

Teacher Job Satisfaction and Well-Being: Impact of School Calendar Design

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Abstract

Examining teachers' job satisfaction could be key in addressing recruitment and retention within the profession (Gangone, 2024). While this is a multi-faceted concept, one newly emerging aspect of teachers' work that is being examined is teachers' workload and how the design of the school calendar contributes to teachers' professional well-being. While there is not an abundance of recent research on this topic, some districts across the country are moving away from the traditional 180-day "summers off" calendar design and looking at structuring calendars that are more attractive for their school staff. This paper will explore the literature related to such school calendar designs as well as factors related to teacher job satisfaction. Then, we will highlight findings from our study in which we surveyed 120 teachers' perceptions of their job satisfaction, with particular focus on their perceptions of how their professional well-being is or may be impacted by their workloads as related to school calendars. Their perceptions indicate school calendars that allowed for more frequent breaks would encourage their satisfaction and retention, offering a unique concept to pursue for supporting retention in the field.

Keywords: Teacher retention; School calendars; Teacher Well being

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1. Introduction

Attracting and retaining teachers in the workforce is becoming increasingly difficult. While there have been several studies and reports related to why the decline of educational professionals is occurring (Gangone, 2024), no definitive solutions have been identified. Taking a very serious look at how we can make the profession more appealing and sustainable for educational professionals has certainly become a priority for those of us interested in the field of Education.

One such approach is to investigate the aspects of teachers' experience that contribute to their overall job satisfaction. While this is a multi-faceted concept, one newly emerging aspect of teachers' work that is being examined is teachers' workload and how the design of the school calendar contributes to teachers' professional well-being (Guibahar, 2020). While there is not an abundance of recent research on this topic, some districts across the country are moving away from the traditional 180-day "summers off" calendar design and looking at structuring calendars that are more attractive for their school staff. These districts identify changes to the school calendar as a way to cut costs, while also attracting and retaining their teachers (Irving, 2023).

Some examples of non-traditional school designs being explored in school districts across the country are "year-round" school calendars and calendar designs that provide more frequent breaks for teachers and students throughout the school year. There also seems to be some growing interest for schools to consider a four-day school week design. This paper will explore the literature related to such school calendar designs as well as factors related to teacher job satisfaction. Then, we will highlight findings from our study in which we examined 120 teachers' perceptions of their job satisfaction, with particular focus on their perceptions of how their professional well-being is or may be impacted by their workloads as related to school calendars.

2. Teacher Retention and Job Satisfaction

We are facing a critical issue in this nation involving the recruitment and retention of teachers. Data from a recent NCTQ report noted enrollment in teacher preparation programs in 2020-21 is only 70% of what it was in 2010-2011 (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023). In addition to the troubling issue of recruiting teachers, we are also facing a sharp decline in teacher retention in recent decades (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Sawchuk, 2016). Current attrition rates suggest that 20 to 30 percent of first-year teachers leave the field within the first year (Aud, et al. 2011; Ingersoll & Connor, 2009; Sutchter, et al., 2019). Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023) note that the pandemic has

further increased attrition by 17% in many cases. Most recently, Gangone (2024) published a report noting that there will be a global teacher shortage of nearly 44 million teachers by the year 2030. Examining factors of why teachers are not coming to and staying in the field is of paramount importance. One such aspect of this examination is to look at barriers to teachers' job satisfaction overall as a means of uncovering how to create a more sustainable work environment.

The degree to which teachers experience dissatisfaction with their work can rest on many factors (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2019; Hsieh, et al., 2022). Low salaries, poor working conditions, and inadequate preparation have been identified as leading the reasons for teachers not staying in the profession, creating a crisis in our field (Guha, et al., 2017b).

Examining reasons teachers are not satisfied with the profession is a critical issue to explore. This particular paper highlights a study looking at teachers' work environment, workload and the design of the calendar school year to determine the extent to which these play a role in teachers' professional satisfaction.

