

Is A Four-Day School Week The Answer?

BY DONALD BRADLEY

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BATES COUNTY, Mo. — Ever-increasing global competition in job markets and research fields has pumped up pressure on American schools to churn out smarter and better-prepared students.

Some education experts advocate year-round schools. Others say we need longer school days. Some schools have even added Saturday classes.

But a growing number of school districts across the country are trying a different strategy. In fact, they're going in a completely different direction.

They're taking Mondays off. Students go longer Tuesday through Friday because they still must meet state minimums for classroom hours. And while they don't attend class on Mondays, teachers do. They come in for staff development, lesson planning and technology training.

The idea is either horrible or innovative, depending on whom you ask. Critics say it adversely affects students' education. Supporters say it makes teachers better. Students? A senior girl shrugged and said she was looking forward to sleeping in an extra day.

Officials in these four-day districts make no apologies and insist their students will hold their own against any elsewhere.

"Our ACT scores are the best they've been in 10 years, and our teachers love it," said Chris Fine, superintendent of the Lathrop school district in Clinton County, which went to four days in 2010. It was the first district in Missouri to do so after the General Assembly passed legislation a year earlier.

Most of these are small, rural districts, such as Miami R-1, about an hour south of Kansas City. Its one school building, serving all grades, is surrounded by head-high corn this time of year and has so few students the boys play football for another school in a nearby town. Eagles by day, Bobcats on Friday night.

In Montana ranch country, a Monday on the school calendar is sometimes called "go-to-town day."

The Missouri law came with the requirement that any district incurring substantial drop-offs in performance must go back to the traditional five days. It's early, but no district has had to do that.

When states first agreed to four-day schedules, the reason was to help financially strapped small districts save money on transportation, support staff and utilities. Those savings turned out to be minimal, but that's not why Miami switched this year.

"This is about making teachers better," Superintendent Frank Dahman said earlier this month on opening day.

He is convinced that giving teachers those Mondays revs them up so they can do more with the new four than the old five.

"Ever since the beginning of time, we've placed demands on teachers and then not given them time to do it. With new requirements for development and new technology, those demands are going to increase. Giving them this day is what teachers have been screaming for years."

"Better-prepared teachers means better students, and that's where the rubber meets the road."

No one knows for sure how many districts have gone to four-day schedules. The Educa-



Fifth grader Abigail Bennet works on a math problem on her iPad on the first day of school in Bates County, Missouri, on August 14, 2013. Miami R-1 Elementary School has started a four-day school week adding about half an hour to the other days and is embracing technology such as iPads in the classroom.

TAMMY LJUNGBLAD/KASAS CITY STAR/MCT

tion Commission of the States estimates the number at several hundred in 17 states — and going up.

A big mistake, said Jennifer Davis, president of the National Center on Time & Learning, a Boston-based group that advocates more classroom time.

"The idea of narrowing the educational structure is absolutely the wrong direction," Davis said. "We are at a critical point of education in this country. We need to be raising standards. We're past the time of graduating from high school and getting a middle-class job. Those jobs are gone."

"Our kids are going to have to compete with the world. I can't think that taking away a day of school is going to help."

The debate is a touchy one for state education officials. They may not like the idea of four-day schools, but the format has been approved by states.

"We stay neutral, but it is the law," said Roger Dorson, Missouri's coordinator of school financial and administrative services.

It's too early to give the system a grade, he said.

"Next year, we will know more."

Grandma seldom finds herself part of a national debate.

But she's in this one about the four-day school week. The thinking is that the plan works best in rural areas where child care for those Mondays would be less of an issue.

"We're seeing this in districts where a parent is home during the day or the child can spend the day with Grandma nearby," said Jennifer Dounay Zinth, senior policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States.

Indeed, child care has been the big issue. And probably why we don't see the four-day week in large, urban districts, where parents typically work outside the home. The occasional snow day causes them enough child care trauma.

Fine, the Lathrop superintendent, said child care was a major concern at first. But a community survey conducted halfway

through the first year showed that more than 70 percent of parents supported the four-day schedule.

Davis, with the National Center on Time & Learning, thinks child care is often a socio-economic issue and should be a deal breaker against the four-day week.

"What about the families that can't afford enrichment activities, piano lessons and high-quality child care on those Mondays?" she asked. "What you would end up with in a lot of districts is kids spending those days in unsafe environments."

That's not the case in the Orearville school district in rural Saline County in mid-Missouri. Or as Superintendent Marilyn Ehler puts it: "We're just a little school on top of a hill in the middle of farmland."

