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Rural Research Brief

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The Four-Day School Week: Information and Recommendations

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Within the past three decades, a number of schools and districts, particularly those in rural areas, have moved toward a four-day school week. Recent articles and reports indicate that there are now schools with four-day weeks in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Louisiana, New Mexico, Idaho, and Nebraska. The reasons for this shift include saving money in the face of declining enrollments and avoiding interruptions and absences due to sports and activities. Districts contemplating the four-day week need current information about this alternative schedule and how it is working in schools around the country. This report is intended to summarize recent research and other articles on the four-day week and make recommendations to district personnel on whether and how it should be implemented.

Research in the 1980s

In the 1980s, studies were conducted in Colorado and New Mexico on the four-day week, which at the time was a fairly new idea. Robert Richburg and colleagues at Colorado State University made several studies of the four-day school week in rural Colorado. In one study (Richburg & Sjogren, 1982), they reported that the new schedule had resulted in energy savings through using 7-25% less heating fuel and by paying for less gasoline and bus maintenance. Some staff costs remained the same, but some increased as custodians used the fifth day to make repairs that would have been put off until summer. The researchers found no evidence that achievement suffered under the four-day schedule. Over 90% of parents, teachers, and students preferred the new schedule, as it gave them more time for appointments, family trips, and working on the farm or ranch. However, some parents felt that the day was too long and the children were more fatigued. A few teachers (6 out of 205) commented that the schedule was difficult for special needs students. Teachers said planning more activities for longer classes took more time, but they were still in favor of the new schedule, because it resulted in lower student absenteeism. In another study, Daly and Richburg (1984) examined Iowa Tests of Basic Skills scores over a four-year period (two years before and two years after the schedule change) and determined that the four-day week had no effect on the scores. A study conducted later in New Mexico (Grau & Shaughnessy, 1987) found similar results: lower energy and transportation costs, lower student and teacher absenteeism, and comparable test scores. In this study, teachers reported that the students spent more time on task than before the change.

Research in the 1990s and Beyond

After the 1980s, research on the four-day week became less common in educational journals and conference papers, perhaps because this alternative schedule had become established practice in many rural areas. In order to do a comprehensive search of recent information on the four-day week, McREL searched the following sources:

- ERIC, Professional Development Collection, and Academic Search Elite databases.
- Web sites of organizations such as the Rural Trust, National Rural Education Association, the Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, and Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- *The Journal of Research in Rural Education and Rural Educator.*
- State departments of education in Colorado, Louisiana, South Dakota, Wyoming, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Idaho.

We found journal articles, research reports, and state department of education documents on the four-day week. The information from these sources was supplemented with reports in periodicals such as *Education Week* and from newspaper articles on specific districts' implementation of the alternative schedule. Although the information in these sources is anecdotal, their conclusions correspond with those in research reports, and they represent a firsthand school district perspective.

Changes to the School Day

The sources revealed that schools used different options to transform the week into four days. Some lengthened the school day by one hour ("Idaho schools switch to 4-day weeks to cut down on costs," 2006) or 90 minutes (Johnston, 1997), while others had to add only 30 or 40 minutes (Associated Press, 2006a; Ferak, 2006). Some schools that originally had a full hour for lunch shortened it, which helped with lunchtime supervision problems, and then added a few minutes to the beginning and end of the day (Fager, 1997; Litke, 1994). Schools on a four-day week generally reported releasing students between 3:30 and 4:00 (Fager, 1997; Featherstone, 1991; Ferak, 2006), sometimes reserving the last 30 minutes for clubs, and scheduled school for 144 days per year (Sagness & Salzman, 1993). One school reported taking off every other Friday (Litke, 1994), while some schools in New Mexico and Colorado implemented a four-day schedule only in winter (Dam, 2006; Koki, n.d.). The majority of schools closed on Friday to allow for sports and activity travel, but many closed on Monday to better coordinate with holidays (Sagness & Salzman, 1993) and to pursue greater cost savings, because gymnasiums had to be lit and heated on Fridays for sports even if school was not in session (Fager, 1997).

