

*Supporting Schools, Educators, Students, and Families in a Transition to
a Four Day Week*

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Abstract

The study discusses the transition of schools in the Emirate of Sharjah from a five-day workweek to a four-day workweek at the start of January 2022, and explores results of surveys conducted to assess satisfaction of stakeholders and challenges that educational institutions and communities faced with this transition. The survey sought to understand the impact of this change on critical variables such as productivity, family financial impact, student learning, work-life balance, wellbeing, health, and school operations. The results released in May 2023 showed high level of parent satisfaction and financial savings, high motivation and satisfaction among school employees, and improved physical and emotional wellbeing of student skills and their ability to be more self-directed; to engage in socialization leisurely activities after school. The results also revealed certain challenges that teachers and professional staff reported in finding sufficient time to cover the required school curriculum, prepare lesson plans and attend professional development during the reduced school week. With global interest across all sectors in reducing the work week from five days to four, it is imperative that educational researchers and regulators understand how the Western literature can have either positive or negative impact on policy borrowing across Western, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Eastern cultures. This paper provides early guidance to policymakers, practitioners, and scholars on these matters.

Keywords: Sharjah, Schools, Reduced Workweek, School Hours, Work Life Balance, Wellbeing, Productivity

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Introduction

Reduced workweek in Sharjah evolved for different reasons than those in other parts of the world. It emerged in Sharjah to accommodate the long-standing tradition of maintaining Fridays as non-working days and to conform to the United Arab Emirates declaration in January 2022 that made Saturdays and Sundays as the official weekend days. Unlike Sharjah, the reduced workweek in other parts of the world evolved for purely economic reasons or to respond to demands for less working hours in the interest of providing greater family time. For example, moderate body of literature in the United States on reduced working hours in schools were due to two factors: first, limited transportation options in rural areas requiring school systems to find alternate solutions, such as reducing the week from five days to four; second, readiness for change because of COVID online learning schemes, particularly prompted by other social or economic necessities, such as limited transportation.

The literature on reduced working hours in schools is sparse outside Western contexts. Sharjah, with a diverse student population, is an ideal location to expand the global knowledge base on time reduction in school. While countries, as well as multilaterals, such as the OECD, have set minimum expected days of school per year as policy or benchmark, online/distance learning has increasingly allowed for new methods of accounting for learning time. Yet days in school, or even hours in school, have been subject to country comparison assuming no difference in quality of learning. Time in school has various productivity implications by culture, including expectations of guided practice, independent learning, teacher-centered instruction, as well as other educational constructs.

The Emirate of Sharjah transitioned to a four-day workweek in January 2022. All private and government schools have therefore implemented a four-day week, Mondays through Thursdays. To support schools, educators, students, and families in this transition, the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA) conducted various stakeholder surveys during January and February 2023. The results of these surveys have provided SPEA with a clear set of indicators on satisfaction and challenges, related to such aspects as productivity, learning, work-life balance, wellbeing, health, family financial impact and school operations. The results, summarized in this report, provide insight into the ways in which schools, families, and educators have responded, both positively and negatively, to the changes. The results are being utilized by SPEA, as a regulatory body, to suggest new initiatives that aim to support the wellbeing and productivity of schools, students, educators, and families. The results are also a catalyst for SPEA's sister organization, the Sharjah Education Academy (SEA), to improve the professional development courses provided to teachers and school leaders.

The Educational Landscape in Sharjah

Sharjah is the third largest Emirate in the UAE by size, with its population comprising 22.4% of the total UAE population. The population is made up of 88% expatriates, with the majority originating from South Asian and Arab countries. Sharjah has succeeded in attracting a large talent pool due to a leadership focus on education, government's various policies to attract and retain talent within the Emirate, and the Emirate's relatively low cost of living compared to neighboring Emirates. Figure 1 shows the distribution of Sharjah's population across the major municipalities.

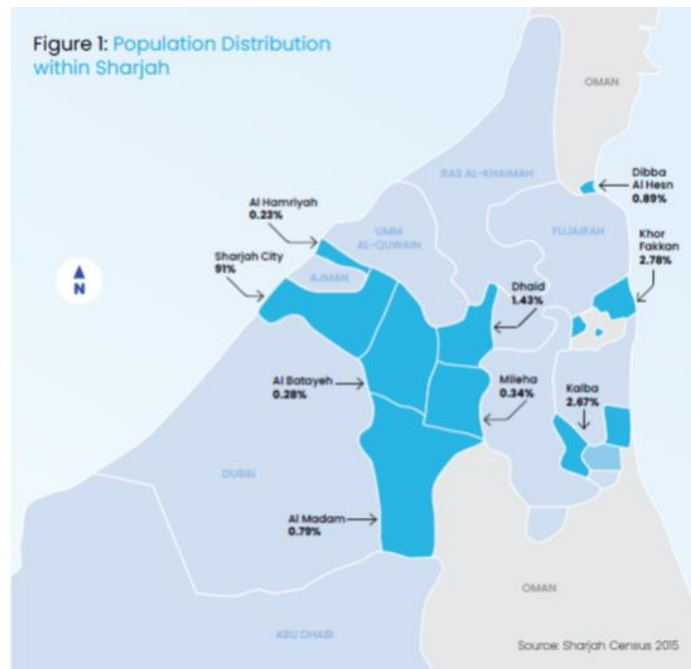


Figure 1: Distribution of Sharjah’s population

Over the last decade, Sharjah has witnessed a steady growth in the number of private schools, from 94 schools in 2013/2014 to 130 schools in 2022/2023. Currently enrolled in the 130 schools are approximately 185,000 students.

