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We Wanted to do Something Innovative: Exploring Motivations of Arkansas Districts Adopting Four-Day School Weeks or Year-Round Calendars

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We Wanted to Do Something Innovative:

Exploring Motivations of Arkansas Districts
Adopting Four-Day School Weeks or Year-Round Calendars

Kate Barnes
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Office for
Education
Policy

Providing current research
to support thoughtful
decision-making concerning
PreK-20 education in Arkansas

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Summary

Recent legislation has allowed Arkansas school districts increased flexibility to adopt a non-traditional calendar. Act 688 introduced four calendar options for districts: a traditional calendar, a four-day calendar, a year-round calendar, and an alternate calendar based on the number of instructional hours.

During the 2022-23 school year, 33 school districts throughout the state adopted new calendars. The motivations behind why districts adopted new calendars were unclear. This report aims to identify the rationale behind why these districts moved away from the traditional calendar.

This report uses data gathered from interviews with twenty-three superintendents in districts that selected non-traditional calendars to identify the motivation for the change as well as the successes and challenges of adopting a new calendar. Arkansas's district leaders will select calendars in the spring for the 2023-24 school year. The findings from this study will provide leaders and stakeholders with helpful information and items to consider.

Fast Facts About Calendar Options in Arkansas

- There are four calendar options that school districts can adopt:
 - Traditional Calendar
 - Four-Day School Week
 - Year-Round Calendar
 - Alternate Calendar
- The number of schools adopting non-traditional calendars as increased over the past 10 years.
 - 27 districts use a four-day school week
 - 6 districts use a year-round calendar

Key Findings

- **Calendar Selection Rationale**

Districts identified the following reasons for adopting a new calendar: increasing teacher recruitment and retention, improving the mental health of students and teachers, and addressing learning loss.

- **Modified School Structure**

Adopting a new calendar allowed districts to alter their schedules to provide more time for academic intervention. Additionally, districts operating a four-day school week had to do additional planning since Pre-K was required to remain on a five-day calendar.

- **Outcomes to Monitor Implementation**

The major items districts are monitoring for evidence of successful implementation of a new calendar are teacher and student absenteeism and academic achievement. Several districts mentioned additional monitoring benchmarks, such as school choice students and juvenile arrest rates.

- **Extended Partners**

District leaders discussed working with higher education institutions and career technical centers that remain on traditional calendars. They also discussed changes to backpack and snack programs to continually support their students when they are not in school.

- **Ancillary Matters**

Several ancillary matters arose as important things for district leaders to consider. These include salaries for classified staff, holding community meetings to discuss calendar changes and child-care.

Introduction

Developing a school calendar is an annual undertaking for school district personnel and communities. Prior to the 2022-23 school year, the decisions district leaders faced involving calendars surrounded the topics of start and end dates, length of holidays, and allocating time for professional development. In 2021, a bill was passed by the State of Arkansas's General Assembly that provided districts more flexibility in choosing a school calendar. Act 688¹ states that beginning with the 2022-23 school year, districts would have four options for establishing a school calendar. With this bill's passage, numerous Arkansas school districts opted into the use of a non-traditional school calendar beginning in the 2022-23 school year. This report examines the motivations, challenges, and successes Arkansas districts had when making the switch to a non-traditional school calendar. This study employed a qualitative analysis to answer the following questions:

- What was the primary motivator for district leaders adopting a non-traditional calendar?
- What was the process district leaders used to present the idea of a new calendar to stakeholders?
- What are the effects the implementation had on the school districts?

The report will continue as follows: structure of and prior research on non-traditional calendars, the context and methodology of the research, emerging themes, and a conclusion.

Structure and Prior Research of Non-Traditional Calendars

A traditional school calendar in Arkansas is structured for 170-180 school days from August to May. The nine months are divided into two periods with a two-week winter holiday, a one-week break in the spring, and a twelve-week break in the summer.² Although Arkansas districts are relatively new to adopting and navigating non-traditional school calendars, these calendar structures have been used consistently in the United States since the 1960s. The longevity of the use of non-traditional calendars has allowed researchers to study the impacts in various ways.

Four-Day School Week

The structure of a four-day school week (4DSW) differs depending on the state or district. The most popular schedules hold classes Monday through Thursday or Tuesday through Friday. The fifth day is not a required school day, but some districts offer enrichment or childcare opportunities. To meet state regulations for minimum instructional time, districts operating with a 4DSW have longer school days compared to districts operating on the traditional calendar. Although districts have used the 4DSW since the 1970s, the adoption of this calendar has grown over the past few decades. As of the 2018-19 school year, approximately 1,607 schools in 662 districts across at least 24 states operate using a four-day school week.³ This equates to approximately 5% of districts in the United States using a 4DSW⁴.

¹ [ADE Commissioner Memo](#), COM-22-079, December 1, 2021

² Pedersen, J. M. (2012). The History of School and Summer Vacation. *Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education*, 5, 54–62.

³ Thompson, P. N., Gunter, K., Schuna, J. M., & Tomayko, E. J. (2021). Are All Four-Day School Weeks Created Equal? A National Assessment of Four-Day School Week Policy Adoption and Implementation. *Education Finance and Policy*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00316

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Public School Enrollment. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cga>.

Districts previously adopting the 4DSW identified cost savings as a primary motivation for the change.³ Initial studies estimated that districts operating a 4DSW could save 20% on energy costs from savings in transportation and utilities.⁵ The reduction in operating expenditures is a fairly consistent finding in the research. More recent studies estimated that districts with 4DSW have the potential to reduce a district's overall cost; however, it is also likely to reduce the district's revenue as a result of a reduction in services due to the shortened week.⁶ Empirical research estimating the relationships between student achievement and a 4DSW has yielded mixed results. Some studies reported small declines in students' test scores in 4DSW districts compared to districts operating on a traditional calendar. Other studies have reported no effect on student achievement in mathematics or literacy or an increase in the percentage of students meeting benchmark readiness standards in mathematics and literacy.^{2,7}

Year-Round School Calendars

Year-round calendars (YRC) have been more prevalent in the history of public education in the United States than the 4DSW. There is more variability in the structure of YRC compared to 4DSW. Typically, YRC features a shorter summer break than traditional calendars, with longer and more frequent breaks, called intersessions, throughout the school year. Despite being structured differently, YRC still operates with students in school for the same 170-180 days as the traditional calendar. Although initially popular in the 1960s, the percentage of districts adopting these calendars has declined over the past few decades. In the 1990-91 school year, approximately six percent of schools nationally used a year-round calendar. In the 2017-18 school year, only about three percent of schools nationally operated using a YRC.⁸

Critics of the YRC point out that since there is not an increase in instructional time, YRC cannot be expected to increase student achievement. Supporters for the YRC advocate that a shortened summer break helps reduce students' learning loss, which is most acute among disadvantaged students.⁹ Therefore, YRC calendars should increase test scores, especially for disadvantaged students. However, recent research calls into question the idea of summer learning loss. Studies have estimated that children lose very little skill over the summer or that learning loss is no larger among disadvantaged students than advantaged students.¹⁰ As with the 4DSW, recent literature on increased learning in YRC has been mixed. A meta-analysis from 2003 estimates that YRC improved student test scores by a small but statistically significant amount. The scores for disadvantaged students, however, had a greater improvement.¹¹ Newer studies conclude that YRC has not improved test scores overall and that positive effects for disadvantaged students are small. Further studies have estimated null or negative effects for lower achieving students attending YRC schools.¹²

⁵ Johnson, D. (1977). Four-day week saves energy. *Community and Junior College Journal*, 48(3), 33–33.

⁶ Morton, E. (n.d.). Effects of 4-Day School Weeks on Older Adolescents: Examining Impacts of the Schedule on Academic Achievement, Attendance, and Behavior in High School. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 0(0), 01623737221097420. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221097420>

⁷ Anderson, D. M., & Walker, M. B. (2015). Does Shortening the School Week Impact Student Performance? Evidence from the Four-Day School Week. *Education Finance and Policy*, 10(3), 314–349. https://doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00165

⁸ Hippel, P. T. von. (2015). Year-Round School Calendars: Effects on Summer Learning, Achievement, Parents, Teachers, and Property Values. ERN: Government Expenditures & Education (Topic).

⁹ Borman G. D., Benson J., Overman L. T. (2005). Families, schools, and summer learning. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 131–150. <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/499195>

¹⁰ Von Hippel, P.T. (2019). Is Summer Learning Loss Real? How I lost faith in one of education research's classic results. *Education Next*, 9-14.

¹¹ Cooper, H., Valentine, J. C., Charlton, K., & Melson, A. (2003). The Effects of Modified School Calendars on Student Achievement and on School and Community Attitudes. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(1), 1–52. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543073001001>

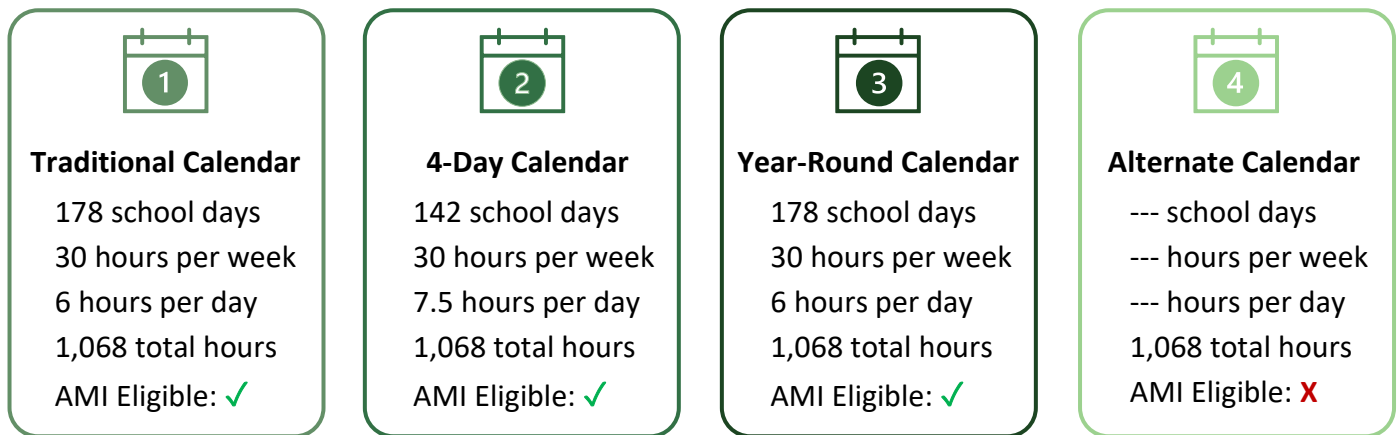
¹² Hippel, P. T. von. (2015). Year-Round School Calendars: Effects on Summer Learning, Achievement, Parents, Teachers, and Property Values. ERN: Government Expenditures & Education (Topic).

