

CCSD to consider shortening school week by one day

By Sarah Pridgeon, Sundance Times

Parents, students and staff appear to be in favor of moving the school schedule to a four-day week, says Superintendent Mark Broderson. Still in the early stages of discussion, the Crook County School District issued a survey to stakeholders to gauge their reaction to the idea.

“We sent the survey to all the parents of students, all the staff – cooks, custodians, teachers, principals, everybody – and we let the nine through eleventh grade students take it as well,” he says.

The technology used for the survey allowed the district to break down the results by type of stakeholder, location and other factors to see in detail how the various groups feel about the idea of shortening the school week. A total of 247 parents took the survey, as well as 125 certified staff members and 70 classifieds, and the results were largely positive.

The breakdown shows that the MK-8 staff were the top supporters of the idea with 77.8 percent of respondents in favor, while the lowest support came from Sundance elementary parents, the one group that fell below the 50 percent mark at 49.2 percent.

Comments on the survey were wide ranging. Among the positive reactions, students were both excited about an extra day at the weekend and keen on the idea of a day on which to secure a job.

Teachers liked the idea of dedicated professional development time that doesn't pull them out of the classroom and more time to plan lessons. Parents, 62 percent of whom were in favor, liked the idea of more time together as a family, an extra day for kids to recuperate from the school week and leaving Fridays for extra-curricular activities.

Among the negative comments, respondents pointed out that a four-day week would lengthen those days for the students, which could be overwhelming for younger kids. Some criticized the idea of the district saving money at the cost of its less well-paid employees and expressed concern over finding childcare on Fridays for parents who work.

Cost Savings

According to Broderson, the four-day week has not been suggested for financial reasons. At face value, it would seem that reducing the number of school days by 20 percent ought to lower the budget by the same amount.

“Realistically, it doesn't take 20 percent off your budget because you still have all your teachers working on those days and the hours you have to contract and meet with the students are the same,” he says.

In other words, though the number of days would drop, the district will still be statutorily obligated to offer the same number of teaching hours. The four remaining days would thus each become half an hour longer, ending around 3:50 p.m. at the secondary level.

This would remove the need for cooks in the building on Fridays and substitute teachers to replace the coaches who are pulled from their rooms on this day, resulting in some potential savings. Switching to the alternative calendar – a middle ground between the traditional structure and a four-day week that had 80 percent support from stakeholders – has in this way saved the district around \$5000 per month.

However, Broderson stresses, a four-day week does not bring guaranteed cost savings and is not the driving force behind the idea.

“We’re not sure how much money we’re going to save and there’s a wide range of savings out there. Some schools really focus on savings and they’ve been able to save a lot – but that was their goal,” he says. “Others have gone to four days and spent the money somewhere else, so they really don’t see savings. I suspect we’re going to be somewhere in the middle.”

Improved Fridays

Fridays in Crook County’s high schools are traditionally less academic than the rest of the week, says the superintendent, due to extra-curricular activities.

“So many of our kids are out on activities and so many of our teachers are our coaches. We have to bring in subs on that day and the classrooms are half empty,” he says.

On Fridays, he continues, almost every coach comes out of the classroom and all students involved in extra-curriculars do the same. While some teachers don’t schedule around activities, they must still catch those kids up on the subject matter at a later date.

“Our subs do a wonderful job, but they’re not the teacher. Also, instead of having 16 kids sitting at the desk, you have eight because half of them are at [activities], so whatever you teach on that day you have to come back and teach on Monday or you have a study hall,” he says.

Should the four-day week be implemented, the teachers would be in the school buildings on two Fridays per month, one of those to provide extra, one-on-one help for students who need it or an environment for kids to study on their own and the other geared towards professional development; lesson planning can also be done on these days. Teachers will be given the other two Fridays off.

Broderson notes that activities would not cease to be scheduled on week nights as planning games must be done cooperatively between 20 schools. There are also more basketball games in a basketball season, for example, than there are Fridays.

Though 60 percent of classified staff expressed support for a four-day week, Broderson is aware that some stakeholders are concerned about a cut to their hours.

“For the bus drivers only driving four days a week, we’re still going to have as many activities as we’ve had and we kind of run short on bus drivers for a lot of those. For the custodians, we’re going to have as many people in those buildings as we do now – and now, maybe they can get a little easier cleaning done on a Friday if it’s empty once in a while,” he says.

“I don’t see that changing a whole lot. As far as classroom paras, the requirements for how long a student needs to be at their desk are remaining the same.”

Family Freedom

Teachers are not the only ones who would have an extra day each week to make use of. For high school kids, Broderson says, Fridays can now be an opportunity to take a job, participate in extra-curricular activities, catch up on school work or spend the day with family.

“Families get another day together. High school kids are run pretty hard and elementary school kids too are wiped out by Friday. Now, they’ll be wiped out by Thursday night but they get another day at home,” he says.

Meanwhile, as the four remaining school days are now more vital than ever and students and teachers will need to make the absolute most of them, Fridays at home provide a time for other obligations that would ordinarily pull a kid out of the classroom.

“The school days become more valuable because there’s not as many of them, so you can’t waste them. We want to train our parents and our communities if we go this route that doctor and dentist appointments, shopping trips and whatever else should be scheduled on Fridays,” he says.

“The same goes with our staff – our goal is to keep our staff in the classroom.”

The superintendent does concede that childcare may become a difficulty for working parents.

“For every community that looks at a four-day week, daycare is probably one of the biggest battles that they start out with. It has worked out somehow in every community,” he says.

“The district is willing to work with parents and the high school is going to have a lot of students with free time on Fridays as well as paras and cooks and perhaps some bus drivers.”

Broderson points out that one possible downside to a four-day week that the district does not yet have an answer to is that at-risk kids would need to spend three days at home instead of two, which means no access on Fridays to the cafeteria.

“I don’t know the answer to that one. That’s one of the things that the communities will have to look at and be concerned about,” he says.

“We do Blessings in a Backpack and those are very popular and supported at the elementary level; maybe we would have to bring that up to the junior high level in some more of the buildings.”

Success Elsewhere

A four-day week is not a new idea, says the superintendent. In fact, it's something that many smaller schools have experimented with in neighboring areas.

"A lot of schools in Wyoming and western South Dakota, smaller schools, are on a four-day week and they've brought up discussions to go back to a five-day week and the communities have really rallied around remaining a four-day week," he says.

"They've been very successful, it's improved school climate, parents like it, the kids like it and it's been a good move for the schools that have gone in that direction."

Broderson has looked at articles, studies and literature investigating the effects of a four-day week, he says, including one dissertation looking at 27 schools in South Dakota. In general, he says, it appears that a shorter week does not have a negative effect on academic results in any way.

"The research shows that test scores go up a little bit and then they stabilize out to where they were. They don't drop. Participation and attendance stays up," he says.

Future Planning

Broderson stresses that this is not a decision that has already been made.

"The board hasn't decided one way or another which way they are going," he says.

With the survey results detailing the thoughts of stakeholders in hand, the board can discuss the idea in more detail, Broderson says. In the meantime, members of the community with ideas to share who were not included in the survey can email them for the district's consideration to ccsdsurvey@crook1.com.