The number of private schools in the UAE has increased at a higher rate than public schools. The percentage of public schools in Sharjah has decreased from 92% in 2009/2010 to 49% in 2018/2019. As illustrated in figure 2, Private schools in Sharjah follow ten different curricula, with the highest school numbers utilizing British/IB, American, Indian, and UAE Ministry of Education curricula. Between 2017 and 2022, the number of American and British/IB curriculum schools increased at a compound annual growth rate of 4.5%.

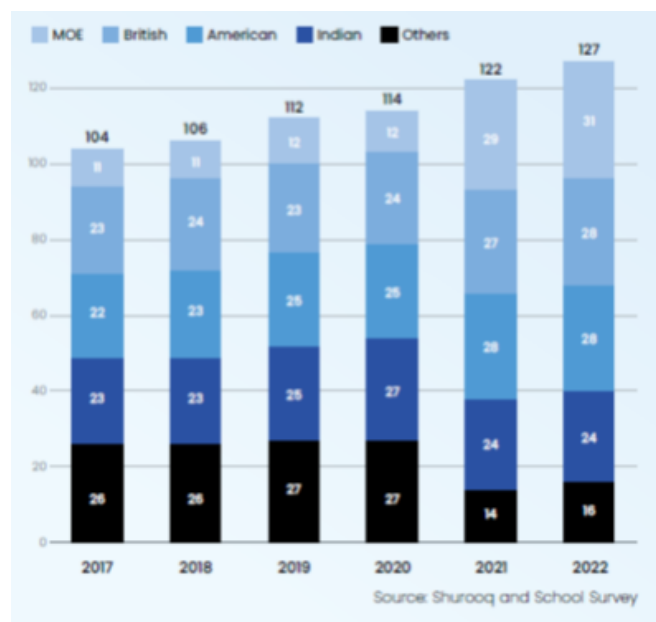


Figure 2: The distribution of curricula in Sharjah (2017-2022)

More than one third of total enrollment is in schools utilizing the Indian curriculum. Schools offering the British curriculum are the second most popular, with 21% of total enrollments. Enrollment in private schools is centralized to a large degree in the city of Sharjah (97%), with more than a quarter of enrollments in the district of Muwailah. Enrollment distribution by curriculum is illustrated in Figure 3.

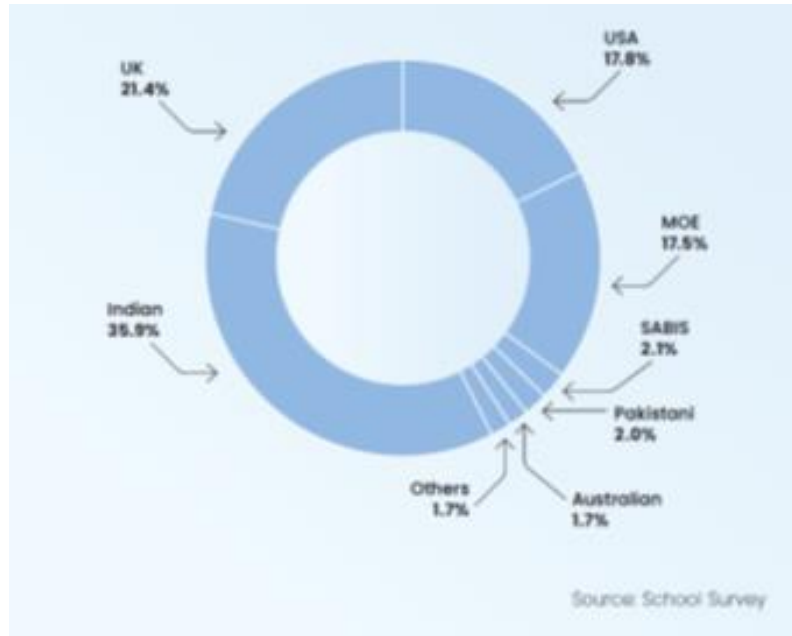


Figure 3: Student enrollment by curriculum (2021-2022)

The overall student-to-teacher ratio across Sharjah’s private schools is less than 18 to 1. In 2021/2022, 11,902 teachers were employed by 122 private schools in Sharjah, with an expatriate teaching workforce of 98%. Student-to-teacher ratios are as low as 6 to 1 in premium-priced schools, whose tuition fees are above AED 50,000 per year. As shown in figures 4 and 5, the highest student-to-teacher ratio is in Indian curriculum schools, followed closely by schools that offer the UAE Ministry of Education curriculum.