Arkansas Calendar Policy

In the past several years, there has been an increase in the number of districts in Arkansas moving to the use of a non-traditional school calendar, particularly the use of the four-day week calendar. The first noticeable increase happened between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. In December of 2021, it was announced that Arkansas districts would have four options for establishing a school year calendar for the 2022-23 school year: a traditional school calendar, an alternative school calendar, a 4-day week school calendar, and a 12-month/year-round school calendar. The differences between calendar options are displayed below.

Figure 1:

Arkansas Calendar Options by Type, 2022-23



All calendars require students to have 1,068 total hours of instruction throughout the school year. The alternate calendar is based solely on hours attended. Districts that have adopted this calendar create their own schedules and calendars that fulfill the instructional hours requirement. We removed alternate calendars from this analysis since it closely aligns with the traditional calendar. Most schools using this calendar type have calendars that mirror the traditional calendar with slightly modified instructional times.

Act 688 introduced increased flexibility for districts to adopt different school calendars starting in the 2022-23 school year. The figures on the next page present information on the trends of non-traditional calendar use in Arkansas in terms of schools and enrollment.

The information presented in Figure 2 shows how the number of schools using 4DSW and YRC has changed over time. The information presented in Figure 3 shows the percentage of Arkansas students attending a school with a 4DSW and YRC over the past ten school years.

Figure 2:
Number of Arkansas Schools Using 4DSW and YRC, 2013-2023

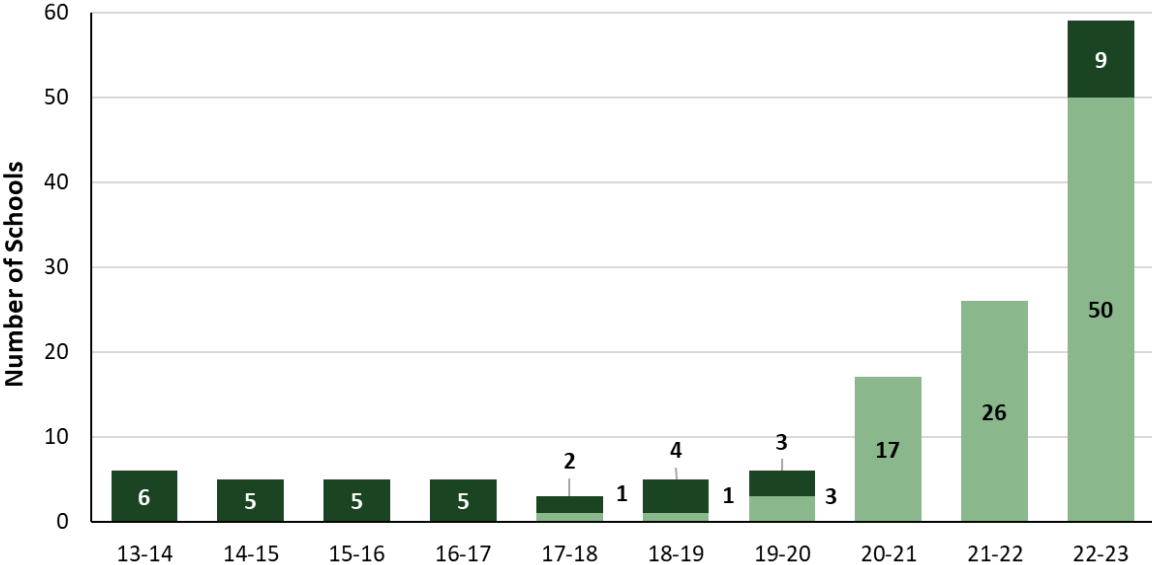
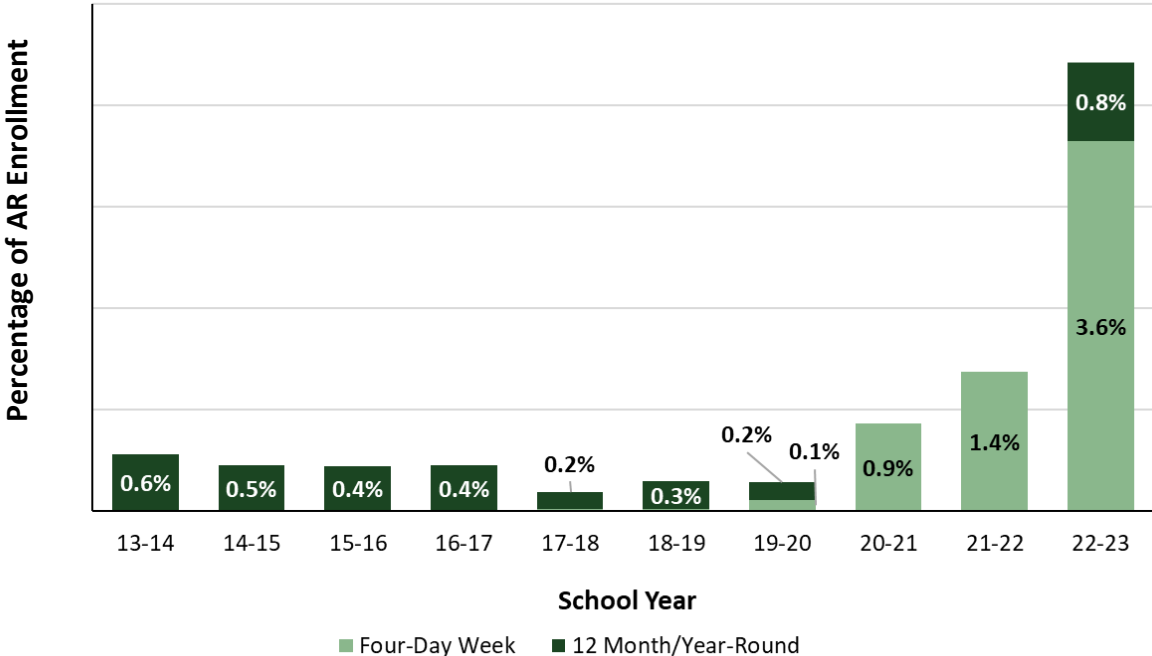