The shift to a four-day schedule required school personnel to adapt their daily schedules. In order to keep younger students on track, some elementary schools kept daily activities flexible so that teachers and paraprofessionals could make the best use of time and focus on instruction (Rouse, 2006). Elementary teachers reported having to eliminate some "fluff" from the curriculum and be more businesslike with the new schedule (Associated Press, 2006b). On the secondary level, the longer days were said to combine well with block scheduling (Mitchell, 2006). One benefit of the new school day, cited by several schools, was the decrease in interruptions (Featherstone, 1991; Harp, 1995), partly due to a greater separation between academics and extracurriculars. Secondary students said fewer interruptions allowed them to get more deeply involved in schoolwork (Featherstone, 1991).

Fifth Day

Schools and students took different approaches to handling the fifth day, when school was not in session. In suburban Idaho, 51% of intermediate students said they "just goof around" on Friday, 68% said they had more time to plan and do things at home, 65% reported that they had more time to prepare for class, 72% had more time for family and friends, and 60% had more time to work. Of parents, 53% said there was more time for family, 51% said there was more time for the child to work at home, and 62% said there was more time for appointments (Sagness & Salzman, 1993). In addition to working (Geranios, 2006),

babysitting, and dealing with appointments (Rouse, 2006), students said they did homework on the extra day (Ferak, 2006).

Several schools on a four-day schedule offered special programs for students on the fifth day. Some schools had remediation (Mitchell, 2006), tutoring (Associated Press, 2006a); and testing practice (Johnston, 1997), while others offered recreation or enrichment programs in areas such as math and science. Some parents reported concerns about the quality of the enrichment, however (Rouse, 2006). Teachers took advantage of the extra day for professional development activities, collaborative planning with other teachers, or giving extra help to students (Keen, 2007). Career tech courses were also an option for some secondary-level students (Associated Press, 2006a). Schools offering fifth-day activities either funded them themselves, or asked community groups to supply space and volunteers for the programs (Mitchell, 2006). One rural district in South Dakota was able to get a state grant for all-day Friday activities and afterschool programs for the rest of the week (Richard, 2002).

Achievement

The Colorado studies referenced previously (Daly & Richburg, 1984; Richburg & Sjogren, 1982) indicated that achievement scores remained static following the shift to the four-day school week, and there was certainly no downturn (Johnston, 1997). More recent research from Colorado affirmed that students appear to do no worse on a four-day week, but the researcher acknowledged that it is difficult to control for all the variables involved (Dam, 2006). This is mirrored by schools in other states; for example, schools in rural Oregon (Fager, 1997) had also seen no change in scores with the four-day week. Some schools reported that scores initially went up and then leveled off (Mitchell, 2006; Sagness & Salzman, 1993), or simply improved (Inman-Freitas, 1991; Koki, n.d.); one Idaho school district met all NCLB benchmarks for the first time following the schedule change (Geranios, 2006), although it is not possible to determine whether or not the improvement was caused by the change. The only report found in which scores declined was of a New Mexico middle school on academic probation, whose superintendent advocated a return to the five-day week to provide more instructional time (Richard, 2002).

Attendance

Each study or alternate source that mentioned attendance reported that student attendance had gone up and that teacher absences had gone down. Increases in student attendance ranged from 2% in a suburban district (Sagness & Salzman, 1993) to 3.3% (Koki, n.d.) and 5.8% (Geranios, 2006) in rural areas, while reported teacher attendance increases ranged from 2% (Sagness & Salzman, 1993) to

50% (Johnston, 1997). In rural areas where doctors and dentists can be far away, students and teachers had sometimes missed entire school days to go to appointments (Dam, 2006). The increase in attendance was attributed to the newfound ability of students and teachers to attend to appointments and other personal business on the day off from school (Featherstone, 1991; Harp, 1995; "Idaho schools switch to 4-day weeks to cut down on costs," 2006), as well as a lessening of sports travel during the school day (Fager, 1997; Keen, 2007). Schools benefited from the attendance increase by receiving more funding based on average daily attendance figures and by spending less money on substitute teachers. However, students who do still miss a school day miss more hours of instruction than they would have with the five-day schedule.

