



**Testimony to NYS Senate Committee on Education
By the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers
December 10, 2008**

Senator Saland, Committee members and staff. My name is Richard Longhurst and I represent the New York State Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. with 356,000 volunteer members across New York State. As we approach a new budget year faced with unprecedented fiscal challenges, we wish to commend you for inviting dialogue regarding flexible and creative approaches to structuring school calendars. As New York State's largest child advocacy organization, we approach the current fiscal challenge with two primary principles in mind:

1. Protect NY's investment in the learning opportunities that today's youth will need to succeed in tomorrow's world.
2. Keep the decisions for determining how educational services should be structured in the hands of local communities.

With those goals in mind, the discussion arena needs to be wide open. First and foremost, we believe that decisions to implement a flexible school calendar should be made locally. We further believe that changing the school calendar can be only one of a number of key discussions, especially noting that more than 70% of all school costs are related to staffing. We especially encourage you to consider the operational realities that schools, parents and communities would face as a result of significant change and invite dialogue (as you are doing here) to identify our concerns. Here are some of our thoughts.

Concerns

1. Schools don't exist in a vacuum. While one school may adopt a four day week, transportation would still be required for students attending private schools, vocational or special service programs out of district that continue to function on a five day schedule. As studies in other states have found, such challenges, however, are greater in urban and suburban environments than in very rural districts.
2. With extra curricular activities related to sports, music, performing arts and use of facilities by community groups, many schools are in use seven days a week. Restricting such use to four days would require coordinating schedules with neighboring schools and community groups.
3. In today's world, many, if not most parents work outside the home. A shortened school week would create difficulty with adequate availability of child care. In addition, non school activities would need to be planned with consideration of such items as transportation and food service and staffing needs.
4. Serious attention would need to be given to what students do and where they do it during time that school is not in session.
5. Most employee contracts contain language that defines both the work day and the instructional day. Any changes would be subject to collective bargaining.

6. New York State finances schools based on days of attendance. Legislation would be required to permit financial support based on hours of attendance.
7. Planning time is critical. It is unrealistic to adopt alternate schedules in May and expect to implement an entirely new instructional plan in September. Major change would require significant planning time once all parties have agreed on what such change should look like.
8. The Regents are preparing to ratchet up the standards in order that NY's children will be able to compete in a globalized market. Keeping this in mind, how would cutting instructional days affect our ability to assure that all students are able to successfully reach these standards.
9. Adopting a four day week implies a longer school day. It cannot be assumed that existing daily instruction can simply be increased.

School districts have gone through similar discussions during the energy crisis of the 1970s and more recently in Buffalo and Rochester. We should examine and learn from those experiences. Changes to the school calendar were considered and largely rejected. Many other decisions such as elimination of lighting and reduction of fresh air intake were misguided, leaving schools to cope with the results twenty or thirty years later. Planning new strategies must consider the lessons from these discussions as well as those from the 17 states where some school districts have adopted a four day week.

In summary, we conclude that a flexible school week is not a viable option as a cost savings strategy. We believe that immediate attention, however, should be given to those concepts which promise to contain or reduce costs in the short term without jeopardizing the quality of education currently available to our children.

We again thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion.