

24-08-09 TheBuzz web

Thu, Aug 08, 2024 10:54AM 27:41

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

school, day, work, fridays, students, week, patagonia, friday, teachers, arizona, kids, year, people, parents, hear, education, zac, staff, happening, talk

SPEAKERS

Nicole Cox, Zac Ziegler, Christopher Conover, Chad Gestson, NPR promo, Karen Kordon, Kenny Hayes

C Christopher Conover 00:03

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover this week examining a four day school week. School is back in session across much of Arizona. For most students, that means going to class Monday through Friday, but for about 175 school districts and charter schools, they go one fewer day. So how does a four day week affect children's education? We start this week's show with our producer, Zac Ziegler, who worked with other AZPM reporters to send an informal survey to all of those schools. Zac, welcome back to this side of the glass.

Z Zac Ziegler 00:45

Hey, I keep seeming to be here a little more often lately.

C Christopher Conover 00:48

You really do. So how did this survey work?

Z Zac Ziegler 00:53

Well, we went ahead and dug up emails, called up school districts, and put together a little Google Form that people could fill out give us a little information about how this impacts education in their area. We got around 30 respondents of everyone we sent to so not quite as big as we were hoping for, but still enough that it's worth mentioning.

C Christopher Conover 01:16

So are four day school weeks a new thing in Arizona?

Z Zac Ziegler 01:20

Not really for more than half of our respondents, they said they've been doing this for over a decade. Some have been doing it for more than 15 years. Only a few have been doing it for the last few years.

C Christopher Conover 01:33

The listeners will hear from a couple of school superintendents and executives as we go through the show. But are there any geographic links between all these schools?

Z Zac Ziegler 01:46

Well, many of them tend to be rural schools. We see them in places like Quartzite, Colorado City, Joseph city, Crown King, Bowie. If they are in larger cities like one, we will hear from they tend to be charter schools or accommodation districts, things like that.

C Christopher Conover 02:04

So state law, federal law, talks about the requirement for children to be in school. It's based on hours and days in the classroom. How do districts make up those lost hours when they take a day off?

Z Zac Ziegler 02:20

Most of them tend to extend the amount of time that students are in the classroom on the days where they are there. There were a few actually, though, that extended the length of the school year, adding classes in the summer, even one that went pretty much year round.

C Christopher Conover 02:39

I remember seeing that, and they just take a two week fall break, according to the answers they gave us,

Z Zac Ziegler 02:45

yeah,

C Christopher Conover 02:46

so of the schools we heard back from, is this something that's usually supported by parents and faculty and staff?

Z

Zac Ziegler 02:53

Yeah, from what we heard, they said that the response had been mostly positive, or at least somewhat positive for a few or a couple were neutral. We didn't really hear anyone telling us that this was an issue for them. But you know, then again, this was the school districts reporting this information to us.

C

Christopher Conover 03:13

So I'm guessing some of these schools that we heard back from are in economically disadvantaged areas. Do they still do things like distribute the free or reduced cost breakfast and lunches that children rely on, even though, on Fridays, most of the schools took Fridays, that we heard from aren't going to be there.

Z

Zac Ziegler 03:33

That was one thing we did find on this was of our respondents, none offered any ways for children to get meals. That was a difference. You know, if you think back to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many schools that were still offering parents a chance to swing by and pick up the meals that their students would normally get. That does not seem to be the case here.

C

Christopher Conover 03:53

Okay, thanks to you and Katya Mendoza and Carly Siegel and the rest of the team for reaching out to all of these schools and helping set this show up.

Z

Zac Ziegler 04:04

Sure thing

C

Christopher Conover 04:06


That was Buzz producer Zac Ziegler, to get an academic view of how four day weeks affect students, we spoke with Chad Gestson. He's the founder of the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy at Northern Arizona University. We started our conversation talking about why schools usually make the switch.

C

Chad Gestson 04:27

I think there's two, two main reasons why we're seeing this happen. One, of course, is the educator workforce crisis, just a shortage of all things educators, not just teachers, but bus drivers and food service workers and so you know I think school systems charters districts


drivers and food service workers and so, you know, I think school systems, charters, districts, are really looking for unique ways to recruit and incentivize a workforce that is maybe looking for something different. And then I think what we also see in especially rural Arizona is some of the potential cost savings of utilizing just a four day work week. If you, if you don't go to school on Friday, you're only bussing students four days a week, not five days a week. You're serving, serving food four days a week, not five days a week, utility costs. And so I think it's, it's this blend of educator workforce needs meets potential cost savings, especially in this financial context of Arizona.

 Christopher Conover 05:21

You know, it's interesting, you mentioned workforce. One district talked about using this as a recruiting tool because they're right near the California, Nevada state lines, and teachers there get notably more money. Is this an unconventional recruiting tool also?

 Chad Gestson 05:39

Yeah, actually, I do. I think what we're seeing is that in some cases, that's the lead story that we are. You know, school systems are trying to be competitive, sometimes to their neighboring district or charter network, but to your point, sometimes it's the neighboring state. And if you're, if you're an Arizona border school system, it is very difficult to compete, and this is one way to be competitive in that marketplace. Schools,

 Christopher Conover 06:06

of course, are required by law to have kids in the classroom so many hours a year to maintain their funding dropping to four days means longer days for some schools. Do we know if the longer or shorter days are better for students?

 Chad Gestson 06:27

Well, we're still so new into the four day work week, so it's really difficult to tell what ultimately will be better for students. I think one of the concerns that people have had are two fold with this model when it comes to students. Number one, it's a lot of time for kids to be sitting in multiple classes, multiple content areas, in one day. And so certainly, when systems go to four day work week, engaging lessons and projects and problem based curriculum are going to be critically important to keep students engaged. And so that's one concern. How do you how do you manage a 10 day, 10 hour day, nine hour day, versus a seven to eight? But then the second that I know people are watching, and there's not enough research on this yet, which is the previous research has said kids need more time in school, more instructional time, even after school, Saturdays. And so there is a fear that, you know, we're going from from five days, sometimes after school, sometimes Saturday school, now down to four days, and will that equate to less instructional time? And therefore might that equate to less student achievement? I think time will tell.

 Christopher Conover 07:00

 Christopher Conover 07:33

And there's also a toll on the teachers, longer days. Even though they're adults, it's still a longer day of their jobs. Are there pros and cons that really work out for the teachers?

 Chad Gestson 07:49

Yeah, I think anecdotally to this point, I mean, teachers certainly have said yes, the day is longer. It's a little more challenging to be on your feet that long, to stay engaged that long. However, teachers again, the research is this is too new, but the teachers have said that having that Friday off, the three day weekend, or even the extra day just to plan and get caught up. So far, anecdotally, teachers seem and educators seem really positive about this, but those days are long days for students and for staff.

 Christopher Conover 08:27

You know, it's interesting. Last year, we did a show in a small rural area, and we were talking to a movie theater owner in that town, and they have a four day work week, and he said a lot of his staff on the weekends and Fridays included, aren't just teenagers, you know, making popcorn and doing all the stuff I did when I worked in movie theaters as a teenager, but teachers are coming in to work on Fridays and weekends, so in smaller rural communities, I guess it also gives them an opportunity to make some extra money.

 Chad Gestson 09:06

Yeah, and I do think that's, you know, they're kind of pros and cons to that as well. I think it does. It gives, there's a lot of students that are contributors to their family income. Gives them a chance to work an extra day, as we know, unfortunately, many teachers in Arizona and across the country are working two to three jobs to make ends meet. So this does give a little more flexibility for that. I also do know that, you know, a lot of people are concerned. Of you know, for the kids that aren't working on that Friday, what are they doing? Is it productive enough? Is it safe at home? Is this more isolation? Should they have more time in play and around other people? And so I also know that there are a lot of potential positive impacts of having this Friday off, so to speak, but we do need to be very mindful in watching what's happening with our youth on those days off as well.

 Christopher Conover 09:58

Can we look to corporate America for any hints on the ways to do this even better? Because there are a lot of companies that have gone to four day work weeks, and I say their productivity is up because efficiencies are there, or are schools in corporate America, once again, very different places?

 Chad Gestson 10:20

Well, I think that's a great question. I think humans are the same, right? I think humans, whether you're in education or corporate America, may appreciate the four day work week.

whether you're in education or corporate America, may appreciate the four day work week. Yes, in some cases, maybe productivity goes up. Again, I do think one of the challenges that makes education different than corporate America is we, we are dealing in Arizona with the 1.1 million children of Arizona, the 50 million children in America. And we learned during the pandemic that a lot of adults rely upon schools to take care of their children and educate their children so they can go to work. And so, you know, in corporate America, they're not necessarily worried about childcare. They're worried more about productivity and recruitment. And so it's certainly different if we can find ways to keep kids safe, to allow kids to be productive on that Friday, you know, and at best, maybe they find ways to interact and grow in their learning and their interaction. So I think there are similarities, but certainly differences, because we're dealing with children

C Christopher Conover 11:25

all right. Well, thanks for spending some time with us. Yeah,

C Chad Gestson 11:28

very, very nice to be with you this morning.