Extracurriculars

One possible concern of parents and school staff about a four-day week is the effect on sports and other extracurricular activities with the longer days. One Idaho district simply moved sports practice to 4:30-6:30, and successfully limited sports travel to Friday to avoid missing class time (Geranios, 2006). In Idaho suburban schools on four-day school weeks, 14% of secondary students said they had less time to participate in extracurriculars (Sagness & Salzman, 1993), while in South Dakota participation actually increased (Durr, 2003). A New Hampshire elementary school reported that the four-day schedule freed up buses on the fifth day for optional school trips (Featherstone, 1991). No evidence was found that the four-day week harmed extracurriculars to a large degree, although conflict is less likely to occur when other schools in the area have a similar schedule.

Teacher Reaction

In general, teachers reacted positively to the four-day week. In Idaho suburban schools, 77% of teachers surveyed said that a greater variety of learning activities was used after the change, 82% said that enough learning time was provided, 76% said students participated more actively, 89% said attendance was better, and 74% said disruption of class lessened. Eighty-five percent said they used time more effectively, 71% said they liked work better, 80% said there was a greater opportunity to plan and develop instructional activities, 67% said there was more time for renewal, and 84% said there was more time for personal activities. When asked about the future of the program, 74% wanted to continue, 14% said to continue with modifications, and 9% said to discontinue the new schedule. Only six out of 103 respondents described various disadvantages of the schedule, such as concern about untended children on Friday and fatigue in young students (Sagness & Salzman, 1993).

Teachers who liked the new schedule said they had more time to take care of personal business, spend time with family, plan lessons, get supplies (Rouse, 2006), conduct meetings with other teachers, attend in-service training (Featherstone, 1991), or work on classroom projects (Fager, 1997). They preferred prepping for the next week on Friday or Monday rather than over the weekend (Dam, 2006). Because the four-day week was popular with teachers (Durr, 2003), some districts found that it helped them recruit teachers in cases where they could not compete in salary with other districts in the state (Ferak, 2006; Rouse, 2006), and that teacher turnover declined after the schedule was implemented (Koki, n.d.).

Some localities experienced difficulties with switching to the four-day week due to the need to negotiate with teachers' unions (Richard, 2002), or because teacher labor contracts often are set by days rather than hours (Durr, 2003). In one case the teachers had a pre-existing mistrust of the school board due to an earlier teacher strike; these teachers initially focused on the fact that there would be 20 minutes more instructional time per week and contested the schedule change (Litke, 1994). However, once any difficulties were smoothed over, the four-day week was implemented and teachers adjusted their teaching to a new daily schedule.

Community Reaction

By far the greatest difficulty encountered by districts implementing the four-day week has been in managing community and parent reactions to the plan. In many places parents and community members opposed the new schedule because of concern about securing child care for the fifth day (Keen, 2007), the effects on at-risk students, possible fatigue with longer days (Associated Press, 2006a; Associated Press, 2006c), perceived lessening of instructional time (Harp, 1995), a perception that school personnel should work five days a week (Dam, 2006), and possible trouble from unsupervised youth on Mondays or Fridays (Geranios, 2006; "Wright schools reject bid for 4-day school week," 2006).

In at least one case, in a district in Wyoming (Associated Press, 2006A), these types of concerns were enough to cause a district to abandon the four-day week before it began. Although the Wyoming district turned to the four-day week out of concern over student absences for activities and teacher absences for professional development, they did not receive enough support from the community (45% of parents and 44% of other community members) to make the change.

Aside from concerns about the effects of the schedule, communication with community stakeholders appears to have been an important issue in the implementation of the four-day week in many locations. Parents sometimes said they had wanted more notice of the change Associated Press. (2007), and had needed more straightforward information during public meetings; some said that they felt

district officials were trying to “sell” the plan (Associated Press, 2006a). Communication issues were at the heart of one very difficult implementation in a school in Canada (Litke, 1994). Having obtained the agreement of the teachers, school officials had gone to the school board first with the plan so as not to offend the decision-makers. However, the board required the school to get parent approval, which required a general meeting and a positive formal vote. School officials had less than three weeks to get the necessary parent approval between the board approval date and the date on which they wanted the four-day week to start. They tried to notify parents through letters that students took home, so they informed the students first and took a student vote, then gave them the letters. Some parents, feeling that they were then the last to know, accused school officials of asking students to “work on” parents to get their agreement. Others started complaining in the press and putting up negative posters around town. At meetings, questions and comments became very personal. Finally one person spoke for the schedule change in a meeting, and public opinion started to change. The measure finally gained parent approval, but after three weeks of difficult community-school relations.