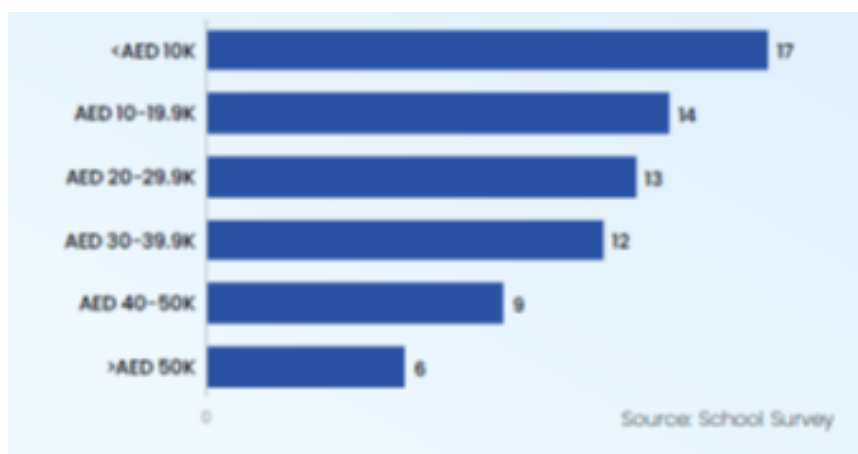


Figure 4: Student to teacher ratio by tuition fees (2021-2022)

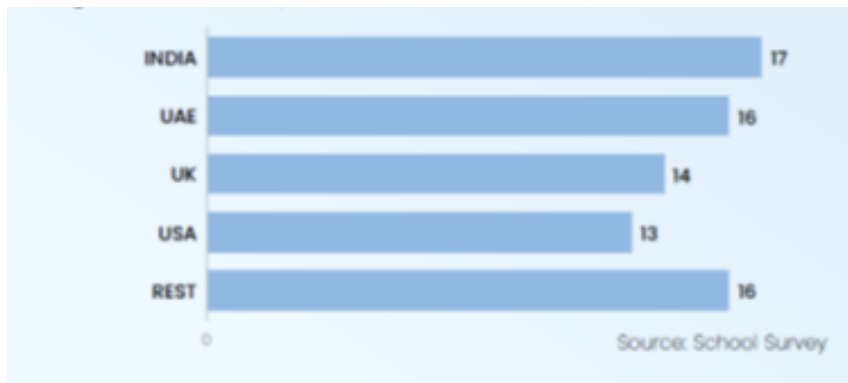


Figure 5: Student to teacher ratio by curriculum (2021-2022)

The student-teacher ratio (STR) is the number of students divided by the number of teachers in a school. It is a measure of the workload for teachers and the level of individual attention that students receive. A lower STR is generally considered to be better, as it allows for more individualized instruction and support. However, there is no single ideal STR, as the optimal ratio will vary depending on the specific needs of the students and teachers.

In the United States, the average STR for public schools is 16:1. However, there is a wide range of STRs across the country, with some schools having ratios as high as 30:1 and others as low as 8:1. The STR is also affected by the grade level, with elementary schools typically having lower ratios than middle and high schools.

Sharjah private schools have approximately 32,000 vacant seats, which translates into a capacity utilization rate of 84%. The capacity utilization rate, which represents the percentage of filled seats in schools, is calculated by dividing enrollments over maximum capacity. The current capacity utilization level, which is within the optimal utilization levels of 80-90% for primary and secondary education, enables schools to meet additional demand in the short term and maintain the flexibility needed for rearranging student schedules. While Indian curriculum schools have a high utilization rate, they have 30% of the free seats. A quarter of the free seats are in the American curriculum schools, followed by British and UAE Ministry of Education curriculum schools (17% and 15%, respectively). Accordingly, Sharjah Private Education Authority developed a forecast model illustrated in figure 6, to forecast the estimated number of needed school till 2026.

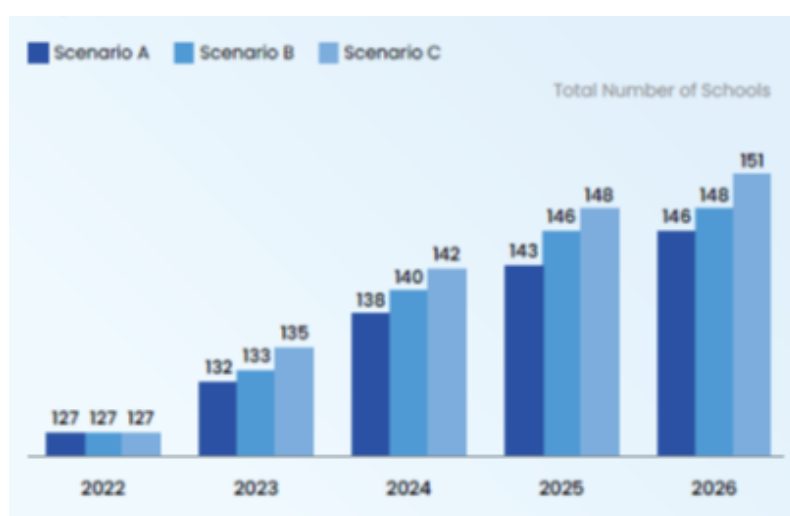


Figure 6: School Demand Forecast (2021-2022)

The key growth drivers for primary and secondary private educational institutional growth include expatriate population growth, government support for quality education, and parental high spending on education in the UAE. The UAE's school-going population is estimated to grow from 1.3 million in 2021 to 1.5 million in 2028, according to the United Nations population forecast (Insights, 2023). Sharjah's existing large expatriate population, estimated at 88%, underlies the preference for international curricula. SPEA's 2022-2024 strategy with its focus on four strategic priorities of: enhancing the quality of life and wellbeing of the educational community; promoting trust in the quality of education; fostering a culture of innovation, creativity, and continuous learning, as well as encouraging Sharjah's competitiveness in the education sector, are strengthening Sharjah schools' ability to attract more students.