Figure 3:
Percentage of State Enrollment in 4DSW and YRC, 2013-2023



Characteristics of Arkansas Schools with Non-Traditional Calendars

Currently, there are thirty-three districts in Arkansas operating a 4DSW or YRC. Twenty-seven districts operate using the 4DSW, and six districts use a YRC. The map below shows the location of the districts utilizing non-traditional calendars.

Figure 4:
Arkansas School Districts Operating on Non-Traditional Calendars, 2022-23

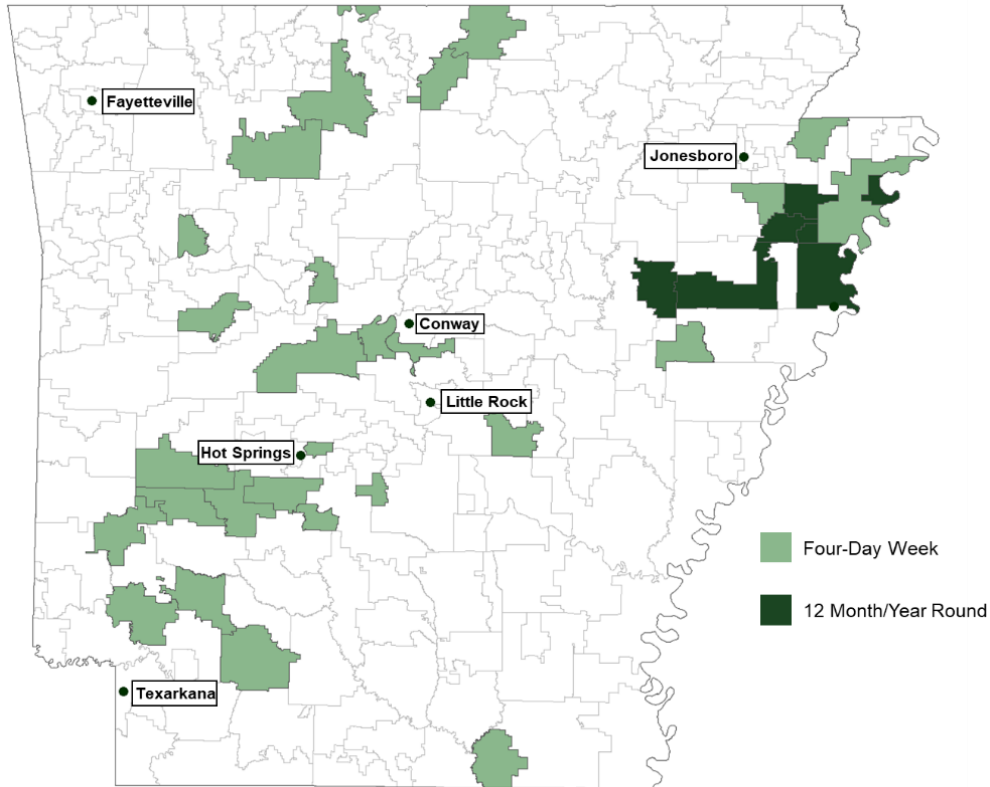


Table 1:
Comparisons of District Characteristics by Calendar Option by Weighted Average, 2022-23

	4DSW	YRC	Arkansas
<i>Total Enrollment</i>	658	1,466	1,810
<i>% Free and Reduced Lunch</i>	81	75	65
<i>Number of Teachers</i>	91	127	149
<i>% Inexperienced Teachers</i>	53	33	43
<i>% Proficient ACT Aspire Literacy (2022)</i>	37	33	37
<i>% Proficient ACT Aspire Math (2022)</i>	34	32	35
<i>Value-Added Growth Literacy (2022)</i>	79.37	79.15	79.68
<i>Value-Added Growth Math (2022)</i>	78.62	79.06	79.45
<i>ACT Composite Score (2022)</i>	18.33	14.25	18.36
Total Districts	27	6	260

When comparing the districts using 4DSW or YRC calendars to all Arkansas districts, as presented in Table 1 above, noticeable differences appear:

- Average student enrollment in 4DSW and YRC districts is lower than the average enrollment of Arkansas public schools. The difference is especially noticeable in 4DSW districts, with an average of 658 students enrolled compared to the state average of 1,810.
- The percentage of students qualifying for FRL is 10-15% higher in 4DSW and YRC districts.
- The percentage of inexperienced teachers in 4DSW districts is higher than the state average at 53%.
- Average students in YRC districts are less likely to meet benchmark readiness standards in mathematics and literacy compared to all districts in Arkansas.
- Students in 4DSW and YRC districts have lower averages of student value-added growth, a metric not impacted by outside factors such as poverty. Value-added growth measures the difference between what a student is expected to achieve based on their prior achievement and what the student achieved in the past school year.
- The average ACT Composite scores of high school students in 4DSW districts are slightly lower than the state. The same ACT scores are notably lower than the state in YRC districts.