In suburban Idaho, the four-day week ended after one year, also largely due to communication problems with the community (Sagness & Salzman, 1993). The school board had announced the schedule change unilaterally, which polarized the public, and the opposition finally forced a referendum. Although the majority voted to retain the new schedule, the board still voted to end it. The authors of the Idaho study said that because the school board had merely informed rather than involved community stakeholders, it caused reactive rather than proactive feelings, so efforts to seek support for the four-day week did not happen until the public was already polarized. Because the change was premised only on saving money, rather than on a broader vision of education, not enough attention was paid to policy and teaching/learning concerns and no substantive knowledge base was acquired to support the change. This lack of vision and communication effectively ended the project.

Fortunately, other districts have been more successful in communicating with stakeholders and in gaining support once they had decided to propose a four-day week. In several locations, surveys and unofficial public votes were conducted in order to gauge parent and community interest (Mitchell, 2006). In Louisiana, district officials secured substantial community support before making the change. The superintendent said, “It should not be used in schools and communities that aren’t ready for it” (Johnston, 1997, p. 1). In some districts, promises to end the schedule after a trial period (such as two years) if it did not work may have eased community concerns (“Deuel to go to four-day school week,” 2007; Featherstone, 1991).

With the four-day week in place, districts have continued to survey parents, students, and staff periodically

(Geranios, 2006; Litke, 1994), and some periodically seek renewal approval from their boards (Geranios, 2006). To gauge the effects of the new schedule, schools can collect data on absenteeism, utility costs, discipline problems, vandalism, student achievement, police incidents, and use of town recreation facilities (Litke, 1994). In areas where the four-day week has been in place for a number of years, it has gained wide acceptance. In a rural Idaho district, the superintendent said that 70% of school patrons favored the shorter week (Geranios, 2006), and in Colorado, 80-90% of community members wanted to continue the alternative schedule (Dam, 2006). In Hawaii, a school implementing the four-day week saw more parent volunteers than before, and greater attendance at open houses and parent workshops (Koki, n.d.).

Child Care

The prospect of a four-day week raises concerns about child care on the fifth day. In Murray, Nebraska, the superintendent said that about 30 students transferred out of the district when the four-day week started (although 30 others transferred in), a change he attributed to child-care issues (Ferak, 2006). Schools on this schedule responded in different ways to this need. As previously mentioned, some schools provided programs on the fifth day, either self-funded, paid for with grant money, or arranged through volunteers and community groups. Other schools set up a day care program for Fridays (Geranios, 2006), or invited private child-care providers to use space in the elementary school on the extra day (Ferak, 2006).

However, in some districts, parents found that child care was no harder than before the schedule change. Because students got out of school later, parents could pick up the children as they left work (Geranios, 2006; Johnston, 1997), and some said it was easier to find care for one day per week than for a few hours five days per week (Dam, 2006; Featherstone, 1991). Parents also took advantage of the availability of high school students on the fifth day, and hired them to baby-sit younger children (Dam, 2006; Keen, 2007; Richard, 2002).

Student Discipline

Schools that shortened free time during the school day, such as passing periods and lunch periods, saw a decline in the number of discipline problems at school (Geranios, 2006; Litke, 1994). In rural Hawaii, disciplinary referrals declined from 203 in the semester before implementation to 75 the semester following implementation. There was also less vandalism, which school officials attributed to the students’ having less time to mill around the school during the day (Koki, n.d.). One school, addressing community concerns about students causing trouble in the town on their day off, met with law officers before and after the four-day week to gauge whether students out of school would commit

more crimes, and found that there was no increase in crime on the fifth day (Geranios, 2006).