2.1 Factors influencing teachers' job satisfaction

Work Environment

The overall work/school environment has a strong impact on teachers' job satisfaction. School safety and an orderly school climate have been found to be influential factors related to teachers' and school staff's job satisfaction (Ker et al., 2023). Among work environment issues found to impact teacher satisfaction are the disciplinary climate of the school and teacher-student relationships (Zakaniya, 2020), administrative support (Lochmiller et al., 2024), and time allotment (Merrimack College Teacher Survey, 2023).

Teachers' Workload

Workloads and complexities associated with teachers' professional lives have increased over time (Thompson, et al., 2023). A recent survey, the "Teaching and Learning International Survey" (TALIS), sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, found that teachers work well over 50 hours a week, up to as much as 30 hours above their face-to-face classroom instruction, with work often involving weekend hours. Mielke also (2023) found that the median number of hours teachers work weekly is 54, well above a forty-hour work week. Also found through the TALIS, teachers reported their workload issues such as too much grading, too much lesson planning and administrative work as sources of "stress" in their professional lives. Keeping in mind that teachers are salaried with no overtime pay and are not granted any time such as a lunch break during the workday, and further noting the increasing demands of the profession, workload, and work intensity contribute to "time poverty" among teachers (Creagh, et al., 2023), creating dissatisfaction with their profession and no doubt driving some teachers to quit.

School calendar design as an influence

As noted above, one idea often proposed to alleviate some of the stressors in the school climate has been to explore alternative calendars. There are a variety of versions of modified school calendars, ranging from four-day school weeks to year-long versions. This interesting aspect of schools warrants further examination. Connolly (2023) suggests that since the pandemic, rethinking how we utilize the time in schools (school calendars and the use of teachers' time) is critical to retaining today's teachers. Hess (2023) recently posits that it is time for us to reconsider how schools organize time and become creative in our approaches to scheduling.

Year-round School Calendar

While much of the research thus far has focused on how iterations of school calendars impact student achievement, much of the research focusing on teachers' experience with school schedules has focused on teacher recruitment (Smith, 2011). Few studies have provided insight into how school calendars potentially impact teachers' job satisfaction, sense of professional well-being, and ultimately, teacher retention. Among those studies, Rule (2009) found that teachers in year-round schools rated their work environment more favorable than teachers working in schools with traditional calendars. Smith (2011) found that there are higher retention rates correlated with change from traditional to modified school calendars. These studies cite the more frequent school breaks, rather than the longer summer breaks, as reasons for this satisfaction.

Four-day School Calendar

According to a research brief published by the National Conference of School Legislatures, 850 of the nation's districts use a four-day schedule, with at least one such district found in at least 24 states (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). Four-day school weeks are more popular in rural school districts, however. Mortan (2023) found that roughly 90 percent of four-day school week calendars can be found in rural areas. Thompson,

et al. (2021) found that rural schools moving toward the design of a four-day school week do so to respond to challenges of dissipating school budgets and to address teachers and staff shortages. While most four-day schools hold classes on Mondays-Thursdays, some school districts have opted for Tuesdays-Fridays (Thompson et al., 2021). These four-day school weeks encourage teachers' satisfaction, potentially allowing teachers an extra day within the traditional work week to address other professional duties outside of teaching, to engage in professional/personal development activities, and reset. Peetz (2024) noted the move to a four-day week has been found attractive for recruiting teachers. Manion et al. (2021) found that districts adopting four-day school weeks were likely to see fewer teachers leaving for neighboring districts. The National Conference of State Legislatures noted that the benefits of four-day school weeks are cost efficiency, boosting teacher morale, and helping student attendance.

Related to teachers' perceptions and the potential impact of a four-day workweek on teachers' satisfaction, the Rand Study originally conducted in 2021 found that most teachers viewed a four-day workweek as a "job perk" and that it contributes to higher job satisfaction. Further, this study found that most administrators viewed the four-day workweek as a tool in recruitment and retention (Irving, 2023). In their examination of staff and faculty in a rural school adopting a four-day schedule Turner, et al. (2018) found greater staff morale and overall satisfaction.

The National Conference of State Legislatures noted there are some concerns related to this calendar design, including posing challenges for smaller kids with longer school days; childcare issues for working parents and food-insecurity for students not attending school an extra day (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). The research on the impact of four-day schools weeks indicates that there is not a great impact on student performance, however (Morton, 2023).

Given the studies that suggest teachers are potentially more satisfied with non-traditional calendar designs, it is worth continued examination of their impact on long-term teacher satisfaction and retention.

3. Methodology

In an effort to contribute to this line of inquiry, we developed an online survey for teachers to examine their perceptions of their working conditions and their perceptions of how school calendar design impacts or may potentially impact their job satisfaction. The survey design was carefully examined to be sure the questionnaire aligned with our overarching research questions. Through our survey, we sought to specifically address these questions: how do teachers perceive the school calendars influencing their sense of professional wellbeing and satisfaction? and do teachers believe they would be more professionally satisfied working within a traditional or non-traditional school calendar?

Our online survey was distributed throughout various local and national teacher organizations and through social media platforms. The target population was current classroom teachers in grades pk-12 grades. The survey garnered responses from 120 teachers. The demographics of the respondents are below. They represent a largely female population with more than 10 years of teaching experience. Most were currently teaching in rural, public-school settings. Most teachers (82%; n=120) in this study had not experienced a calendar design change in recent years. This sampling represents a fairly large sample population. The demographic makeup of participants in the survey was overwhelmingly white (85%; n=105) and female (86%; n=119), which aligns with the predominance of white female teachers in k-12 settings nationally. Additionally, the majority of participants reported teaching at the elementary school level (58%; n=119). Middle school teachers made up the next largest category (40%), with High school teachers right behind at 39% and preschool teachers being the smallest group at 13% in our sample. We were surprised to find that 46% of our participants identified as teaching in a rural school. Suburban teachers made up the next largest segment at 36%, while urban teachers were only 19% of our participants in this survey. Unsurprisingly, 83% of our participants reported working in public school systems, while the remaining 17% identified as either in private (12%) or charter (5%) schools. The majority of our participants had also been teaching more than 10 years (56%) at the time of the survey with those teaching 6-10 years representing 21% of our participants; making participants with over 5 years in the profession 77% of our participants. Participants reporting 3-5 years in the teaching profession constituted 14% of our participants, while beginning teachers with less than 2 years of teaching were only 9% of our participants. Although a smaller sample size, we disaggregated the data to compare those with less than 5 years of experience (23% of participants) in the teaching field with those who had more than 10 years of experience (56% of participants) to determine if there were significant differences in the perspective of novice vs veteran teachers.

Through the survey, we asked a series of questions related to career satisfaction and working conditions (especially as influenced by the school calendar). This series ended by asking "what school calendar do you

perceive to be the most satisfying” and an open-ended question providing an opportunity for the participant to explain why this calendar is most appealing. The final section first ascertained whether the participant had actually experienced a 4-day workweek followed by 20 statements with a 5-point scale asking participants to rate their level of agreement with each statement. These 20 statements were adapted from (Troeger, 2021, pp. 157-160), a mixed methods survey used to assess teacher job satisfaction. The qualitative, open-ended data were analyzed through thematic coding to determine common threads.

4. Findings

The survey was divided into 3 parts: demographics described above; general perceptions of job satisfaction as it might be influenced by the school calendar with a Likert scale, multiple choice, and one qualitative question; and questions specifically about a 4-day workweek option. In this final section, participants were asked twenty Likert scale questions focusing on their experiences with a 4-day workweek.

In the general, regarding the perceptions of the relationship between job satisfaction and the school calendar, participants indicated that the school calendar does contribute to job satisfaction. Seventy-five percent of participants (n= 120) indicated agreement with the statement, “The school calendar in my district/school contributes to my job satisfaction.” Participants also indicated overall satisfaction with “the working conditions at my current school” and “in my profession.” These responses demonstrated statistical significance with the length of time teaching, indicating that participants with more than five years of teaching are also satisfied with the profession as well as the general working conditions.