Methodology

This research study aimed to study and compare the experiences of districts that adopted a 4DSW or YRC. The goal was to identify challenges and successes related to the planning for and implementation of these calendars to aid districts considering switching to a new calendar. To gather information, the research team identified eligible 4DSW and YRC districts. We made initial contact with the district leaders to explain the project's purpose and invited superintendents to sign up for an interview. All interviews were conducted over Zoom. The interviews began with a brief explanation of the study, followed by a specific set of questions. The interviews operated in a semi-structured and open-ended format allowing interviewers to ask about tangential topics. Once the interviews were completed, recordings were anonymized, transcribed, and imported into a database for analysis. The table below displays the interview response rate for the project by calendar type.

Table 2:

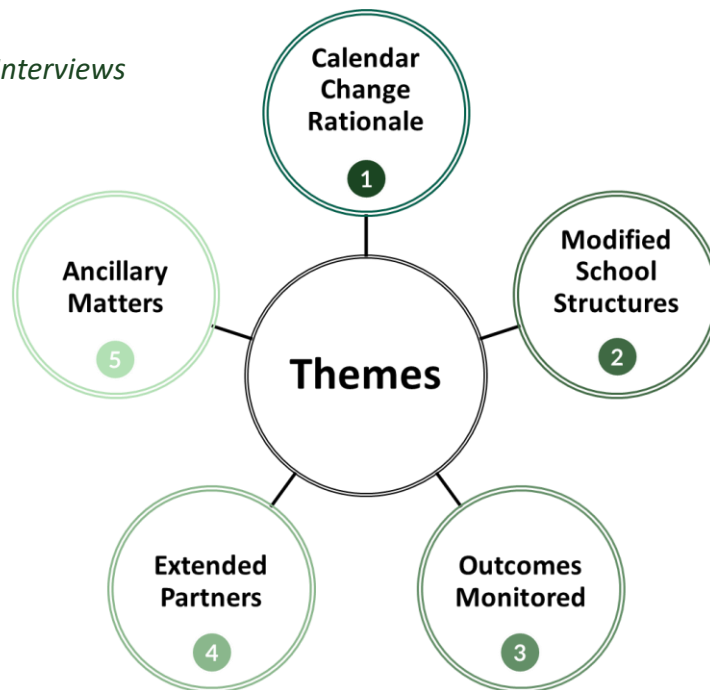
Interview Response Rate by Calendar Type

	4DSW	YRC	Total
<i>Total Districts</i>	27	6	33
<i>Number of Scheduled Interviews</i>	21	6	27
<i>Number of Interviews Conducted</i>	18	5	23
<i>Percentage of Interviews Completed</i>	67%	83%	70%

Emerging Themes

Following the interviews of all participants, the analysis revealed five central themes and several sub-themes. As presented in Figure 5, the central themes were calendar change rationale, modified school structures, outcomes monitored, extended partners, and ancillary matters. The following sections explore each central theme in more detail with representative quotes from superintendents.

Figure 5:
Central Themes from Interviews



Calendar Selection Rationale

Every superintendent interviewed discussed their district's rationale for shifting away from the traditional school calendar. Three subthemes emerged.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Nine of the superintendents interviewed noted that the primary reason their district adopted a new calendar was to help with the recruitment and retention of teachers. The superintendents lead districts located in rural areas and reportedly face a variety of challenges, including recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Although districts set their own pay scale, rural districts report difficulty matching the teacher salaries provided in more populous nearby districts. For the 2021-22 school year, the average teacher salary for first-year teachers with a bachelor's degree is \$35,837 for districts utilizing a 4-day calendar and \$38,009 for districts utilizing a year-round calendar.

Our thinking was, well, what's best for kids? The best thing for kids is to have the highest quality teacher in front of them. If we're losing good teachers, what can we do to keep good teachers? We can't pay \$10,000 a year more. What's another alternative that we could do to try to keep the teachers in front of kids? Just theoretically, would you rather have an average teacher in front of your child for five days a week? Or would you rather have a really good teacher or friend of your child for 4 days a week? And we thought that the four day a week with a really good teacher was probably the better option for kids.

Superintendent 1, 4DSW

Several superintendents mentioned that they have recruited more high-quality teachers since adopting a new calendar option. The following is a quote regarding the applicants for open positions in the district:

We are now getting 15, 20 applications of people with actual experience, even Master's degrees. I kind of made the joke of we stole teachers from surrounding schools. We took 10 teachers from [neighboring district] this past year.