Fatigue

Because students face a longer school day with a four-day week, teachers, parents, and students are often concerned about fatigue. In suburban Idaho, 42% of primary-grade students felt that they got tired at school and that the day was too long, but 89% said they liked being at school, 98% said they learned a lot, and 89% said school was fun. Thirty-seven percent of intermediate students said the school day was too long, but the majority wanted to continue the new schedule. Only 19% of secondary students believed that they got more tired in class. However, 41% percent of parents believed that children were more fatigued in class, while 24% of teachers said student and teacher fatigue was greater. When the researchers conducted classroom observations, they found high levels of on-task behaviors despite longer days (Sagness & Salzman, 1993).

To some extent, concern about fatigue may be partly a problem of perception, as schools reported that the students are fresher and more motivated to learn after a long weekend (Featherstone, 1991; "Idaho schools switch to 4-day weeks to cut down on costs," 2006) that can relieve the intensity of the other days (Dam, 2006). Nevertheless, some teachers reported that elementary students got tired, so they incorporated music, exercise, and snacks into the school day to keep their energy up (Ferak, 2006).

Saving Money

Many districts that went to the four-day week did so, at least in part, to save money. Some sources reported that districts did in fact save money on various expenses, including food services (Dam, 2006; Fager, 1997), utilities, fuel, transportation, classified staff wages, and substitute teachers. A district in Nebraska saved about \$1000,000 per year (Ferak, 2006), while another saved 1.6% of its operating budget (Sagness & Salzman, 1993). A very small district in Arkansas saved enough to pay for preschool, Monday tutorials, and subsidized college courses for high school students (Johnston, 1997). Not all districts realized the anticipated savings, however.

Several of the schools turned the thermostats down (or up) on the extra day to save on utilities (Fager, 1997; Ferak, 2006; Geranios, 2006; Sagness & Salzman, 1993). A rural Idaho district switching to the four-day week expected to save between \$60,000 and \$80,000 ("Idaho schools switch to 4-day weeks to cut down on costs," 2006), while a study of several districts found utility savings of between 10 and 25% (Inman-Freitas, 1991). In New Mexico, electricity costs went down 10 to 15% (Koki, n.d.). Whenever the

school building was used on the extra day, however, as for fifth-day enrichment activities (Associated Press, 2006a), extracurriculars (Dam, 2006), teacher meetings (Keen, 2007), or a four-and-a-half-day schedule (Durr, 2003), utility savings decreased correspondingly.

Especially in rural areas where bus routes are long, a four-day week can bring a substantial savings in transportation costs (Fager, 1997; Ferak, 2006; Geranios, 2006). In one study, districts reported transportation cost reductions of 10 to 23% (Inman-Freitas, 1991), while New Mexico districts reported 10 to 20% transportation savings (Koki, n.d.). However, in order to realize 20% savings in transportation, the Colorado state report advised that schools must eliminate or restrict transportation for activities not done on school days (Dam, 2006). This will result in fewer hours and lower pay for drivers (Geranios, 2006), which is difficult because the drivers are often valued members of the school community.

Although teacher and administrator pay is not usually affected by the four-day week, savings are possible with classified staff, who can be employed for one day less per week (Dam, 2006). In Oregon, a rural district saved about \$250,000 out of a \$14 million budget due to savings on classified employees (Durr, 2003). However, this means that people who are the lowest-paid employees stand to lose the most from the four-day schedule (Keen, 2007). Believing that reducing classified staff hours was not practical in their districts, some chose to leave their salaries the same (Sagness & Salzman, 1993). They lost opportunities for savings, but believed that morale was more important (Durr, 2003).

Less controversial was saving money on substitutes. Because teacher absenteeism declined with the four-day week, fewer substitute teachers were needed (Associated Press, 2006a). One district in Louisiana saved \$10,000 on substitute teacher costs (Johnston, 1997), while the suburban Idaho district saved \$25,000 (Sagness & Salzman, 1993).

Conclusion

Table 1 summarizes some of the pros and cons of the four-day week, based on the sources found. Overall, the preponderance of the available evidence (research reports and other articles) supports the implementation of the four-day week, especially in small rural districts that were featured in most of the source material. Although there were some drawbacks to implementing the four-day week, districts who carefully manage the transition and who underestimate neither the planning implications nor the reaction from the stakeholder community can have a successful four-day week.

