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Asymmetric School Weeks

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Public Policy Institute for Wales

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Summary

- The former Minister for Education and Skills asked the PPIW to convene a workshop to bring together a select group of experts with senior Welsh Government representatives to discuss asymmetric school weeks.
- There are three main reasons for adopting an asymmetric school week: opportunities for financial savings; improved opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers; and dedicated time for enrichment activities for children.
- The most common concerns include: access to childcare, the impact of the length of the school day, transport availability and the potential loss of extracurricular activities.
- Overall, the evidence base on asymmetric school week schedules is limited. While there is some anecdotal information about the potential advantages and disadvantages of asymmetric school weeks from case studies, there is very little systematic research on the impact.
- If a decision is made to pursue an asymmetric school week in Wales, steps need to be taken to ensure that it is done in a way that maximises the potential benefits and minimises the potential risks. Among other considerations, the workshop discussion suggested:
 - A process of consultation with parents, teachers and pupils would be essential. This would need to clearly outline the objectives and the potential benefits, and explore local challenges with a view to developing potential solutions (e.g. around transport provision).
 - As part of the same consultation process, there would be value in mapping and understanding local provision of childcare, the potential supply of extracurricular activities, and the implications for transport provision.
 - The development and implementation of an asymmetric week should be designed to enable measurement of impact. This would require careful thought at an early stage, and there could be value in gathering and analysing data from schools which have already implemented an asymmetric week.
- The workshop suggested that there is appetite for further exploration of how and whether asymmetric school weeks would work in Wales. However, while an asymmetric school week might enable more opportunities for CPD or enrichment activities, putting a new structure in place is unlikely to have a positive effect unless the parents, families and school leadership and culture are supportive of the change and overarching objective.

Introduction

The Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW) works closely with Ministers to identify their evidence needs and provide them with timely independent expert advice and analysis. The former Minister for Education and Skills asked the PPIW to convene a workshop to bring together a select group of experts with senior Welsh Government representatives to discuss asymmetric schools weeks.

An asymmetric school week includes various start and finish times with some longer days and some shorter days with coordinated pupil free time. The most common asymmetric school week structure comprises four longer days and a short half day, but other patterns are also used. It does not necessarily result in a change in the total hours of instructional time.

The Welsh Government are committed to improving school attainment and experiences. In the coming five years, the education system in Wales will undergo a significant programme of reform intended to fundamentally change the way that it operates. This will be against a backdrop of further austerity which, even if education budgets are protected, will put a strain on the education system. As a result it is the perfect time to explore how Wales can use its teaching workforce and instructional school time most effectively. Positive reports of the implementation of asymmetric school weeks in several Scottish local authorities suggest that the approach is worth exploring in Wales.

Specifically, the former Minister was interested to understand:

1. the benefits and concerns associated with asymmetric school weeks;
2. examples of asymmetric school weeks and how effective they have been in achieving the objectives they were designed for; and
3. alternative strategies for freeing up teacher time for school improvement activities and continuing professional development (CPD) that contribute to breaking the link between poverty and attainment and improving enrichment.

This report summarises the key messages from our rapid review and an expert workshop held in May 2016 attended by practitioners and academics plus representatives from Parents Want A Say, Unions, Governors Wales, the WLGA and Welsh Government (see Annex 1 for a list of participants). It begins by discussing the perceived benefits and concerns associated with asymmetric school weeks and summarising the three primary objectives identified at the workshop. It goes on to elucidate some of the factors that need to be considered if further exploration is carried out, drawing on examples from England and Scotland.



Potential Benefits and Concerns

Overall, the evidence base on asymmetric school week schedules is limited. While there is some anecdotal information about the potential advantages and disadvantages of asymmetric school weeks from case studies, there is very little systematic research on the impact.

Based on previous consultations and the workshop discussion, the potential benefits and typical concerns associated with asymmetric school week schedules can roughly be grouped according to the potential effects on students; teachers and support staff; families and communities; and school operations and finance.

The effects on students in Wales

Potential benefits

- Advocates suggest that some shorter school days with coordinated pupil free time (e.g. pupil free afternoon) might result in increased time for pupils to:
 - engage in extracurricular activities;
 - take on part-time work;
 - spend quality time with family and friends;
 - relax;
 - attend personal appointments without missing school.
- Advocates also suggest that coordinated pupil free time could lead to more effective CPD, improved staff well-being and thus better teaching and consequently pupil performance (see below potential benefits for teachers).
- Depending on the structure of the asymmetric school week, shorter school lunches have been reported to reduce bad behaviour and bullying in some schools. (However, this could potentially be achieved without the move to an asymmetric school week).