The third part of the survey asked participants their perception of the 4-day workweek. We developed two datasets from this part of the survey. The first dataset included all participants who responded to the 20 questions. The second dataset included 6 respondents who responded to the 20 questions and also affirmed that they had experienced the 4-day workweek.

4.1 First Dataset

Participants were asked to use a 5-point scale to determine their level of agreement with a series of 20 questions aimed at ascertaining their perspective on some of the most commonly claimed advantages or disadvantages of a 4-day workweek calendar. For example, on the advantages side of the 4-day workweek were statements such as “allows me to be more efficient with my time,” “brings a better work-life balance,” “motivates me to make every minute count,” “keeps work interesting,” and “keeps me interested and motivated.” While statements indicating disadvantages of a 4-day workweek included: “makes me exhausted by the end of the day,” “my day is harder to manage,” and “students don’t seem to settle in before the workweek is over.”

The first dataset includes all participants who responded to these questions. Each positive and negative statement received support across the spectrum from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” For the most part, if respondents disagreed with positive or negative statements, they did so strongly. When respondents agreed with statements, they expressed various levels of support, from agree to strongly agree. Agree and strongly agree carried between 40-50% of the responses for most positive assertions about the 4-day workweek. For example, “improves my working conditions at school” (49%), “brings me a better work-life balance” (65%) and “allows me to be more efficient with my time” (54.5%) demonstrated overwhelming support for these statements. Statements that indicated possible disadvantages with a 4-day workweek were also generally “agreed” with or “strongly agreed” with but the proportions were much lower. For example, the statement “the longer workday makes it seem like the day will never end” received 40% agree/strongly agree, 28% neither agree nor disagree, and 32% disagree/strongly disagree. But, with only three exceptions (4-day week “allows me to be more efficient with my time” (11%), brings “better work-life balance” (15%), and leaves me “exhausted at the end of the day” (12%)), neither agree nor disagree carried between 28%-40% of the responses. Taken together, this data indicates general agreement with the potential advantages of a 4-day week as well as the potential disadvantages of a 4-week. This data, coupled with the 47% of participants in the whole dataset who identified the 4-day workweek as “the most satisfying,” indicates that in spite of potential disadvantages, teachers would like the 4-day calendar.

4.2 Second Dataset

As noted above only 6 respondents checked “yes” when asked if they had experienced a 4-day workweek either currently or in the past, placing them in the second dataset in this third section of the survey. We examined these surveys closely. All of these participants are white women with more than 10 years of teaching. They represent across the spectrum of teaching in rural (3), suburban (2), and urban (1). One participant teaches in a private school, while all of the others teach in public schools. Three of these participants indicated frequent breaks as

their most satisfying school calendar design, two indicated the 4-day workweek, and one indicated the traditional calendar as best. Four participants justified their choice of the most satisfying calendar on the basis of breaks being “well-timed” or reducing teacher feelings of being overwhelmed. *Unlike the first dataset, this second dataset prioritized frequent breaks over a 4-day workweek.*

The participants were also presented with a series of commonly expressed potential advantages and disadvantages of the 4-day workweek and were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with these statements on a 5-point scale. Their answers, after having experienced a 4-day workweek, provide some interesting datapoints.

The participants generally agree that the 4-day week “allows me to be more efficient with my time” (3 strongly agree, 1 agree, 1 neutral, and 1 strongly disagree). But, on the other hand, they concurred that they still “run out of time to get work done on a 4-day week schedule” (2 strongly agree, 2 agree, 1 neutral, and 1 strongly disagree). They also agree that the 4-day workweek brings a “better work-life balance” but the longer days leave them exhausted. Nonetheless, despite perhaps more realistic assessment of pros and cons of the 4-day workweek, 4 out of 6 agree (2) or strongly agree (2) that the 4-day workweek improves “working conditions at the school,” 3 out of 6 agree that the 4-day workweek “keeps me interested and innovative,” while 5 out of 6 agree that the 4-day workweek “motivates me to make every minute count” (4 agree, 2 strongly agree and 1 neither agree nor disagree).