Table 1.

Pros and Cons of Four Day Week

TOPIC	PROS	CONS
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More time to plan lessons, get supplies More time to spend with family Good recruitment tool Decline in teacher transfer requests Use Friday as extra work day: conduct meetings, work on classroom projects, group planning Increase in variety of instructional activities Lessened classroom disruptions School-wide in-service possible "Fluff" cut from the curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers' union negotiations Teacher labor contracts set by days, not hours
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 89% of primary students said they like being at school, school is fun Majority of intermediate students said school schedule was fine Only 19% of secondary students believed that students get more tired in class Classroom observations revealed high levels of on-task behaviors Achievement did not decline Children are more motivated and energetic after long weekend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 42% of primary students said they got tired and the day was too long 42% of intermediate students said school day was too long 41% of parents believed children were more fatigued in class 24% of teachers said student and teacher fatigue is greater
Community Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong support when drummed up prior to making the change Strong support in communities with history of four-day week More parents volunteer than before Increased parent attendance at open house and workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents cite child care as main worry Concern about at-risk students and student getting into trouble on days off Fatigue, especially in younger children Community stakeholders may not understand reasons for change Perceived lack of information from school district Too little advance notice from school districts District officials or school board seen as uninterested in input
Savings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saved on substitutes and classified staff 10-25% utility savings 10-23% transportation savings Up to 20% savings on food costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all districts saw expected savings Cuts to classified salaries can be unpopular Use of school on extra day cuts into savings
Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased student attendance, which brought more ADA funding Absenteeism due to sports and activities declined Teacher absenteeism decreased Fewer disruptions caused by appointments for students 	
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports travel and other activities moved to Friday, avoiding missed class time Increased extracurricular participation in some schools Frees up buses for optional school trips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A few students said they had less time to participate
Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decline in discipline problems Less milling around Less vandalism 	

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Recommendations

The research and additional sources point to a number of recommendations for districts who are considering implementing a four-day school week:

1. The reason for the change must be carefully established. Determine, clarify, and explain why this change is being considered. Avoid positioning the schedule change as merely a savings opportunity, even if that is an important reason, as there are other positive effects as well.
2. Very carefully plan communications with the stakeholder community. Make a concerted effort to involve everyone. Devise a collaborative plan for gathering teacher, staff, student, parent, and community input. At all costs, avoid the appearance of unilateral decision-making, and leave plenty of time for the entire decision process so that no one feels rushed.
 - a. Form representative committees.
 - b. Have parent meetings, offer parents a phone number or e-mail address for comments.
 - c. Take school/parent/community surveys.
 - d. Explain what the available evidence shows about the four-day week, including all pros and cons.
 - e. Include law enforcement in discussions of concerns for community safety.
 - f. Inform stakeholders about any planned trial period (and any contingency plans to return to the old schedule if necessary), the data that will be used to monitor the effects of implementation, and the schedule for informing them about how things are working out.
3. Fully review options for choosing either Monday or Friday as the day off. Monday coincides with holidays, but Friday may result in fewer absences for sports and activities.
4. Ensure that enough minutes would be added to the school day in order to fulfill state requirements for instructional time. When the new school day length is determined, meet with groups of teachers and staff at each school to ensure that all schedules and policies are adjusted accordingly.
5. Encourage teachers to rethink their classroom practice for a longer day, for example teaching elementary students more difficult subjects in the morning when they are more alert, and provide professional development as necessary.
6. Plan to address the child care need, as this is an important parent concern.
 - a. Explore options to partner with private care providers for the fifth day, or at least allow private providers to provide information to parents on their fifth-day offerings.
 - b. Consider offering a list to parents of high school students who have said they are willing and able to baby-sit on the fifth day, and whom have been recommended by teachers or other parents as responsible and trustworthy.
 - c. Expand any after-school programs to the fifth day, if funding is available or grants can be obtained.
7. If funding or volunteers are available, consider offering enrichment or tutoring opportunities for the fifth day.
8. Ask the community to help out with internships or jobs for high school students on the fifth day.
9. If saving money is important, consider limiting use of the school building or buses on the fifth day. Reduce hours of classified staff only if absolutely necessary.

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