

Here's a question Idaho would rather not ask

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In 2006, 10 Idaho school districts and two charter schools placed close to 8,200 students on a four-day week.

Thanks to former Gov. - and now U.S. Sen. - Jim Risch's meddling, schools lost stable property tax support just as the Great Recession made state revenues wobbly. Idaho public education has yet to recover.

So the list of school systems hoping to save a few dollars by converting to a four-day week expanded to 43 of Idaho's 115 school districts. Virtually all are rural. Among them are Culdesac, Highland, Orofino and Salmon River. Also included are nine charter schools.

Attending those schools are 26,881 students - or 9.1 percent of Idaho's student body. That's a larger enrollment - and a higher percentage of the overall student population - than found in any of Idaho's neighboring states.

In a state that has debated charter schools and waged back-and-forth battles over the role of technology in the classroom, nobody has critiqued the four-day school week.

Not Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

Not the State Board of Education.

Not former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna nor his successor, Sherri Ybarra.

Not Idaho Business for Education, a statewide group of pro-education business executives.

Not the Legislature's Office of Performance Evaluations, which turned a spotlight on teacher recruitment and retention and the failed Schoolnet program.

Not the chairmen of the legislative education committees, Rep. Reed DeMordaunt, R-Eagle, and Sen. Dean Mortimer, R-Idaho Falls.

That is, until Idaho Education News' Kevin Richert and Clark Corbin as well as Idaho Public Television's Melissa Davlin and Seth Ogilvie went to work.

They learned:

- Savings rarely materialized. Most of a school budget goes into paying educators - and they earn the same money working four 10-hour days as they would staffing five eight-hour days.

Since the state of Idaho pays 85 percent of the transportation costs, it draws most of the savings if buses stay idle one extra day a week.

In small towns, schools get used on Fridays - and weekends - whether classes are held or not. So the lights and heat stay on.

That leaves the staff - the people who drive the buses, clean the schools and serve the food.

Cut their hours and benefits and you might save 10 percent - but it means hardship for those workers as well as the local economy.

Don't cut their hours and benefits and you are left with about 1 percent savings.

- Inertia is setting in. Teachers like the schedule. In fact, rural districts have used this feature as a recruitment tool. Parents enjoy the convenience of having their children free on Fridays.

And students - especially those active in sports or with after-school jobs - prefer the freedom.

- What about the acid test? Does the four-day week hurts academic performance?

Nobody knows.

Since Idaho is the national guinea pig, it can't turn to other states for advice.

Test scores are inconclusive. On the Idaho Smarter-Balanced Assessment Consortium test, 32 of the four-day week districts performed below state averages. However, in a state that has plowed through so many variations of its standardized achievement tests, you can't draw accurate comparisons.

Still, no one believes switching to a four-day week enhances a child's education. Were it otherwise, wouldn't Idaho's larger, better-funded urban districts would have joined this trend?

Consult long-time educators and they'll ask why standardized test scores are not higher in rural schools. With fewer resources, those schools are essentially sticking to the core subjects the tests measure.

Just as the Idaho Education News and Idaho Public TV journalists engaged this subject, Otter switched course and called for a review. For the sake of argument, suppose that inquiry confirms the suspicion that education works better for more students in a five-day setting.

Getting nearly 27,000 students back on track will force the state to cough up money that it has been so far been unwilling to spend.

Could that be why these questions have gone unasked for so long?