C Christopher Conover 11:30

That was Chad Gustsen of the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy. You're listening to The Buzz after the break we hear from two school districts who made opposite decisions about the four day week. Stay with us.

N NPR promo 11:46

New from the Embedded podcast, female athletes have always needed grit and talent, but for decades, they've also needed a certificate. There was chit chat about, is that really a woman? And even now, they're still being checked and questioned. Their story is the newest series from CBC and NPRs embedded. It's called Tested. Listen wherever you get your podcasts.

C Christopher Conover 12:12

Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're looking at four day school weeks. August 2 was a notable day for Patagonia Public Schools. It was the first of what will likely be many Fridays that students had off. The district made the switch to a four day week this year. To learn more about the switch, we talk with Superintendent Kenny Hayes, who started by explaining why the change

K Kenny Hayes 12:40

we live in a rural, remote area, and we have kids that travel as far as two hours a day each way on the bus. not a high percentage of kids, but enough that on Fridays, they were on the bus

on the bus, not a high percentage of kids, but enough that on Fridays, they were on the bus more than they were in school. So that was one of the reasons we also, like I said, our half days were on Fridays, so we only went to school till noon, and we had a high rate of absences on those days anyways. It's also very difficult to get high qualified teachers out to such a rural, remote area, so we were hoping that that would be also be recruiting tool for us, for for teachers as well.

C Christopher Conover 13:17
Who started the push for the change.

K Kenny Hayes 13:19
We've been discussing it for a while. We've been kind of moving towards it for a while. I guess it was me that actually started the push for the change, though. And in all honesty, I don't mind you know, the three day weekend either.

C Christopher Conover 13:34
Well, so many people don't what were parents reaction and staff's reaction also?

K Kenny Hayes 13:40
the staff was overwhelmingly positive for the change. It only lengthened our school day by about 35 minutes, so that wasn't too difficult of a shift, and the parents were largely in agreement with it, which was kind of surprising for me. We had about 75% that were in favor or greatly in favor of it, and then we had another 5 or 6% that were neutral about it. So we were making 80% of our parents happy, or, you know, not unhappy at the same time.

C Christopher Conover 14:13
I imagine that's a win. It's hard to get 80% of people to agree on anything. So that's a win, right there.

K Kenny Hayes 14:20
Yeah. So, yeah, that was, that was a good news for us. So then we just needed to work out what would work best. And, you know, serve the community the best.

C Christopher Conover 14:29
How hard is it to make this switch? As you all said, Patagonia was on a four and a half day week anyway, but I'm sure there are logistics and all kinds of things for those of us who are not in education and running school districts and schools that we would never think of that have to be

education and training school districts and schools that we would never think of that have to be dealt with to do this.

K

Kenny Hayes 14:49

Yeah, there were some logistical issues, and we're honestly working through a few of them still. We just started school last Wednesday, so we're still working through a couple of the issues. We had to change the schedule around a little bit and try and make it fit what our teachers needed. So there were some logistical issues, like one, one that we just think we solved today was busses for students on Fridays, for practices for high school athletics. I think we solved it, but we'll see if what we came up with works out, you know, everything is in some of those regards, is trial and error, but we don't want to go through too much of that, because we don't want to create a situation for our students that isn't stable for them, you know, we want them to feel like they can come in and learn. So we tried to mitigate most of those as we could, but it wasn't too big of a switch for us. But there were some issues. Yeah.

C

Christopher Conover 15:43

We've heard, as we've talked to other districts, that one of the things that has been a challenge is for parents who work and normally have their kids in school on Friday, or, in your case, at least half the day on Friday, now they have to figure out what to do with the kids, are you all going to offer any programs, especially for younger kids on Fridays?