This will be the kindergarten-to-eighth-grade district's third year going four days.

"Teachers hated the idea at first, but they wouldn't go back now," Ehler said. "Our attendance is up, our teacher attendance is up and we are accredited with distinction by the state."

She grew up in St. Louis and attended big-city schools. She doesn't know why everybody seems so insistent that a four-day week wouldn't work in a suburban or urban district.

"But if you think something will be an obstacle, you can probably make it into one."

Besides Orearville, Lathrop and Miami, other four-day districts in Missouri include East Lynne, Lexington, Harrisburg and Montgomery County R-II. Officials don't know how many more may have joined them this year.

Dale Dennis, deputy commissioner for the Kansas Department of Education, said that for the 2010-2011 school year, the state had 16 districts going four days a week.

This year, the list includes four more.

"All small rural districts," Dennis said.

Want a good debate on the four-day week? You missed a dandy in a green Jeep SUV parked under a shade tree on a recent Wednesday in front of the Miami school,

which draws its 180 or so students from Amoret, Amsterdam, Merwin and farms in between.

Amanda McConnell, who had arrived to pick up her kindergartner, said she likes the idea of teachers having an extra day for planning. And she's tired of hearing people complain that kids will be in school less time.

"They're going the same amount of time — just in a better way," she said.

"But what about the kids having to stay longer each day?" asked her sister, Amy Kelly.

"What — 20 minutes?" McConnell said. "I think they can handle that."

"I think young kids were checking out late in the day already," Kelly said. "This is just going to make that worse."

"Twenty minutes, not two hours," McConnell said. "And being off that Monday refreshes kids for the week."

Their mother, Susan Kelly, broke the tie: "I would have to think more days means better retention."

Superintendent Dahman has heard it all.

First off, he came to town and worked out a grant deal to provide every student an iPad. Now he is taking the district to four days a week. Keep in mind, this is farm country.

Wacky guy?

"I don't know what they're saying up at the corner," he laughed, referring to the store in Amsterdam, Mo., where coffee drinkers gather on mornings.

But he wants it known that by starting school a week earlier, students will be in class only 14 fewer hours over a school year.

Last year, the district went 1,066 hours. This year it's 1,052 hours, still more than the state requirement of 1,044 hours. Classes start 15 minutes earlier and extend 20 minutes later. But having teachers come in every other Monday, Dahman said, is worth 14 hours. "Especially for our older teachers," he said. "We need to give them time to catch up." Students use the iPad to keep track of schedules, assignments and messages from teachers.

Sometimes a student's homework from the tablet is displayed on a large TV in the classroom.

"Give me this time because I need it," said fifth-grade teacher Jeanne Burgin. "I can use an iPad, but my students use it better than me. I have a family and my own kids. I don't want to be in here at midnight or weekends learning to use this thing."

Students seem to be good with the change.

"I've got a job after school, and now I can use Monday to put in a good 10-hour day," senior David Weaver said.

Ashley Jellison, a senior volleyball player, said that because of Friday night games, athletes can't do homework that day.

"Now we have Mondays for that," she said.

The dissenter: Dylan Good. "I think it's a waste of a day. We should be in school, and I think my parents would agree with me."

Some parents probably don't like the new system — possibly because they don't know what to do with a younger child on Mondays.

But they get no sympathy from parent Lisa Filtingberger.

"What did they do with that child all summer?"

PDIII

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with a suggestion of paying them \$8,000 and, if we use them we use them; and if we don't, we don't."

Greg Henderson, director of PDIII and its 10 employees, said he was surprised to read about the discussion because he had no warning that it was going to take place.

"The impression I got after reading the article in the newspaper and speaking with Pat Garrity was that the county was investigating everything that this office does for the county," he stated. "In other words, they were talking to all the people we work for about the impact we have. It remains to be seen what the county actually decides to do. If this continues to stir, and we're uncertain what they're really intending to look into and have no proof of their intentions, I'm going to be uneasy until it is settled."

Henderson has spoken with Jensen, in addition to Garrity, and he said the discussion has been good.

PDIII was organized in 1973 as a voluntary association of county, municipal and tribal governments. The quasi-governmental organization serves 15 counties, in-

cluding Yankton County. As a member of the district, governments receive application writing, research, project administration and land use planning services. Other services provided by PDIII include small business loans through the Areawide Business Council, business consulting through the Small Business Development Center, the Procurement and Technical Assistance Center, mapping and computer-assisted illustrations, housing support and assistance with personnel manuals.