Concerns

- However, there are concerns that some longer school days could lead to:
 - a reduction in opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities during shorter lunch breaks and/or after school on longer days;



- fatigued pupils and thus reduced capacity for learning and quality of education¹;
 - an increased likelihood of pupils travelling home from school in the dark during the Winter months.
- There are also concerns that some shorter school days could also result in increased truancy. A representative from the Scottish Borders suggested that there was anecdotal reporting of more wealthy parents taking their children out of school on the shorter day (Friday) to go on holiday for the weekend.
 - The workshop discussion also raised the concern about how children with difficult home lives would be affected by more time at home on some days. It was suggested that schools would need to think hard about how to provide for vulnerable children.

The effects on teachers and school staff in Wales

Potential benefits

- Advocates suggest that some shorter school days with coordinated pupil free time (e.g. a pupil free afternoon) might result in increased time for teacher training, development sessions and cross-school working groups, potentially leading to improved CPD and thus improved teaching.
- Furthermore, teachers and support staff could experience improved well-being through, for example, greater flexibility to schedule personal appointments on shorter days.

Concerns

- School staff with children attending schools adopting a different asymmetric school week schedule/ not adopting an asymmetric school week schedule may encounter issues with childcare.

¹ This concern is particularly high for primary school pupils. A rapid review of the literature found no research exploring the impact of asymmetric school weeks on academic achievement. Nonetheless, the impact of timetabling changes on academic achievement are minimal. According to the Education Endowment Foundation's teaching and learning toolkit on teaching 5-16 year olds, extending the length of the school day (in a bid to extend overall instructional time) is an approach which can be used to increase academic achievement, with some evidence that disadvantaged pupils benefit disproportionately (see <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/extending-school-time/>). Critically, research suggests that the amount of time spent in school is much less important than how the available time is spent and on which subject, what methods of teaching and learning are used, how strong the curriculum is, and the quality of teachers.

The effects on families and the wider community in Wales

Potential benefits

- Some shorter school days may result in increased family time.

Concerns

- Various start and finish times might result in childcare requirement issues for parents. This was the biggest concern for parents during the Scottish Borders consultation. A representative from the Scottish Borders suggested that the change to an asymmetric school week did not result in the need for more childcare but did affect the time at which it was needed (less was required Monday – Thursday, but more was required on a Friday after the change).
- Various start and finish times might result in transportation issues.
- There are concerns that some shorter school days could also result in older pupils being left with nothing to do and thus an increased opportunity for some pupils to engage in risky behaviours.

The effects on school operations and finances in Wales

Potential benefits

- Advocates suggest that some shorter school days with coordinated pupil free time (e.g. a pupil free afternoon) might result in increased time for teacher training, development sessions and cross-school working groups, potentially leading to:
 - increased joint planning;
 - greater collaboration between schools;
 - efficiencies achieved through delivering CPD for staff and holding meetings outside of pupil contact time e.g. fewer teachers being released from as many classes to attend meetings or training, leading to:
 - greater consistency in the classroom; and
 - less of a requirement for supply teachers and therefore reduced spending (but potentially fewer teacher jobs).

During consultations in Scotland, the most common concerns associated with the move to an asymmetric school week included childcare, length of the school day, transport and the potential loss of extracurricular activities. However, the workshop discussion suggested that



concerns regarding childcare and transport should be manageable, and would be worth overcoming if an asymmetric school week structure promises to improve schools' primary objective: to educate. Nevertheless, the impact of school week structures are hard to measure.

If a decision is made to pursue an asymmetric school week in Wales, steps need to be taken to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks. The workshop discussion covered this to some extent but further work is needed.

Some Lessons from Existing Practice

The workshop identified three main objectives for an asymmetric school week:

1. improved Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for teachers;
2. enrichment activities for pupils; and
3. opportunities for financial savings.

This section of the report draws on examples from schools in Scotland and England to explore how effective they have been in achieving these objectives. It also summarises some of the key messages that came out of the workshop discussion.

Developing time for CPD in Edinburgh

Advocates suggest that some shorter school days with coordinated pupil free time (e.g. a pupil free afternoon) might result in increased time for teacher training, development sessions and cross-school working groups.