The Four-Day Work Week in Sharjah

The four-day workweek was implemented in the Emirate of Sharjah in January 2022. This step occurred following the decline of COVID-19 and the new ways/practices of applying efficiency at the workplace. Globally, COVID-19 strained supply chains, accelerated governmental deficit spending, and produced high rates of inflation. COVID-19 nevertheless enhanced governmental and private sector focus on strategic priorities associated with risk mediation, competitive advantage, innovation, and quality of life.

During the 2020-2022 period throughout the globe, organizations in both the public and private sectors implemented and continually adapted work-from-home plans. Habits regarding work, learning, and recreation shifted, creating new knowledge for post-COVID productivity, work-life balance, and remote learning. This was true around the world, and particularly so in Sharjah—and, like schools and educational systems throughout the world, these adaptations and learnings occurred in Sharjah's schools. In particular, as the Sharjah Education Academy (SEA) had been developed in the midst of the pandemic, it became clear that teacher knowledge and skill needed rapid updating to address the hybrid learning approaches that were adopted across schools.

The shift to the four-day workweek in Sharjah occurred as a result of the lessons learned in the years of COVID-19, as well as a desire to innovate in work-life balance and human capital development, while also finding new ways to utilize technology to increase productivity. Upon implementation of the four-day workweek across the education sector in Sharjah, other reform initiatives began to take shape, led through the expert support of the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA), including quality improvement for early childhood education, PK-12 school improvement, and identification and support for students of Special Needs. The four-day workweek implementation occurred alongside various other strategic priorities and reforms that aim to increase human capital development, organizational productivity, wellbeing and work-life balance.

Global Trend

Time magazine recently reported that 2023 will be the year of the four-day work week (Abend, 2023). This expectation was driven by various pilot programs that found positive aspects in reduced workweeks across the globe. For example, results of a recent study published in the UK showed there was no productivity loss among 61 private firms that participated in the reduced workweek (Lewis, Stronge, Kellam, & Kikuchi, 2023). While most focus on the changes in the length of the workweek has been on private sector work in

knowledge-focused jobs, education employs a large share of educated workforces in most developed countries, and therefore, must be considered in changing attitudes about the workweek. Furthermore, education cannot be disentangled from the overall workforce due to family constraints with regard to childcare and transportation.

The four-day week is a trend that will continue globally as more institutions and countries achieve tangible returns that support continued implementation. With the trend expanding, the impact will also be significant on school systems that will switch to either reduced working hours or a four-day school week. Some school districts in the United States, as well as some school systems in South Pacific countries, are among the few places this has been attempted before. For example, in the 1970s, with high fuel costs, some school districts in the United States reduced the week to four days temporarily (Armitage, 2022). Some rural school districts also moved to a four-day week during the 2008 economic recession, in order to save on resources (Sawchuk, 2021). Additionally, there are 662 school districts across the United States that made the same transition since COVID-19 (Thompson & Morton, 2021).

The transformation in the United States has been encouraged by positive results. Using data from the Colorado Department of Education in the United States, Anderson and Walker (2015) argued that the four-day week has positively affected the percentage of students scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on mathematics and reading achievement tests. Further studies in the United States suggest that the four-day week gave students opportunities to spend more time on homework and extracurricular activities. It also had an impact through decreased per-pupil bullying incidents by approximately 31% and per-pupil fighting incidents by approximately 27% (Morton, 2021). In one study in the United States, 85% percent of parents and 95% of students said they would choose to stay on a four-day school week, after experiencing it (Kilburn et al., 2021).

Methodology and Participants

SPEA conducted the study with a clear focus of measuring the impact of applying the 4-day workweek on productivity, learning, work-life balance, wellbeing, health, family financial impact and school operations. SEA has collaborated with SPEA in producing this report. The formal study was conducted between January and February 2023. Parents and school employees (teachers and administrative staff) were surveyed. Both surveys comprised closed-ended items (the parent survey had 33 questions; the employee survey had 24), as well as some open-ended items. Both surveys had three questions about positive experiences, challenges, and recommendations. The parent survey was administered electronically in Arabic and English to all parents of children in the private schools in Sharjah targeting approximately 185,000 students. The employee survey was electronically administered to 17,663 employees among 130 private preK-12 schools. Both surveys were administered during a short timeline from the 27th of January to the 3rd of February 2023, to determine the perceptions and ratings about the four-day workweek.

Over the course of seven days that the survey was open, a total of 31,198 surveys were completed by parents. Of parent survey-takers, 66.4% were female and 33.6% were male. In terms of age, 49.2% of parents reported that they were from “30 to 39” in age and 39.2% reported that they were “40 to 49” years old. 83% of parents reported that they lived in Sharjah, with 11% living in Ajman. 97% of the parents were married.