Superintendent 15, 4DSW

Mental Health of Students and Teachers

Seven of the interviewees identified improving the mental health of teachers and students as one of the primary motivators for adopting a new calendar. The following is a quote from Superintendent 13:

We started exploring new calendar options because we were kind of concerned about teachers. The last couple of years has been really difficult for our teachers. There's a lot of burnout and a lot of overstress. So, we actually started looking at what we could control and what we could do to kind of help some of that.

Superintendent 13, YRC

Learning Loss

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the conversations surrounding learning loss as students were not physically in a school building for various points of the year. Unlike other states, all Arkansas public schools were required to have at least one in-person option for students in the 2020-21 school year. However, as the world recovers from the pandemic, the conversations surrounding how to recover from all the disruptions students experienced during Covid-19 still linger. Schools are getting more innovative with solutions for students falling behind in key subject areas. The following is a quote from Superintendent 6:

The other big part was learning loss. You know, the big gaps you have in between [breaks]. I'm talking about consecutive gaps where students are out, especially in the Delta [region], the last chance you have of maintaining what they learned previously before coming back.

Superintendent 6, YRC

Modified School Structures

The next theme that emerged from the interviews surrounded how district leaders have adjusted or modified the structure of their schools due to adopting a non-traditional calendar. This can be seen in three subcategories: RTI or Intervention Programs, Blocking Schedules, and Pre-K programs.

RTI or Intervention Programs

Seven of the superintendents mentioned that their districts had created an intervention program during the times that their schools are not in session (either the fifth day or during intercessions). More than seven districts noted that they have some version of programs during the district's off time, but some programs operate to provide childcare, not to support students with learning and/or behavior needs directly. The intervention programs offered are unique to each school district. The following is a quote from Superintendent 3 about their intervention programs:

We're having some great success with W.I.N. [What I Need] Friday...we rotate students in and out as needed. For example, if they become Tier I, they make it into that Tier I level, we move them out and we bring anybody that falls into that Tier II or III level that will move them into the next W.I.N. rotation.

Superintendent 3, 4DSW

Several superintendents mentioned that teachers are presented with the opportunity to work during these intervention programs for additional compensation or stipends.

Block Schedule

Four of the superintendents discussed how they modified the schedule of the schools in their district to better support student learning and instruction with the change to a new calendar. The common themes presented were moving to a seven-period day for secondary students and including a blocked time for instruction in primary grades where students are not pulled out for interventions. Superintendents also mentioned having a dedicated RTI block in both the primary and secondary levels. The following quote is from Superintendent 16:

One of [the changes we made was] blocking the first 180 minutes for elementary for English and math. And that was a big factor ... you know, that was something else that we hoped to see some gains from that.

Superintendent 16, 4DSW

Pre-Kindergarten

Pre-K services appeared as a recurrent concern for superintendents whose districts adopted a 4DSW. Five superintendents expressed concern or frustration that their Pre-K program was forced to remain on a five-day school schedule while the rest of the district operated only four days. One district official mentioned that the district lost their ABC funding for Pre-K after adopting a 4-day school week. Below is a comment about the struggles surrounding the implementation of a Pre-K program with an alternative calendar. The following quote is from Superintendent 11:

The mandate now, the, the way that it is mandated at this current time is that Pre-K must go five days a week... I feel like it hurts them. We have kids that don't come to Pre-K on that fifth day a week so they're missing time. They're on a five-day schedule, they are only carrying out that 360 minutes a day. So, if a kid misses Friday, they're missing 360 minutes versus if they were going on an extended day.

Superintendent 11, 4DSW

Outcomes to Monitor Implementation

The third main theme that emerged focused on how districts that adopted a new calendar monitor the implementation. Over the course of all the interviews, twenty-five comments were made about the outcome measures that district leaders are using to monitor the success of implementing a new calendar. The most frequent outcomes mentioned are presented below.

Teacher and Student Absenteeism

The most common measure district leaders are using to monitor the implementation of non-traditional calendars is through teacher and student absences. Thirteen of the superintendents interviewed mentioned that staff and student absenteeism present challenges in their districts and that when students miss school, there is the potential for them to fall further behind academically. This is particularly worrisome for districts that adopted a four-day calendar where when a student misses one school day, they are missing the equivalent of 1.25 days of instruction in a traditional calendar. Furthermore, when teachers miss school days, students lose an opportunity to learn from a qualified professional. Additionally, the district must pay for a substitute teacher to fill in when a teacher is absent. The following quote is from Superintendent 14:

One of the reasons that we [changed calendar], and this sounds kind of counterintuitive, but is because of student absenteeism ... we have a horrible problem with student absenteeism.

Superintendent 14, 4DSW

It is important to note that many superintendents discussed that the number of student and teacher absences has been lower for this school year. Depending on the calculation, declines in staff and student absences in 4DSW could be because the number of school days decreased from the days in a traditional calendar. A detailed examination of teacher and student absenteeism should be completed at the end of the academic year.

Academic Achievement

Modifying a district's calendar could have implications for students' academic achievement, particularly if there are alterations in exposure to instructional hours. Eight of the superintendents interviewed mentioned that they would be tracking the academic achievement of their students as an outcome of switching calendars. The following quote is from Superintendent 21:

Well, I was thinking, you know, there's no clear indication that [changing to a non-traditional calendar] can help academics, but to me, if it helps with attendance, if it helps with teacher retention, then those all have direct relation to improve student achievement.