Since 1987, schools in Edinburgh have had the opportunity to organise the statutory pupil hours into four and a half days (closing at lunchtime on a Wednesday or Friday) (The City of Edinburgh Council, 2004). The rationale behind this was for Edinburgh's schools to take advantage of development time enabling teachers or whole staff to take part in CPD activities on the pupil free afternoon. The authority's HM Inspection of Education Functions, undertaken in March 2003, stated that, "the arrangements of school hours to create one afternoon free from teaching provided opportunities for staff development. However, as there was not a consistent pattern across the Authority, this limited the most effective use of this time" (The City of Edinburgh Council, 2004). Indeed, a 2005 review called for the asymmetric school week to be retained and the allocation of the half day be standardised to a Friday to ease the pressure on parents with children at more than one school, increasing opportunities for

collaboration across schools and enabling equal access to training opportunities for all staff (Aberdeen City Council, 2008).

In addition to creating time for CPD, anecdotal evidence from Edinburgh identifies a reduction in staff absenteeism since the implementation of asymmetric school weeks in some schools, thus reducing substitute teacher costs (Aberdeen City Council, 2008). Common closure arrangements have also provided opportunities for school to school, cluster or cross authority working (The City of Edinburgh Council, 2005). Nonetheless start and finish times still vary across the local authority. Schools in Edinburgh may or may not be closed to pupils on shorter days with subsidised childcare provided in some schools. Indeed, some schools and/or pupils are taking advantage of the free afternoon by running and attending school clubs or sporting activities.

The anecdotal success of the asymmetric school week arrangement in Edinburgh has resulted in several other Scottish local authorities consulting on and implementing opportunities for the same structure of the school week elsewhere, albeit for different primary purposes. However, opinion in Scotland remains divided such that not all schools apply the asymmetric structure. It was suggested at the workshop that this is in part because making the transition causes significant disruption and requires a lot of time and energy.

It was also noted during the workshop discussion that if improving CPD is the main objective of an asymmetric school week then a Friday afternoon may not be the best time to organise coordinated pupil free time, as staff are likely to be tired and less productive on this day. Furthermore, it was also suggested that a system where all schools in a cluster have the same pupil free time does not necessarily fit with the need for teacher opportunities to observe other lessons, an important part of CPD. A four and a half day week with a coordinated, common closure afternoon would mainly be about formal learning rather than peer-to-peer learning. This is not to say that peer-to-peer learning could not happen, but the workshop discussion stressed that it would be important not to lose these opportunities for inter- and intra-school observation if the transition to an asymmetric week was made across many schools in the same geographical area.

Importantly, it was also pointed out that schools in Scotland cannot enforce when teachers must be in school outside of contracted teaching time suggesting that CPD opportunities on the coordinated pupil free afternoon would have to be run on a voluntary basis. Reports from schools which have tried this suggested that while some teachers were keen to use the afternoon for collaborative CPD, enthusiasm has tailed off over time.



Enrichment activities for pupils

Some schools, like Cramlington Learning Village (see Case Study box below), have adopted asymmetric school weeks with the objective of providing greater opportunity for enrichment activities for students. It was suggested that a key benefit of the asymmetric school week on enrichment activities is that they become more visible and concentrated on the coordinated afternoon (the same can be said for CPD for teachers), although the amount of time spent on these activities does not necessarily change. For example, depending on the structure of the asymmetric school week adopted, shorter lunch times, which might be necessary to accommodate longer days, may reduce opportunity for extracurricular and enrichment activities at these times in exchange for creating more time on the coordinated afternoon.

One of the big concerns about an asymmetric school week structure is that it actually reduces the opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities after school on longer days, and discriminates against those who are not able to stay after school e.g. due to long journeys or reliance on school transport. Schools which have adopted an asymmetric school week have

Case Study: Cramlington Learning Village Secondary School

Cramlington Learning Village Secondary School in Northumberland adopted an asymmetric week in 2000. Teachers finish their contact time with pupils in Years 9 to 13 on Wednesdays an hour earlier than the rest of the week (typical leaving time is 3.05pm) allowing two extra hours per week for CPD. Those pupils permitted to leave early (Year 9 to 13 pupils) are expected to use this time appropriately, including for their studies if required. They also use this time to participate in sporting clubs or paid work. The school reserves the right to withdraw this opportunity for pupils dependent on their performance in their studies and behaviour.

Year 7 and 8 pupils on the other hand participate in “Challenge Wednesdays” which sees them in school until 3.30pm. Learners sign up for a choice of activities lasting six weeks, with six activities being undertaken per year. The activities form part of the schools junior “Learning Baccalaureate” and depending on the activity the learners may go off-site. Activities include Code Club, Chess, Drama, creative activities such as Ceramics and Crafts, sporting activities such as Karate, Futsal, Girls Football, Archery and Dodgeball, Circus Skills, cooking, dance and science. The tutors, facilitators and coaches come from the local community – the local youth and community service, Newcastle United Football Club and the Newcastle Eagles, students from Newcastle University, local creative and dance companies.

