calendars would also lay groundwork needed to regionalize pupil transportation, whether for all students, or just those in special education programs or nonpublic schools.

Another common schedule request from superintendents is to be able to count professional development days conducted before September 1 or after July 30 for state aid purposes. Currently, districts must be “in session” for 180 days and may use four of those days as “superintendents’ conference days” for professional development but all must be held within the current 10 month school year.

It might be asked, if a condensed week were optional, not mandated, and might save money for taxpayers, why not authorize it as an option for schools to consider?

First, I would repeat that most superintendents responding to us were troubled by the possible impact of a condensed week upon families and learning.

Second, some also envisioned that poorer districts might be more likely to implement the condensed week than better-off neighbors. Since they foresee educational harm, they fear gaps in learning opportunities would widen. Accordingly, if authorized as an option, requiring regional adoption of a condensed school week might somewhat mitigate that effect, but that would compound the logistical tasks.

If a condensed school week is to be authorized at all, we would recommend doing so with a limited pool of districts, so that both the educational and financial impacts can be assessed, before permitting use by all districts.

More basically, however, there are other options available to us to reduce costs for taxpayers without the risk of harm to learning and without the complex, time-consuming groundwork needed to implement a condensed school week.

Here are a few examples:

- ✓ Promote functional consolidation of administrative operations, either through BOCES or direct sharing arrangements between districts. Already, more and more districts are pursuing the use of central business offices run by BOCES.
- ✓ Eliminate obstacles for districts seeking to regionalize transportation services. Senator LaValle has one bill – S. 7615.
- ✓ Increase thresholds for competitive bidding.
- ✓ Encourage school districts to join energy purchasing cooperatives and prioritize school districts for participation in state energy conservation programs. The School and Municipal Energy Consortium run through Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES now serves 176 school districts and municipalities.
- ✓ Promote bulk purchasing of prescription drugs and remove obstacles for school districts to join health insurance consortia.
- ✓ Look to pare back some special education mandates to federal requirements. Perennially, we rank first or second in the nation in overall per pupil spending. We also rank second in the share of instructional salaries we devote to special education. So we devote a high share of high overall spending to special education. But we are not producing commensurately high results.

- ✓ Narrow the burden of proof requirements for school districts in special education dispute proceedings.

I want to conclude by thanking you for your past efforts at mandate relief.

Your proposal to ensure that mandates do not take effect in the middle of a school budget year would apply basic fairness and common sense.

Your proposal to streamline planning and reporting requirements would permit school leaders to spend more time on activities that can make a real difference for schoolchildren and taxpayers, rather than compiling reports that no one at the state level ever reads.

Your practice of holding unfunded mandate bills in the Senate Education Committee has spared school districts from having to absorb costs their leaders cannot measure.

Thank you for all that help and for listening today.