From 1973 to 2012, PDIII reports that Yankton County has received more than \$53 million in assistance for the \$545,900 in annual dues it has paid.

SEEKING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF DUES, FEES

In a conversation with the *Press & Dakotan*, Garrity expanded on Jensen's description of what will be analyzed and said he has two primary goals: to better understand what PDIII has charged Yankton County in fees on top of its membership dues, as well as the membership fee rate increases over the years.

The analysis, which will be done during the next month, has nothing to do with discontent over the services PDIII provides, Garrity said, adding that he

works with its staff regularly and has no intention of changing that.

When the total amount of dues paid is divided by the 39 years, Garrity said it averages out to just under \$14,000.

"I'm clear up to \$26,000 now," he said. "I want to see the rate of increases on the dues."

According to Pat Hansen, the finance officer for PDIII, the annual dues are established upon a base fee and upon population.

"In 2005 we updated that base," she said. "The base fee for all our counties was set at \$7,250, plus 73 cents per capita. Since 2005, we have adjusted that base annually based on the change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), though not correlating exactly with the change in the CPI. The annual increase in the county's dues is lower than the change in the CPI, with the exception that there is no change in dues if the change in CPI is negative."

In May 2013, for example, PDIII calculated the dues for 2014 using the 2012 change in CPI as a benchmark. The change in CPI was 2.2 percent, and Yankton County's proposed dues will be increased 1.72 percent.

For some background, the CPI change used in 2008 was 2.7 percent and the change in Yankton County's dues was 2.13 percent. In 2009, those

figures were 3.49 percent and 2.75 percent, respectively. Although the CPI change used in 2010 was 4.2 percent, PDIII decided not to increase its dues because of the recession. In 2011, a negative CPI change was used, so there was also no increase in dues. The 2012 CPI change was 2.3 percent, and the dues went up 1.81 percent. This year, the CPI change was 3.4 percent, and the dues were increased by 2.66 percent.

For some services, PDIII charges an extra fee.

"Our budget is \$1.1 million per year," Henderson said. "Our membership dues, which is what we charge our cities, counties and Indian tribes to participate in District III, is roughly only 23 percent of our budget. We have to find \$700,000 from other sources to cover the operations of this office. The way we do that is, we have administrative contracts. Oftentimes, if you get a grant or loan, there is red tape to go along with it. We do a good job of taking care of that, and we charge for it. We don't charge for writing applications; we charge for administering them."

Discussed during last week's County Commission meeting was a \$5,000 fee PDIII has charged the county for assisting with the formation of a Highway 52 corridor plan and for updating the compre-

hensive zoning plan. Garrity said he would like a better understanding of the fees so he can budget for them more effectively.

"My guess is, if Yankton County asked a consultant to help them update their comprehensive plan, that \$5,000 would be a tenth of the price they would charge," Henderson said. "We are very reasonable. That's what their dues help subsidize. They get value for belonging. But because those activities take extra time, energy and resources, we feel justified in charging for them."

CITY OF YANKTON OFFERS PDIII SUPPORT

In response to the County Commission discussion and the conversation it has provoked within the community, the Yankton City Commission consented this week to having City Manager Amy Nelson draft a letter of support for PDIII. It was mailed to each member of the County Commission Thursday.

If a county is not a dues-paying member of PDIII, the communities within it cannot be members, either.

In 2013, the City of Yankton paid \$11,248 in dues to PDIII. The proposed amount for 2014 is \$11,638. Like the county, the city pays a fee for extra services such as cemetery mapping or help with the

South Dakota Certified Ready Sites Program.

"In the past four years alone, District III has helped us secure almost \$13 million in grant and loan funding for public projects," Nelson told the *Press & Dakotan*. "District III provides an invaluable service to our work here at the City of Yankton."

Nelson said she wants the letter to stress how vital PDIII is to the community.

The letter notes that if the county were to discontinue its membership, PDIII could relocate its office to a community in a different county that maintains its membership.

Henderson said he doesn't like to even contemplate that scenario.

"But logic would tell you that, why would an office be located in a community that wasn't financially supporting it?" he said.

Reflecting on the situation this week, Jensen said it may all boil down to a need for better communication between the county and PDIII.

Both parties are optimistic they can resolve the issues.

"There are a lot of things cooking right now, and we'd like to keep doing it without any distractions," Henderson said.

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