This model is an innovative approach to the asymmetric week which balances the need to create more opportunity for CPD and to offer more enrichment activities for students. This is achieved by structuring the school day differently one day a week for older and younger pupils and working with external providers to run activities and free teachers up to engage in CPD.

also found that participation in optional enrichment activities on shorter school days was low and so provision has reduced over time.

With so many rural schools in Wales, it was suggested that for enrichment activity to be the main objective of an asymmetric school week, the provision of transport for those living far from school would require some rethinking. Nonetheless, it was also noted that a short half day with extended time for extracurricular activities may increase the opportunity to get community partners involved in delivery. This would take the pressure off teachers and could potentially improve the connections between the school and its community. In cases where this has been done, responsibility for pupils outside of scheduled instructional times has been with the activity provider, not the school. However, it could be argued that this could be done without the need for the change to an asymmetric school week, though perhaps not so easily.

Preparing for budget cuts in the Scottish Borders

Some schools in Scotland adopted an asymmetric school week in response to an anticipated reduction in their budgets. Since August 2014, primary and secondary schools in the Scottish Borders have applied a four and a half day asymmetric school week, with longer pupil days Monday to Thursday and an earlier finish on Fridays. This leaves schools with a pupil free half-day without changing working arrangements for staff or instructional times for pupils. The move to an asymmetric school week system in the Scottish Borders was driven by an expectation that there would be cuts to the education budget, alongside the need to successfully deliver the ambitions within Curriculum for Excellence². The new curriculum in Scotland requires more cross-school working (3-18) which the half-day a week when pupils are not in school promised to accommodate, as long as both primary and secondary schools made the switch together. The changes also enabled courses to be offered on a shared basis thus maintaining choices for pupils and reducing inequity of opportunity. The move to a 33-period week (each period being 50 minutes) has enabled the more effective use of teachers in relation to their contracted hours resulting in efficiency savings without reducing teacher numbers³.

² Curriculum for Excellence is designed to achieve a transformation in education in Scotland by providing a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18. For more information see: <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/index.asp>

³ These efficiency savings have been made by the ability to employ teachers 27 out of the 33 periods per week rather than 24 out of the previous 30 periods per week which means teachers are able to do some supply cover too. However, there was some discussion about whether this would be possible in Wales given the current teacher contracts.

A presentation by schools to the Scottish Education Executive at the end of the first academic year in May 2015 outlined that the switch to the asymmetric week had been positive in the Scottish Borders. In addition to easing budget pressures, the main driver for the change, it has also resulted in:

- additional opportunities for meetings between school staff and other professionals e.g. Health Visitors;
- a wider choice of subjects offered at Secondary level with alignment of periods across schools;
- more access to work opportunities for pupils;
- more CPD opportunities for staff; and
- pupils being able to take part in a wider range of activities on a Friday afternoon.

Nonetheless, a representative from the Scottish Borders suggested that overall, CPD opportunities and enrichment activities were not unanimously improved with some pupils still not being able to access extracurricular activities because of a reliance on school transport.

Case Study: Peebles High School

Alongside eight other secondary schools in the Scottish Borders, Peebles High School made the change to an asymmetric school week in 2014 to prepare for budget cuts. Since its implementation they have found:

- pupil attainment has improved;
- shorter school lunches have reduced bad behaviour;
- staff well-being and attendance have improved;
- the new structure has not changed the size and shape of teacher workload but it has changed how they are able to manage it;
- 15-18 year olds are seeing the greatest impact because of wider choice and less inequality;
- overall both staff and pupils are happy with the change and generally would not choose to revert to the old timetable.

However, in the absence of systematic research, these findings cannot be directly attributed to the new distribution of instructional time. It was noted that what is most remarkable about the change is how unremarkable it has been.

Without systematic research it is not possible to say whether the advantages outweighed the disadvantages in relation to CPD and pupil enrichment opportunities; although there was evidence of a small net financial benefit suggesting the primary objective was achieved. In the case of the Scottish Borders schools, an asymmetric school week has enabled more efficient use of resources, helping schools to respond to further budget cuts if they come. The



workshop discussion suggested that school funding is likely to be an issue in the future in Wales. The opportunity to reduce financial spending and optimise resource allocation was therefore viewed as a positive feature of an asymmetric school week structure.

Some Considerations for Adoption in Wales

If a decision is made to pursue an asymmetric school week in Wales, steps need to be taken to ensure that it is done in a way that maximises the potential benefits and minimises the potential risks.

