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| Busing costs high, school district  considers four-day week  Shift could require law change; state education chief skeptical  **By James Vaznis** | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 15, 2014    MATTHEW CAVANAUGH FOR THE GLOBE |

**Students at Mohawk Trail Regional High School in Shelburne Falls headed for their buses after school.**

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It is an idea that would disrupt parents’ lives, delight students and teachers, and even save taxpayers money: a four-day school week.

In Western Massachusetts, the Mohawk Trail Regional School District is exploring the approach, hoping to save the money it costs to ship students across a district that encompasses 250 square miles, more than five times the size of Boston.

Superintendent Michael Buoniconti estimates the shorter week could save about $400,000 annually, much of it in transportation costs. A bus ride to school can take longer than an hour.

“That’s big money for a district like Mohawk,” said Buoniconti. “Because of that potential, I think it’s worth taking a look at it.”

Across the nation, a small but growing number of rural districts facing tight finances and the challenge of busing students many miles have embraced the four-day school week. In Colorado, a hotbed of the movement, about half of the school districts have adopted a four-day week in some or all schools.

But in Massachusetts, where state leaders have long been proud of a reputation for high academic standards, cutting a day of classes could be a tough sell. The move would require approval by state officials because Massachusetts law mandates at least 180 days of schooling a year and encourages even more days, if possible. That law may have to be changed to accommodate the request, Buoniconti said.

Mitchell Chester, the state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, is not a fan of the idea.

“Commissioner Chester is not inclined to approve such a request,” JC Considine, a department spokesman, said in an e-mail. “But the commissioner did tell Superintendent Buoniconti that he would discuss the matter with staff and get back to him.

“Time in the classroom is essential for all students, and, across the Commonwealth, we are looking for opportunities to expand teaching and learning,” Considine said.

Buoniconti stressed that school district leaders are merely researching the idea and that no formal proposal has been devised. But he said that if his district and residents decide to pursue a four-day school week, the potential shift would include lengthening school days so students would receive the same number of hours of instruction as they do over five days.

Mohawk is not the first district in Massachusetts to examine a four-day school week. Many districts bounced the idea around during the recession in the early 1990s as a cost-saving measure, said Thomas Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents.

“It really never went anywhere,” Scott said. “The more people looked at it and talked about it, the more that other issues emerged, like day care for children.”

Holyoke, perhaps, came the closest to implementing the change. Reeling from voter rejection of a property-tax override, the city’s School Committee approved a plan in 1991 to move to a four-day school week. But the state Board of Education threatened to sue and withhold state aid, prompting Holyoke to reverse course.

Research has mostly shown little variation in achievement among students who go to school four days or five days a week. Typical of those findings is a Colorado Department of Education report in 2011, which found districts with shorter weeks performed similarly on state standardized tests to those with traditional weeks.

The Colorado report offered one possible explanation for this: All students, regardless of the number of days they attend each week, must complete the same number of instructional hours annually. That means schools with four-day weeks hold classes for 7.5 hours each day instead of the traditional six.

With little apparent impact on student achievement, education policy advisers have recommended that districts pursue a four-day week for reasons other than academics, such as reducing operating costs. Even then, savings can be limited.

The Education Commission of the States, a national education policy organization in Denver, issued a report three years ago that found the impact on a school district’s overall budget is somewhere between 0.4 percent and 2.5 percent. The biggest savings tend to be in transportation and utilities, while salaries and benefits, the largest portion of school budgets, tend to remain about the same.

The savings, however, can still add up. The report found, for instance, that a 2 percent reduction in the Pueblo County School District 70 in Colorado yielded savings of $1.1 million.

Mohawk has been struggling financially for years. The district, on the Vermont border, serves 1,000 students from nine towns: Ashfield, Buckland, Colrain, Heath, Plainfield, Shelburne, Charlemont, Hawley, and Rowe. About a decade ago, Mohawk considered closing some elementary schools; nearly every town has one within its borders. But residents objected, not wanting to lose a sense of community.

The district, Buoniconti said, ultimately saved money when the state allowed municipalities to join together to buy health insurance. But costs are rising again, most notably in busing.

Buoniconti said the toughest sell could be to parents, who may be worried about child- care arrangements on the weekday that school is not in session.

“Anytime significant change is introduced there usually is quite a bit of resistance,” said Buoniconti. “I have no idea how the community feels at this point.”

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**What is your opinion on this issue? According to the article and your own thoughts, what are the pros and cons of the 4-day School Week? How do you think it would affect your school/schedule? Why do you think it hasn’t caught on yet? Write a 5-7 sentence paragraph outlining your views.**