The 6 participants who had experienced a 4-day workweek did not have consensus around the following positive statements: “allows me to get to know my students better or helps meet students’ needs,” “allows me to be more creative in lesson planning” or “develop new teaching methods.” Rather, the picture that emerges from this second dataset is a more realistic picture that values the 4-day workweek (especially if it permits frequent breaks) as a move that helps motivate teachers and that generally improves working conditions. But this dataset also recognizes there are trade-offs in terms of the longer day being more grueling on a daily basis, while offering longer respite on weekends.

4.3 Qualitative Findings

In addition to the quantitative parts of the survey, teachers were asked an open-ended question to justify the selection of which calendar design they believed would be most satisfactory. As noted above, 47% of participants marked the 4-day weeks as their preference. Participants were asked: How do you think the calendar design you selected would contribute to your job satisfaction? Responses to this question were coalesced into 4 key categories: reducing stress, creating a better work-life balance, better retention of teachers, positive influence on students and classroom environment. The table below details participant responses to this open-ended question:

Table 1 Qualitative Findings (resulting from thematic coding)

Lessens Stress	Promotes work life balance	Encourages Retention	Impacts students and classroom
<p>“More frequent breaks would help with teachers being <i>overwhelmed</i>”</p> <p>“Would provide time to recharge”</p> <p>“<i>Less burnout</i>”</p> <p>“Allows time to reset and rest”</p> <p>“Have time to relax and reflect”</p> <p>“It would provide an opportunity to refresh and be prepared mentally to teach students”</p> <p>“Increase productivity,</p>	<p>“I spend <i>all day Sunday preparing</i> for school. I respond to emails or send emails that I didn’t have time to get to prior”</p> <p>“With frequent breaks, teachers are able to take time for their families and themselves”</p> <p>“A closer work-life balance”</p> <p>“It would give us more time to plan to prepare for the following week”</p> <p>“Because having consistent 3-day breaks would give us time to take care of our</p>	<p>“The four-day work week is more sustainable for the <i>longevity of my career</i>”</p> <p>“There is <i>less burnout</i>”</p> <p>“<i>Lesson burnout</i> of both teacher and students”</p> <p>“It would reduce <i>teacher burnout and improve meaningful learning</i> experience”</p> <p>“Long summer breaks <i>allow time for volunteer service and travel and a summer job to pay off debt</i>”</p>	<p>“I believe students need more instructional time throughout the year. I feel we lose too many skills while out on summer break”</p> <p>“It is a good time for reflection as well as job satisfaction. The students would probably benefit as well”</p> <p>“<i>Fewer problem behaviors</i> from children and more energy to explore and learn”</p> <p>“Year-round schooling would allow for more breaks throughout the year (other than just spring) and would</p>

<p>increase self-care opportunities, <i>reduce stress</i></p> <p><i>"The job is extremely stressful, and we need more breaks"</i></p> <p>"Frequent breaks allow teachers to recharge and help break up the year into manageable chunks"</p> <p>"An extra weekend day would be good for mental health <i>relieve burnout</i>"</p> <p>"Help the stress we endure"</p> <p>"Having breaks would allow for better mental health, lesson behaviors in the classroom and create an overall better environment"</p> <p>"The four-day design will allow for self-care and creativity"</p> <p>"Frequent breaks throughout the 10-month school year give teachers a few days to mentally reset"</p> <p><i>"Stop me from being overwhelmed; wish we started at 9 am"</i></p>	<p>responsibilities and ourselves. Two days is enough time to do one or the other"</p> <p><i>"More time to plan"</i></p> <p>"It would be helpful to schedule my appointments and take care of things for my home"</p> <p>"Having an extra day to focus on <i>professional development, planning, paperwork, grading, etc.</i> would allow me to enjoy my weekends"</p> <p><i>"Having 1 day to catch up on the paperwork"</i></p> <p>"I would be able to get more reset and be at my best during the work week. <i>I am often exhausted</i>"</p> <p>"I would have more than just Saturday on my weekend since <i>I spend Sunday working</i>"</p> <p>"It would leave more <i>time for planning</i>"</p> <p>"Having more time on the weekends <i>so I am not drowning</i>"</p> <p>"Would allow teachers an opportunity to focus on <i>administrative and leadership tasks</i>"</p> <p><i>"Not having to take off for doctor appointments or personal business"</i></p> <p>"I spend 40 hours a week at work officially, <i>but often work unpaid</i> outside of this"</p>	<p>allow <i>less 'summer loss'</i> for students"</p> <p>"Having multiple breaks and a short summer seems to positively <i>effect knowledge retention</i>. Which, in turn, decreases the amount of <i>time spent reviewing information</i>"</p> <p>"Breaks are needed to help <i>students and teachers to rejuvenate mind</i>, body and souls"</p> <p>"It would give both me and my students more time outside of the classroom, which I think would be good for mental health and emotional well-being. Students also spend a lot of time outside of class at school. <i>A 4-day school week would give students and teachers a better work/school life balance</i>"</p>
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5. Discussion