Superintendent 21, 4DSW

Miscellaneous Outcomes

The superintendents interviewed noted various other outcomes they are monitoring to measure how successful the change to the new calendar is for their district. There were eight different outcomes the districts indicated of monitoring. These include, but are not limited to, discipline referrals, counseling referrals, student engagement, student academic growth, and student enrollment. The following is a quote from Superintendent 14 regarding how the adoption of a new calendar has increased student enrollment in their district:

We had a record number of school choice kids this year. For the first time in my 16 years at [district], we actually drew students from every other school district in the county. That has never happened before. We normally get about 30 to 40 through school choice but by the time by the time it's all said and done, and it all washed out, you know, we usually gain 10, maybe 20 kids. This year, we had close to a hundred school choice [students]... Now, ah, we didn't show an actual net gain of a hundred kids, but we did show a net gain of about 50 to 60.

Superintendent 14, 4DSW

Extended Partners

District partnerships are essential for helping students achieve their maximum potential. Although challenging, it is imperative that schools and communities work together through a collaborative and comprehensive approach. Community partners can help schools prepare students for college, career, and citizenship by offering additional opportunities, support, and enrichment. Superintendents whose districts have adopted a non-traditional calendar needed to navigate their partnerships due to operating a unique schedule. The superintendents interviewed noted several different partnerships that had to be addressed when adopting a new calendar.

Higher Education Institutions

Concurrent enrollment allows a high school student to enroll in college courses and obtain credit toward a high school diploma at the same time they earn college credit. One of the interview questions specifically asked superintendents about how they navigated the calendar change for students participating in concurrent enrollment. Overall, the interview participants did not note any issues in planning with the higher education institutions. The following quote encompasses the experiences that the superintendents had about the non-traditional calendar and concurrent enrollment:

We had zero problems with [higher education institution] ... they have been phenomenal and very accommodating.

Superintendent 2, 4DSW

Career and Technical Education

When asked about concurrent enrollment, many of the interviewees were quick to address that they had students in their district who attended a Career and Technical education (CTE) program operated outside of their district. Career Centers draw students from multiple high schools and provide high-cost career and technical programs to students. CTE Career Centers are also referred to as "vocational technology centers" or "votech centers." Arkansas law asserts that "A rigorous career and technical education program of study that links secondary education and postsecondary education and combines academic and technical education in a structured sequence of courses that progresses from broad foundation skills to occupationally specific courses shall be made available."¹³ Since many of the schools that adopted a 4DSW or YRC are small, rural schools, they opt to send their students to a Career Center for CTE courses. Six superintendents mentioned that they had to adapt their plans for students enrolled in these CTE programs. The following quote summarize how districts navigated the partnerships with these institutions:

¹³ [AR Code § 6-5-1002 \(2018\)](#)

They've been great with us... I reached out to the career center and they're like, "We'll follow your calendar, whatever you need to do, we'll make it work." One program, which was automotive, was the only one. They were like, "Okay, but [the fifth day] is usually our hands on day. So, we'd really like for them to be here." We just talked to the students [and] say, "Hey, if you want to take this program, that's fine. But understand that on [fifth day] you may have to go in for some hands-on work. [The students] don't want to miss that so they're fine with it.

Superintendent 12, 4DSW

Food and Snack Programs

School "backpack programs" provide families with free groceries on weekends and school breaks. Students are typically provided with non-perishable, easy-to-prepare food to ensure they have enough food to avoid hunger when they cannot depend on school meals. Every backpack food program is unique to the community and the school that it serves. Several superintendents mentioned that they had to adapt their backpack programs to support the needs of students with additional time off. The following quote from Superintendent 19 is representative of the comments made about backpack programs:

We are providing an extra day of food for all our kiddos that are in the backpack program. So, we prepare that so that whenever they go home on Friday they have food as well for Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

Superintendent 19, 4DSW

Additionally, districts that adopted at 4DSW school calendar extended their school day. Several interviewees noted that they had implemented a snack program to help manage hunger during extended school hours. The following is a quote from Superintendent 21:

We have afternoon snack. We provide afternoon snack every day, which we didn't when, you know, the day ended at 3:15 or 3:00. Now, it ends at 4:05. So, we do provide afternoon snacks now.

Superintendent 21, 4DSW

Ancillary Matters

Several other topics continually arose throughout the course of the interviews. These topics are important to be aware of as districts consider adopting a 4DSW or YRC. Below are miscellaneous topics and quotes from interviewees about issues they have had to navigate adopting a new calendar.

Classified Staff

Employees in school districts typically fall into two groups: certified staff and classified staff. The classified staff consists of school employees that do not need certification or licensure to be qualified for the job. Examples of classified positions include paraprofessionals, maintenance, custodial, transportation, and food service workers. Classified staff members have a different salary schedule, typically based on an hourly rate. Many of the superintendents discussed the impact the adoption of a new school calendar had on their classified staff. The following is a quote from Superintendent 12:

In food service, we didn't cut anyone's pay. That was always a concern. They thought, "Oh, we're going down to four days. You're going to cut our pay." We're still here the same amount of time. We're just doing it in four days instead of five. And so we didn't cut anybody's pay and transportation because you can't I mean, there's really they're they are not driving a bus one more day. They're still doing the same time, but not that extra day. Number one, it's hard to get bus drivers anyway. And so we said, you know, we'll just consider that a raise for y'all and we are going to keep your pay.