School employees were also surveyed. Of 17,663 total employees in Sharjah private schools, 6,988 completed the survey (approximately 40%). Of these, 5,421 were teachers out of a total of 12,464 teachers (43%). Of non-teachers, survey takers included specialists, librarians, nurses, counselors, secretaries, school leaders, and other positions. Employee survey takers from Indian curriculum schools constituted the highest proportion (45%), with British and American following (24% and 18% respectively). Of employee survey-takers 83% were female and 17% were male. In terms of age, 42.4% were from the “30 to 39” age category, and 31% were “40 to 49” years old. 71% of employees lived in Sharjah and 18% lived in Ajman. 85.4% of employees were married. In terms of annual school tuition, 36% of employees completing the survey worked at schools with less than 10,000 AED annual tuition, 32% were in schools with annual tuition from “10,000 AED up to 20,000 AED;” and 32% worked in schools with annual tuition from “20,000 AED to 56,000 AED”. For school size (e.g., number of students enrolled), 28.2% of employees worked in schools with less than 2,000 students, 33.1% were in schools with from “2,000 up to 3,000” students, and 38.7% were in schools with at or above 3,000 students. For a total number of classes taught per week, 34.4% taught “16 to 23” classes, 54.4% taught “24 to 28” classes, and 11.2% taught “29 to 38” classes per week.

Parent Survey Results

Parents reported a high level of satisfaction with the four-day workweek, with Emirati parents reporting a higher level of satisfaction than all parents together on most measures. Work-life balance, level of happiness, and social-emotional health are all reported to be increased as a result, with again Emirati parents expressing a higher level of satisfaction than all parents together.

