

East Texas school district moves to four days a week

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The Jasper Independent School District (JISD), located in a rural county in eastern Texas, recently announced plans to convert its school schedule to four days per school week (4dsw). The conversion, which is slated to take effect in the 2022-2023 academic year, is part of a nationwide trend, especially among sparsely populated rural districts in the western US.

On March 16, the JISD Facebook page announced the planned switch, the result of a unanimous Board of Trustees vote, and couched it in terms of a set of “retention incentives” that included a one-time \$3,000 bonus for teachers and \$1,500 for staff to be paid in three installments.

According to the post, “The calendar developed by the district-wide Educational Improvement Committee, consisting of teachers, staff, parents, and community members, is a 4-day model. The length of the school day was not extended, and the calendar includes the required 75,600 minutes plus 5 bonus school days of student instructional time.”

The last sentence refers to a 2015 state law that changed the school year calendar to require 75,600 instructional minutes instead of 180 instructional days to allow for more “flexibility.”

JISD superintendent John Seybold said that teacher burnout, especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, is a primary motivator for the decision to switch to the 4dsw. After admitting, “It’s got its pros and cons,” Seybold added, “We talked to many districts, but the main thing is teacher recruitment. There is a nationwide teacher shortage [and] that’s the main driving force behind a four-day week.”

“Ultimately, we are in the kid business, and the best thing we can do for kids is put the best possible teachers in front of them,” Seybold added.

The history of the four-day school week belies that

claim. Studies have shown that in terms of academic achievement, student progress is slowed under the four-day model.

Paul N. Thompson, an associate professor of economics at Oregon State University and a research affiliate at the Institute for Labor Economics, participated in a study by researchers at Oregon State and Montana State Universities which examined 2005-2019 test scores from over 341,000 Oregon high schoolers.

Thompson found “clear negative consequences for student learning when schools adopt four-day schedules. Although many schools start class earlier or end later during the four days they are in session, overall weekly time in school decreases by three to four hours,” and “as a result of those reductions, math scores decrease by 6 percent of a standard deviation and reading scores decrease by 4 percent of a standard deviation.”

A 2021 study by the RAND Corporation collected data from 36 districts in Idaho, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, as well as from Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota. Its conclusion: “The results point to trade-offs in the 4dsw model. Analysis of data from five states—Idaho, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota—indicates some evidence of educational harm: The test scores for 4dsw districts improved but did so more slowly than they would have if the same schools had maintained a 5dsw.”

The “trade-off” referred to another aspect of claims by proponents of a four-day school week. The JISD announcement cited results of surveys—one of parents and staff and one of teachers—who reportedly responded respectively by 64 percent and 84 percent in favor of the four-day week.

It is understandable that parents, especially those

living in rural regions where, as in Jasper, poverty is widespread—median income for households is \$38,000 and for families \$48,000—might see the four-day week in a positive light. The elimination of one day of bus service to and from far-flung locations might make a marginal difference in school funding priorities, which are paid for by taxes. In addition, on ranches and farms, students can work as extra hands to help out on Fridays.

For teachers and staff, the elimination of one day may appear to offer the promise of lessening the stress and pressures with which they have to contend: unreasonable administration dictates, poor pay and working conditions, shortages of supplies and up-to-date materials, the trauma and policy zigzags endured in relation to the still active COVID pandemic and others. The “bonuses,” though they will hardly compensate for years of insufficient salaries and will not go far with the galloping inflation rate, are nonetheless tempting.

However, the main motivation behind the four-day school week drive is not to enhance learning, improve academic performance, improve mental health, recruit quality educators or any of the other rationales provided by its proponents. It is the same as other “reforms” that have been promoted by the ruling class for decades: cutting costs.

Going back at least to the Reagan presidency and intensifying under succeeding Democratic and Republican administrations, the ruling class has advocated and carried out budget cuts, the charterization of schools, closures, layoffs, elimination of programs and other attacks in its campaign to dismantle what used to be a bedrock principle: the provision of universal public education.

Seen from the standpoint of the increasingly grasping—and crisis-ridden—financial elite, public education is an intolerable burden. In the eyes of the ruling class, education must be converted to a private “industry” devoted to maximizing profit through defunding, privatization and slashing of wages of education workers.

Moreover, curricula must prioritize subjects that contribute to profiteering and away from those that encourage students’ cultural development and critical thinking. The ruling class has no stake in producing well-rounded, thinking citizens who might question the

status quo and demand their democratic rights, including high-quality education; obedient workers who cannot imagine, much less mobilize, to change their lot are the goal.

Lastly, under the mantra of “there’s no money,” the ruling class requires that resources that should go to education, social services, infrastructure and other crucial social needs be diverted to endless imperialist war-making. Students who see a dismal future ahead of them can also be targeted by military recruiters.

Measures to redivide a shrinking pie, like the four-day school week, do not address these issues. They resolve nothing; in fact, they only encourage further assaults on education. Workers must demand their democratic right to free high-quality public education from preschool through college. They cannot rely on any section of the political establishment, Democrat, Republican, or other, to realize these aims.



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