The effectiveness of asymmetric school week arrangements for some versus for all schools

The importance of how many schools apply the asymmetric week structure depends, to some extent, on the objective. If cross school working is the primary objective then common closure alignment is required so that meetings and training can be held outside of lesson time. Indeed, as noted above, the half day was standardised in schools applying an asymmetric week in Edinburgh for this reason.

On the other hand, if pupil enrichment through community engagement is the primary objective then having all schools in the same cluster adopting the same pupil free time might work less well if community partners do not have the capacity to serve multiple schools at the same time. Having enrichment activities on rotation at different schools may overcome this problem but this would need to be carefully planned.

Regardless of the primary objective, the experience in the Scottish Borders was that primary and secondary schools both needed to make the change to make it work. As found in Edinburgh, not coordinating the shorter day was problematic for parents and staff with children at more than one school. That said, it was suggested at the workshop that complications may arise for employers if all parents in a given area want to work the same day on a part-time basis. This highlights the importance of consultation and dialogue in the development of proposals.

The formation of the asymmetric school week

There are many possible iterations of an asymmetric school week. While most schools adopt four longer days and a shorter or half day, other schools have adopted different variations, for example three longer and two shorter days. There was some discussion at the workshop about which day/days should be shorter. While it was expressed that earlier finishes on a Friday

were popular with teachers and families alike, it was noted that a short day on a Friday might not be the most productive day for CPD for teachers. A judgement would need to be made on balancing the need for productivity against the need to gain buy-in from staff and families.

School lunch provision

School lunch provision on shorter school days and long intervals between opportunities to eat on longer days were raised as necessary considerations when thinking about implementing an asymmetric school week. During the Scottish Borders' consultation period, parents expressed a concern about children who have to travel long distances getting hungry during or after the extended school day. There were also concerns that children who receive Free School Meals (FSM) would feel stigmatised if they were forced to stay behind after school on the shorter day to have their free meal. Peebles High School combated these issues by creating more meaningful snack times and offering two opportunities for FSM children to have their free school meal on the shorter day (either at brunch or after school at lunchtime).

Teacher contracts and inset days

More consideration needs to be given to whether current teacher contracts have any implications for attempts to pursue asymmetric school weeks in Wales. The same can be said for how inset days will be affected.

Conditions for success

Given the number of factors involved in creating space for successful CPD or pupil enrichment, it is unreasonable to assume that an asymmetric structure will achieve these objectives in isolation. An asymmetric school week is an enabler of these outcomes, not the silver bullet. Successful schools will be those with successful leaders of change who are keen to drive the adoption of an asymmetric school week forward. Imposing a new, asymmetric school week on schools who do not have the buy in are unlikely to see the benefits.

Consulting with families, communities and staff

Countering cynicism will be a challenge if Wales wishes to trial or roll out the transition to asymmetric school weeks. The workshop highlighted the importance of communicating clear objectives and benefits of the change to parents and involving them in decision making. Indeed, if Welsh Government were to take this to consultation, it was suggested that they should acknowledge both the perceived benefits and the concerns, and communicating these

to parents, teachers and other stakeholders. Clarity in terms of how the week would be structured and how it would affect primary and secondary schools differently would also be helpful to get a meaningful response e.g. explaining what is meant by 'longer' days and what other schools who have implemented the structure have found the effects to be.

As part of the same consultation process, there would be value in mapping and understanding local provision of childcare, the potential supply of extracurricular activities, and the implications for transport provision.

Developing an approach to implementation and measuring the impact

Thus far, there exists a very limited systematic evidence base for the adoption of asymmetric school week structures. Nonetheless, the workshop discussion suggested there are logical reasons to rationalise further exploration and testing. If possible, it would be useful to gather some basic data from schools in Scotland on attendance and attainment and some more information on experiences in primary schools to supplement the knowledge we have gained from their experiences at the secondary level. The development and implementation of an asymmetric week should be designed to enable measurement of impact. This would require careful thought at an early stage.

Conclusion

Despite a limited evidence base, the workshop suggested that there is appetite for further exploration of how and whether asymmetric school weeks would work in Wales. However, implementing an asymmetric school week is not guaranteed to have a positive effect. While an asymmetric school week might enable more opportunities for CPD or enrichment activities, putting a new structure in place is unlikely to have the desired impact unless the school leadership and culture are supportive of the change and overarching objective. If a decision is made to pursue an asymmetric school week in Wales, steps need to be taken to ensure that it is done in a way that maximises the potential benefits and minimises the potential risks. In any case, an asymmetric school week is not a silver bullet, though it may be an enabler for a host of other outcomes.

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Annex 1: Workshop Participants

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