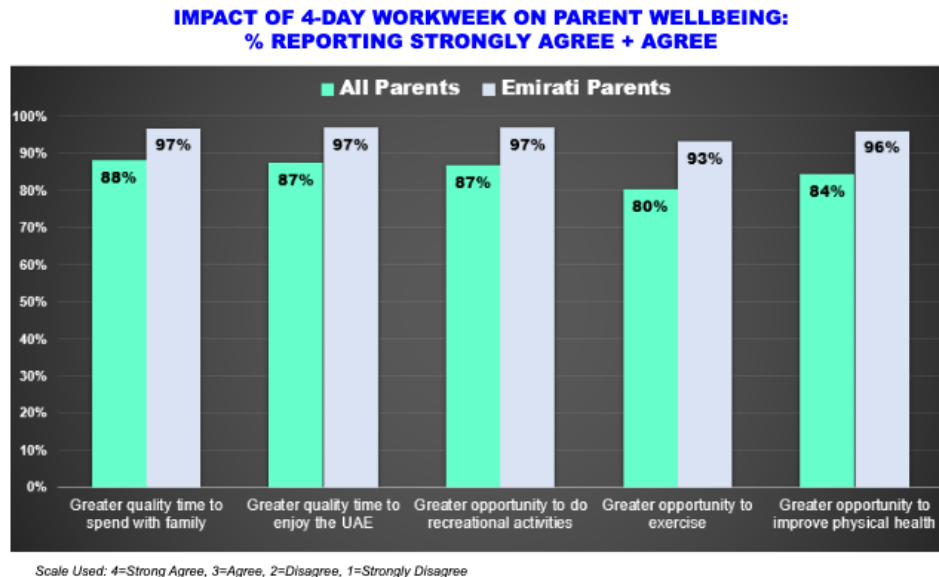


Figure 7: Impact of 4-day workweek on wellbeing

**IMPACT OF 4-DAY WORKWEEK ON PARENT WELLBEING:
% STRONGLY AGREE + AGREE**

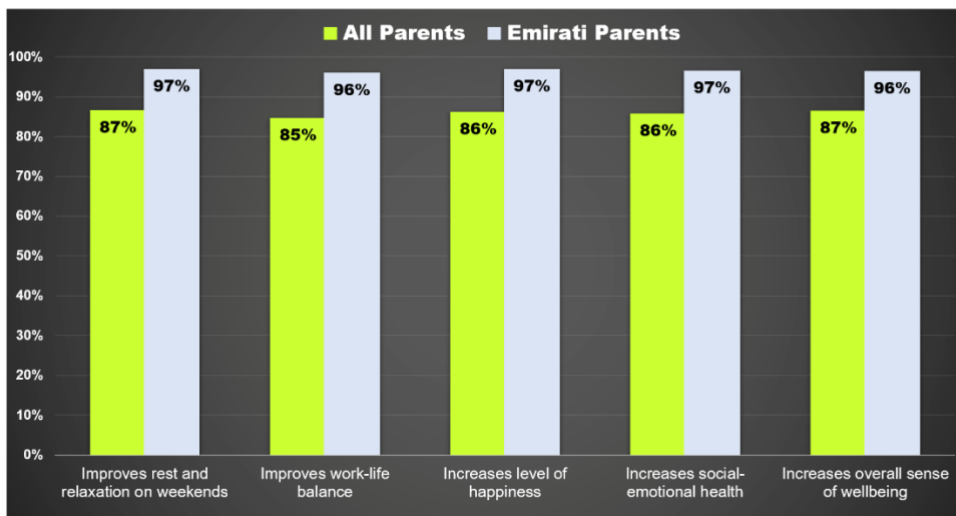
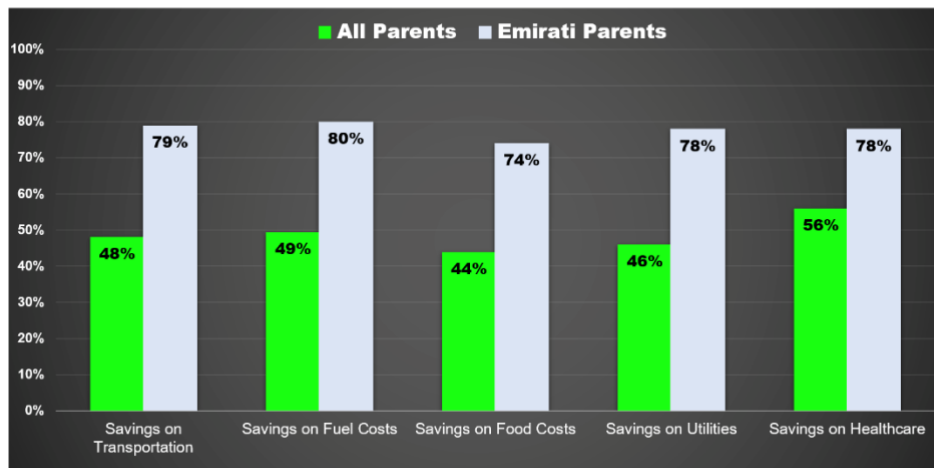


Figure 8: Impact of 4-day workweek on wellbeing

In terms of financial saving, parents clearly reported a benefit in financial savings due to the four-day day work week. 79% of Emirati parents noted that they have benefited by saving on transportation while also 48% of all parents noted a benefit. In addition 80% of Emirati parents reported that they saved on fuel costs due to commuting one day less per week. The results also show that parents reported additional saving in utilities and health care (78%).

% of PARENTS REPORTING 4-DAY WORKWEEK HAS HELPED THE FAMILY EXPERIENCE FINANCIAL SAVINGS



Response Options: Yes, No, Not Sure

Figure 9: Impact of 4-day workweek on financial saving

Parents recognize that the four-day week has improved: school attendance (81% of all parents), participation in extracurricular activities (75% of all parents), and improvement in completing school assignments (80% of all parents). Parents largely have indicated that their children feel more productive (78%) and happy (81%).

**IMPACT OF 4-DAY WORKWEEK ON YOUR CHILD:
% OF PARENTS REPORTING IMPROVEMENTS**

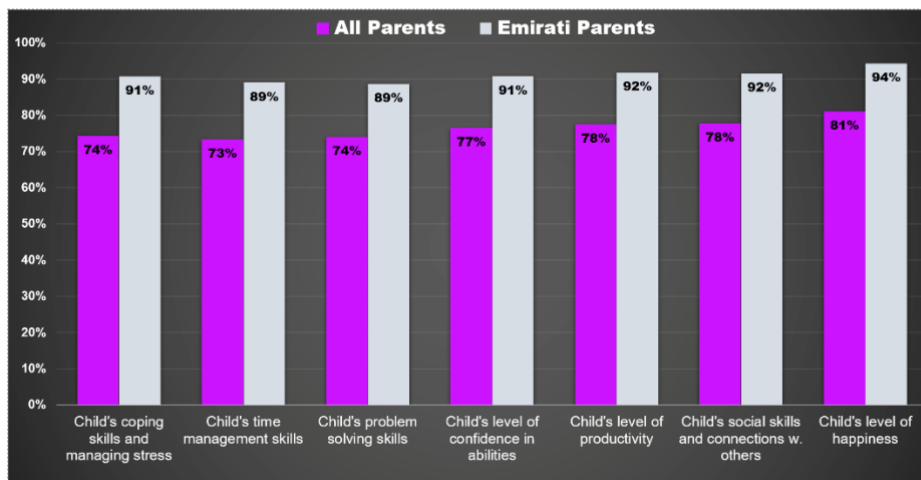
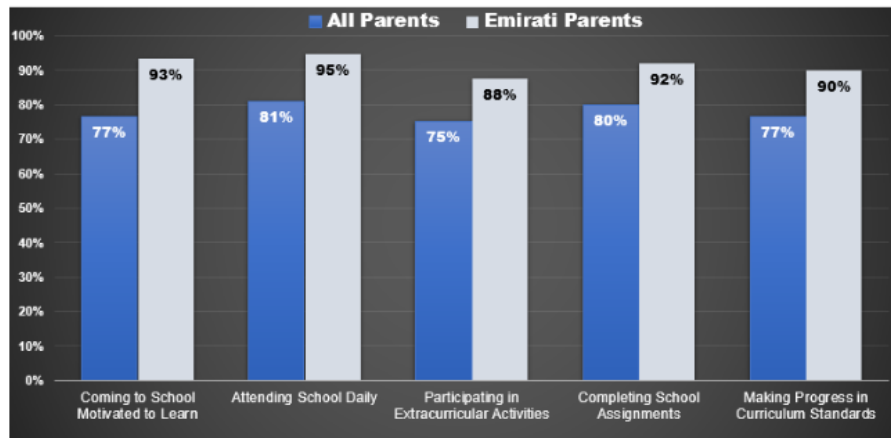