K

Kenny Hayes 16:07

The school isn't offering any programs that are going to happen weekly, like this. Last Friday, we had a pool party to celebrate the beginning of the school year, and we're going to have a movie deal. But we did get the word out to some folks in town, like the library that we have here in town. I mean, we also have the Patagonia Arts Center, which we partner with for art at the school as well. And we got the word out to those folks to let them know that, 'hey, Friday would be a great day to do your programming if you're looking for students' and that sort of thing. So a few of them have stepped up. And, like, I know the library is doing some things on Fridays. And they're going to do a program called The Universe Within which is like a STEAM program. The Art Center is going to do a program on Fridays as well, like art makers. And then also they do a little play with the kids, Club Theater is what it's called. So there's some programs out there for the folks and for the for the people that were working. I think it made it easier for them, because having the kids come to school until noon, and then having to figure out getting the kids picked up from school, and then who's going to take care of them for the rest of the afternoon, and just coming up with one plan where I'm going to drop them off here at eight in the morning, they're going to be there and safe until the end of the day. I think that will work out better for the parents than the half day did anyways, at least that's what I'm hoping for.

C

Christopher Conover 17:22

Now, when we're recording this, you all have only had one Friday off, and granted, it was the first Friday in school. First couple of weeks is always a little crazier than normal. But what did

people do with their Fridays off? Did you hear anything? What'd you do with your Friday off?

K

Kenny Hayes 17:38

For my Friday off, I came in to get some work done that I couldn't get done when other folks were here, and then I ended up grilling at our pool party. So that's what my wife and I, she's a teacher as well. We did. Nobody really told me what they did. They just appreciated the extra time to hang out with their family and and those sorts of things. So but we will have one Friday a month that will be professional development. So we don't get all our Fridays off, but, but we get most of them off.

C

Christopher Conover 18:08

Well, thank you so much for spending some time with us on this second full week of school. We appreciate it.

K

Kenny Hayes 18:15

Yeah, no problem. Thank you. Thank you gentlemen for getting a hold of us.

C

Christopher Conover 18:18

That was Patagonia Public Schools Superintendent, Kenny Hayes, the four day week for the Patagonia schools is a three year pilot project. Hayes says they'll look at it after that and see if they want to continue. While Patagonia dropped Fridays, Glendale Charter School, while Patagonia dropped Fridays Glendale charter school Camelback Academy made the opposite choice. Students hadn't spent a Friday on campus there since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but as executive director Karen Kordon told us, that changed this week when the school switched back to a five day calendar.

K

Karen Kordon 18:56

We had been wanting to go to a four day schedule for years, going back 10 years and just never felt like it was the right time. Plus it's, you know, anytime you make a schedule change this momentous in a family's life, you know, you're, you're always anticipating the pushback. But then COVID happened, and as a result of that, we we kind of did a hybrid of a four day schedule, because we were we were in school, but on Fridays, we were not in school, and students were home doing work online. And so we were still in a five day schedule with the state, but you know, we were only four days in person, and it worked out really well. And we thought, well, let's take advantage of this year. And so we did a lot of, you know, surveys, and we took that as an opportunity to say, well, let's talk about doing this. If we're going to do this four days, let's, let's talk about doing it. So we did, and we had conversations with parents about it, and we said, 'Let's go for it.' So the following year, we went for the four day schedule. It was very well received. I don't I think. Maybe a couple of parents withdrew because of that, just because of their own schedules, we offered to do childcare for parents on Fridays, and

surprisingly enough, the only people that really needed it were our staff members for their children. So we were even able to do away with that. But what ended up happening was there was such a culture shift that happened. I know it wasn't just our community, but we serve a pretty high need population. There were so many things that came into place that really affected what was happening in the classroom. And because we were a four day week, our day was longer because we have to meet those minimum number of minutes. So we were finding that our students, especially our younger students, but even in through eighth grade, they by the time 4:00 4:15 came along, they were exhausted, and they just were not engaging at the end of the day at all. And we had lots of behavior issues, specifically in middle school, we would give lots of brain breaks, lots of opportunities to get up and stretch, but it was just we found it wasn't working, and so we just found that the time that we were providing for education wasn't returning great results as far as what the students were achieving. We also thought that by giving the families Fridays off, we were really giving time back for families to have family time a three day weekend. And what ended up happening was Thursday became the new Friday. And so we thought that what would end up happening was if, if our students were here for only four days, we would get the most out of that four days, and they would come back from a three day weekend, and they would be excited to learn. And now parents still, now parents are going to take Thursdays off. So our attendance rates tanked.

C Christopher Conover 21:41

It sounds like you all saw in the couple of years you were doing four day week, a little bit of drop in academic achievement on the part of the students.

K Karen Kordon 21:51

Yes, so before COVID, we were a high B school. We were very close. I think we were six points away from an A, five or six points away from being an A school. And in this community that was, you know, we were very we worked very hard for that, and then we went down to a low B. And now in the 22-23 school year, that was the first year that testing, the testing, counted toward our grade. And we went down to a C, a high C. We were at three or three points away from a B, but we went down. So we went down a full letter grade. I know it's partly COVID, but we can't blame everything on COVID. And then going into that four day week, we just we knew, probably at the end of the first quarter last year, that maybe this wasn't the best schedule for our students, and we needed, you know, obviously, we need to do everything we can to get our achievement back up to a B and then into an A. So yeah, we saw definitely a drop of an achievement.

C Christopher Conover 22:47

You mentioned the long days, because there are our requirements, how many hours the kids are supposed to be in school. So I assume the number of hours your students will be spending in the classroom with your staff will remain the same. But now, as you said, you just shortened the days down a little bit, which helps with a lot of kids.

K Karen Kordon 23:08

Right, we shortened it 45 minutes each day. And that might not seem like a lot, but it's pretty significant.

C Christopher Conover 23:15

Yeah, my mom has a long time saying of the brain cannot absorb what your your butt cannot handle sitting.

K Karen Kordon 23:25

Exactly, yeah, exactly.

C Christopher Conover 23:27

And especially for little kids, as you were saying, kindergarteners, let alone eighth graders and in that group. And it must have been, it sounds like it was rough on the staff too, not just the students.

K Karen Kordon 23:39

Yeah, they were long days. Like I said, on Fridays, they would come in for a half a day, and then one Friday a month, we gave them off one Friday a month, so they had a nice long weekend. But you know, those are great breaks and those are great benefits, but the day to day was was long.

C Christopher Conover 23:57

I know it's only the first week back for school. But have you seen any changes, or is it just way too early? First week is always full of excitement and all kinds of things anyway.

K Karen Kordon 24:11

Yeah, we'll be in the honeymoon phase for a couple of weeks. So week three, I think it will really tell.

C Christopher Conover 24:17

What did your parents say when you told them, okay, we tried the four day week. This isn't working. We're going back to five day, what did they say?

K Karen Kordon 24:28

KAREN KORDON 25:12

It's really interesting, and I don't know if it's our community or their trust in us, but they really didn't have a lot to say. I mean, they were, they were happy that we were going back to a five day week, but they just didn't have a lot of comments about it.

C Christopher Conover 24:43

When you talk to people in similar positions at other schools that may have tried four day week, because there are plenty of schools that are doing it, but there are plenty of schools that aren't. Do you hear similar issues that what you all saw or were you all unique in good and bad ways?

K Karen Kordon 25:03

I haven't really had a lot of conversations with schools who are who just implemented a four day week. I knew that we needed to make a change. We needed to do something for our students, but we don't want to be flip floppers either. We want to be consistent and we don't want to we don't want to come across to our community as as a school that doesn't know what they're doing. Obviously, on the other hand, because we're so into we try to be very in tune to the impact of the decisions that we make, we are also not going to continue with something that we know is not working, just because we don't want to have the potential of conflict with the family or the community because we made a different decision. You know, I haven't again. I haven't really had conversations with with schools who are new in four day weeks, just, just schools have always done it that way.

C Christopher Conover 25:52

And what about the staff when you all talked and decided to make the decision to go back to the I guess we'll call it traditional five day week. What did they all think?

K Karen Kordon 26:02

It was a collective sigh of relief. Yeah, and I had been having this conversation with with my staff for many months. It wasn't a, you know, I didn't just like roll it out in April. We had been talking about it for a long time. So they were, they were very happy.

C Christopher Conover 26:19

All right. Well, thanks for spending some time with us in that busy, exciting beginning of this, the academic year.

K Karen Kordon 26:27

All right. Well, thank you for asking me to weigh in on this.

C Christopher Conover 26:30

That was Camelback Academy's Karen Cordon, and that's the buzz for this week. Tune in next week as we complete our summer series with a look at unique ways of recycling goods around Arizona. You can find all our episodes online at azpm.org and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcasts, just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler and Katya Mendoza produced this episode with production help from Deserae Tucker and Carly Siegel. Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover. Thanks for listening.

N Nicole Cox 27:27

AZPM's original productions are made possible in part by the community service grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and by donations from listeners like you. Learn more at support.azpm.org