Superintendent 12, 4DSW

While districts may have the funds to keep classified salaries the same, transitioning to a non-traditional calendar, potential issues may arise if a district opts to re-adopt the traditional calendar. In these cases, classified staff may advocate for a pay raise for the additional school day. Classified staff salaries are important for districts to consider if they are looking to adopt a 4DSW temporarily.

Community Meetings

One question posed to the superintendents was, "Did you solicit feedback from families and the community regarding the calendar options?" The superintendents provided information about the process and the ways in which they provided opportunities for two-way communication between the district and the community. The following is a quote from Superintendent 14:

We held five town hall meetings. We opened our school board meetings. Those were big, not even the school board meetings, open school board meetings. We sent out surveys on every digital platform we had. We sent out paper surveys. We made phone calls to everyone that was against it to ask them why and all of that. There [were] a lot of misconceptions that we were going to be go until 6 p.m., you know, in the evening and the days be just so super long. So, there was a lot of misconception with that there, but we cleared all that up.

Superintendent 14, 4DSW

The information gathered from the interviews shows that providing families and the community with open and clear communication regarding the calendar options seems crucial in gaining community support. Several district leaders mentioned they continue to hold an annual parent meeting to collect opinions on the calendar.

Childcare

As noted above, nearly all of the superintendents discussed the process of communicating the idea of adopting a 4DSW or YRC with their school and community stakeholders. A common concern that many superintendents faced was the idea of childcare. The following is a quote from Superintendent 1:

During the course of those public meetings, the biggest concern of parents was "What do we do with our kids on Monday for childcare?" And we said, well, we think we can fix that. So, what if we offer a Monday care for your children? And so that seemed to eliminate that main concern of "What do we do with our kids on Monday?" So we do offer, we call it Monday care and we don't have a lot of kids in there. We have about 18 or 20 students.

Superintendent 1, 4DSW

Overall, it appeared that many school community members were initially concerned about childcare, but it has not presented longstanding challenges for districts once the new calendars were adopted. Childcare, however, is something that district leaders should be conscientious of as they explore the idea of implementing a new calendar.

Medical Professionals

The final sub-theme that emerged focused on the alignment with the operating hours of medical professionals in the community in which schools are located. When the superintendents discussed the rationale behind adopting an alternative calendar, many of the superintendents in 4DSW districts commented on aligning the school's "off day" with the day medical offices are open. Several superintendents mentioned that medical professionals like dentists, orthodontists, and eye doctors also operate on a 4-day work week. The following is a quote from Superintendent 14:

In [our area], all our dentist, eye doctors and our orthodontist are closed on Fridays. So automatically by moving [the "off day"] to Monday, we took care of every kid with braces in our school.

Superintendent 14, 4DSW

The superintendents in 4DSW districts advocated that their day off was not the same day the medical offices were closed. This encouraged families to schedule appointments on the "off" day rather than during the school week. One main goal of adopting a new calendar is to reduce student absenteeism, a theme mentioned previously.

Conclusions and Discussion

This report aimed to provide information about the successes and challenges of implementing a four-day school week or year-round calendar for school districts in Arkansas. While the adoption process is nuanced, this report highlights details district leaders and community members should consider before adopting a 4DSW or YRC. Using information collected from interviews with district leaders, five central themes emerged: calendar selection rationale, modified school structures, outcomes monitored, extended partnerships, and ancillary matters. Differing from prior literature, this study found that the main motivator for adopting a 4DSW or YRC was improving teacher recruitment and retention. Since most of the districts operating under these non-traditional calendars began in the 2022-23 school year, a quantitative analysis of student outcomes will be conducted at the school year's conclusion when state test scores become available.

Many of the superintendents interviewed indicated that improving teacher and student outcomes was the primary reason for adopting a non-traditional calendar. Certain aspects of non-traditional calendars may impact student achievement. The districts interviewed had various plans for helping address learning loss from the summer or the Covid-19 pandemic. Future research will focus on the differences between student outcomes related to the structures highlighted in this report. This research, as well as future work, may provide a greater understanding of how policy decisions to adopt non-traditional calendars impact students, families, and communities. This work can inform policymakers and school leaders about how best to structure districts that adopt a non-traditional calendar.

List of Districts Using Four-Day School Weeks and Year-Round Calendars

Year-Round Calendar Districts

East Poinsett County School District	McCrary School District
Marion School District	Osceola School District
Marked Tree School District	Wynne School District

Four-Day Week Calendar Districts

Atkins School District	Mineral Springs School District
Bismarck School District	Nevada School District
Blevins School District	Norfolk School District
Buffalo Island Central School District	Ouachita School District
Caddo Hills School District	Ozark Mountain School District
Centerpoint School District	Palestine-Wheatley School District
Cossatot River School District	Perryville School District
Cutter-Morning Star School District	Poyen School District
Deer/Mt. Judea School District	Rivercrest School District
Dierks School District	Trumann School District
East End School District	Viola School District
England School District	Western Yell County School Dist.
Kirby School District	Westside School District (Johnson)
Mayflower School District	

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The Office for Education Policy (OEP) is a research center at the University of Arkansas; our staff includes faculty members, research associates and graduate students who specialize in education research and policy. We serve as a resource to state lawmakers, educators, administrators, and other leaders, providing them with current national, state, and regional research in education to support them in thoughtful decision-making concerning PreK-20 education in the State of Arkansas.



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