Figure 10: Impact of 4-day workweek on children improvement

**IMPACT OF 4-DAY WORKWEEK ON YOUR CHILD:
% OF PARENTS REPORTING IMPROVEMENTS**



Scale Used: 5=Strong Improvement, 4=Slight Improvement, 3=No Change, 2=Slight Decline, 1=Strong Decline

Figure 11: Impact of 4-day workweek on children improvement

Parents reported that the transition to a four-day week has positively impacted the participation in students' participation in extracurricular activities, their motivation to learn and had a generally positive impact on their children's socialization (79% of all parents, 92% of Emirati parents) and relaxation (81% of all parents, 93% of Emirati parents).

Employees also indicated readiness and adaptiveness of students, rating highly such aspects as the "student daily attendance in school." Slightly lower, but still reported at 81%, is impact on student homework load and projects.

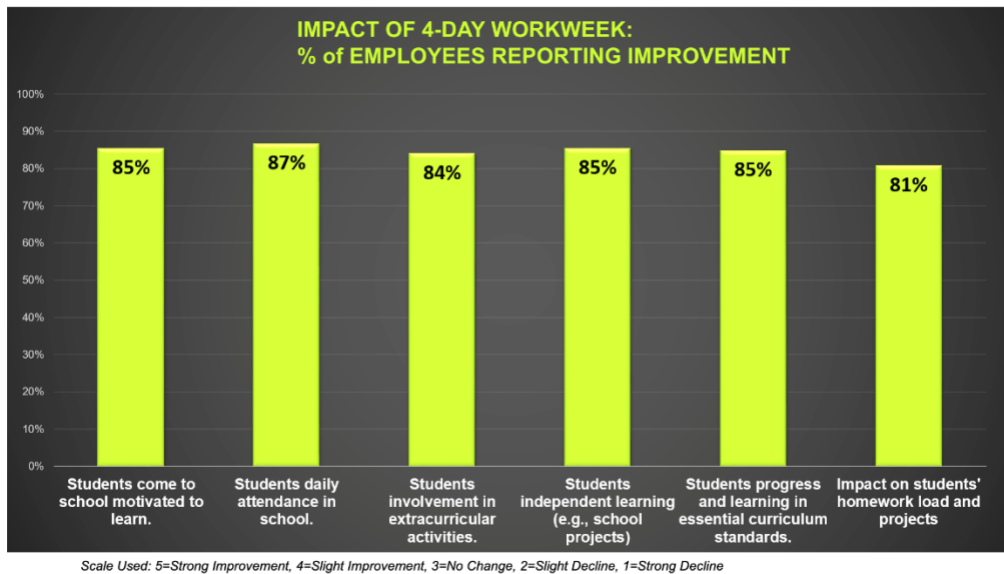


Figure 16: Impact of 4-day workweek on teacher

Among work-related factors, school employees rated their level of motivation for work highly (88%), along with management of work priorities, level of work productivity, and ability to achieve objectives (all at 86%). Rated lower are aspects of time pressure: educators reflected less confidence in their ability to complete professional development (83%), time to prepare lessons (80%), and reduced pressure on teaching (64%).

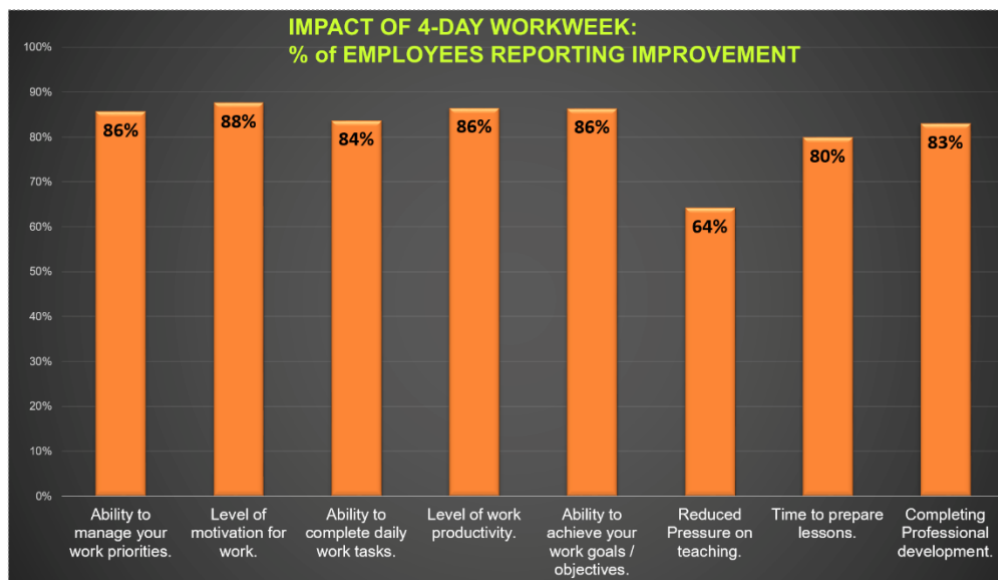


Figure 17: Impact of 4-day workweek on teacher

Nearly 5% of surveys indicated, within the open-ended written responses, that they struggle to teach all the curriculum or complete tasks. Over 5% reported that extra work is assigned to them over the weekends, and that long working hours or lack of time within the day can be a challenge (7%). Some teachers report that they do not benefit from the three-day weekend, as

they are required to go to school for additional work over the weekends. This is a crucial indicator for SPEA, showing that not all the curricula are agile enough to adapt to the 4-day workweek and awareness and transformation is needed to align with the new direction.