As we examine ways that we can change the current trajectory of teacher recruitment and retention, examining the work of teachers and the ways schedules impact their level of satisfaction is one area to explore. Through our study, we noted that teachers generally perceived calendars that provided more time for them through a four-day work schedule or frequent breaks to be most professionally satisfying. By far, the most popular calendar design is the 4-day workweek (47%), with frequent breaks coming in second place (25%) and traditional calendars trailing behind with 19%. Interestingly, year-round calendars were the least popular with only 8% of the participants checking that box, but the year-round schedule is the one that most easily facilitates frequent breaks.

These findings correspond with the research noting that teachers and staff were found to have higher morale when moving to non-traditional school calendar designs (Rule, 2009). Our study also found that school calendar designs were perceived to impact the stress levels of teachers, impacting their work-life balance, positively impacting student performance and classroom environment, and impacting their long-term retention in the field.

Key takeaways from our survey study include the fact that teachers believe a 4-day workweek would decrease stress, reduce burnout and thereby allow them to continue teaching for a longer period of time. Clearly, teachers are yearning for less stressful working conditions and a better work-life balance. They believe the 4-day work week and frequent breaks would help with these concerns. In general, teachers also seem to believe that a 4-day work week would be a panacea increasing motivation, efficiency, creativity and innovation; as well as helping them get to know students better and better meet student needs. But, when observing a small sample of teachers (6) who have experienced a 4-day work week, a more realistic picture emerges. Interestingly, motivation remains strong on the list of plusses, as does better working conditions and better work-life balance. But, increased creativity, efficiency and innovation may not be related to a 4-day work week. Nonetheless, this smaller group also still favors a move to a 4-day work week and/or frequent breaks. Further study, with a larger sample of teachers who have experienced various non-traditional calendars for example, is warranted. But, we believe a strong argument already exists for recognizing the calendar towards a 4-day work week and frequent breaks as ways to give teachers a change they want and a change that would motivate them, thereby increasing morale as Turner has previously found (Turner, 2018) and as Irving has found, influencing teachers' satisfaction in ways such as modifying the calendar impacts teacher recruitment and retention (Irving, 2023). The findings from this study support and expand findings from earlier studies (Connolly, 2023; Creagh et al., 2023; Irving, 2023; Ker et al., 2022) that suggest that modifying the school calendar can impact teachers' job satisfaction overall and may influence their decisions to remain in the profession.

6. Conclusion

As educational leaders and policy makers explore making the profession of teaching more attractive and sustainable, exploring change through calendar design may prove instrumental. As this study suggests, teachers find modified school calendars attractive and perceive academic calendars that lend themselves to more frequent breaks throughout the school year as a potential source of professional satisfaction. The findings from this study have served to answer questions around teachers' perceptions of calendar design on their satisfaction. Based on this study, it would be recommended to examine teachers' experiences with modified calendars as its impact on long term retention as future research.

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