It is clear that with all the increased pressures, employees are highly aware of the value trade-off and therefore report a positive impact overall. The response from school employees gives us very clear recommendations. Schools will need to continue working to identify ways to increase productivity among employees within the working days, as the data show that not allowing teachers to benefit from the three-day weekend may impact wellbeing, stress, and possibly teacher turnover. Key aspects of professional development for managerial aspects of school organization may assist in this regard.

Implications

The four-day work week implemented in Sharjah's private schools has yielded positive results related to the wellbeing of individuals. Eighty-five percent of students and 79.9 % of teachers reported improved level of wellbeing. The recognition of this impact on their wellbeing reflected increased level of happiness and higher degree of engagement within the educational system. On the other hand, the increased level of wellbeing was countered by another adverse measure that some schools have adopted which required school employees to report to school on some weekends to carry out planning, professional development and other non-instructional chores.

The results extend beyond wellbeing to the development of profound trust in the Sharjah Private Education Authority by 90.2% of parents and 96.1% of teachers, thus suggesting an enhanced sense of community collaboration and support. The positive impact on schools is not merely anecdotal. For example, the formal ITQAN school performance reviews during the 2022-2023 school year showed an improvement of 68% of reviewed schools. Improved wellbeing and school's ability to effectively adapt to the new reduced workweek cannot be taken outside of the context of all other variables that contributed to the overall school improvement and students' achievement of learning outcomes. These results paint a compelling portrait of success, where such data undeniably indicates the significant potential of the four-day workweek in the educational landscape of Sharjah as well as in redefining work-life balance while optimizing educational outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The surveys conducted by the Sharjah Private Education Authority on the transition to the four-day week have provided valuable insight into the needs that schools, parents, students, and teachers have, as well as the positive impacts they have experienced. The following broad conclusions are drawn from the study:

1. Parents and teachers alike report that they, and their students, have an improved quality of life as a result of the shift to the four-day week. It has permitted more leisure time, reduced household expenses, and had positive effects on physical and mental health.
2. Parents and teachers alike recognize that new time management skills are needed among students, both in school and at home.
3. The transition to the four-day week has put new pressures on teachers and students that did not exist before, at the same level of intensity. While these new pressures

have caused some concerns among teachers and parents, there is a comparable level of recognition that these challenges are balanced by the positive effects.

The conclusions of this study have shaped recommendations for schools, parents and teachers, as well as for the Sharjah Private Education Authority and the Sharjah Education Academy. They are as follows:

1. Promoting extra-curricular activities and partnerships: raising awareness of the importance of extra-curricular activities and building partnerships with the private sector to explore, develop and sponsor, creative and talented people. Additionally, encourage activities in different forms, to meet the needs of students according to their interest.
2. Planning and modern teaching methods: in partnership with international partners and with Sharjah Education Academy, SPEA can raise awareness on the importance of planning the school day, so that it does not affect the increase of working hours during the week.
3. Policies and enablers: spreading awareness among educational institutions, parents, and students, regarding SPEA's wellbeing framework, and how to empower the community to employ weekly vacation days to achieve effective and fruitful outputs.
4. Adopt smart and flexible teaching methods that allow the student to apply knowledge in an effective way, without affecting wellbeing or increasing school burdens.
5. Schools should emphasize time management skills among students. This starts with a recognition that quality learning will not occur when content is spread thin and addressed quickly. Valuable skills acquisition occurs through quality learning, not quantity. As such, schools must re-evaluate their goals if they feel they are unable to meet all their needs within the time they are given. This should not be seen as a reduction in school output, but rather an improvement in the overall quality and satisfaction of learning.
6. Schools must develop better procedures for management of staff time, so that all staff have an improved experience of the four-day week transition. When teachers do not have a chance to benefit from the three-day weekend, schools may lose out on the opportunity to retain a higher percentage of their excellent staff. This can be resolved through careful and collaborative planning.
7. Parents can take an active role in helping their children manage their personal time and promoting healthy behaviors, both during the four-day week and the three-day weekend. Trying new sports or participating in new out-of-class learning activities will have a positive effect on overall student performance, satisfaction, and development.
8. The Sharjah Private Education Authority will continue to monitor the perceptions of staff and parents, as well as the implementations of schools. From this monitoring, SPEA will be able to fine-tune any regulations to increase overall performance and the satisfaction of parents, students, and school staff.
9. The Sharjah Education Academy will offer training to teachers on promotion of time management skills among students, as well as evidence-based strategies for increasing learning quality within available teaching hours.

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