



Scheduling: On the Block

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Alternative scheduling seems to be one of the hottest new reforms on the block, at the top of the agenda for schools and school boards across the country. Estimates of the number of schools nationwide that have already implemented some version of alternative, intensive, or block scheduling as it is most commonly called, range from 10 to 25 percent; many more are considering the undertaking. Confusion and concern abound among parents, teachers, administrators and students. Why does block scheduling seem to be the innovation of the moment, and what could and should this change mean for the schools?

What is Block Scheduling? Broadly defined, block scheduling is a restructuring of the school day whereby students attend half as many classes, for twice as long. In a departure from the traditional 50-minutes per class, 6-8 classes per day ritual, students take four classes, in 90- or 120-minute blocks each day. In one of the two most common variations, the roster of class subjects alternates from day to day (AB format). In the other, it alternates from semester to semester (4X4 format). **In Theory** Proponents claim a number of advantages to using such a system:

- **More Time to Learn**

- By giving the student only four classes to deal with at a time, he or she can devote more concentration and time to each subject. Having 3-4 classes per day rather than the traditional 5-6, the teacher experiences a decrease in required work load and preparation time, allowing for more prep time per lesson, more grading time per class, and more teaching and one-on-one interaction per student. (Overall class size and student/teacher ratio decrease due to the increased number of total classes from 7 per year to 8.) Students spend less time changing classes, and teachers spend less time getting students settled and handling administrative tasks.

- **More In-Depth Learning**

- With longer, more highly-concentrated classes, students can take on more projects and papers, rather than the less time-consuming multiple-choice quizzes. Varied and innovative methods of teaching can be incorporated as the old lecture style becomes incompatible with the new, longer classes. The daily schedule gains flexibility, making it more conducive to team teaching, multidisciplinary classes, labs, and field work.

- **Higher Morale and Better Grades**

- Proponents say these factors foster a less pressured, more intimate atmosphere in the school, creating a place where children are excited to learn and teachers are inspired to teach. They claim this combination leads to better attendance, higher grades, and lower failure and dropout rates for students in a block scheduling program.

In Practice Very little hard data is available on the positive consequences of a conversion to block scheduling. Measurements of its effects on student and teacher morale and enthusiasm are anecdotal and mixed. What evidence does exist regarding the effects of block scheduling on student achievement indicates more problems than successes.

- **A Question of Time**

- It is not at all clear that block scheduling actually gives students and teachers more class time to cover



subject matter. Obviously, much depends on an individual school's previous scheduling and the type of block schedule it adopts. One estimate showed an overall decrease of class time per core subject by 8% after implementing block scheduling. Perhaps more important is that merely doubling the length of a class does not guarantee doubling the amount of learning. Given the typical adolescent's attention span, a teacher may be hard pressed to keep a classroom full of teenagers focused for 90 or 120 minutes. The intent is to incorporate varied methods of teaching, thus engaging the student in the learning process in several different ways. However, this will only happen if the teacher is motivated and properly trained to handle the longer class time. If conversion to block scheduling is not backed by intensive professional development, students may wind up receiving the same 50 minute lecture as before, followed by 40 minutes of "study hall." Even if this is avoided, the danger still exists that a teacher's efforts to expand the "learning process"- through cooperative learning, portfolio building, multimedia, peer tutoring, etc.- may come at the expense of actual learning. There is no evidence that block scheduling has led to meaningful teaching innovations that have resulted in higher student achievement.

- **Less Content Covered and Lack of Continuity**

- Indeed, many proponents of block scheduling subscribe to a "less is more" philosophy. They agree that block schedule classes cover less content in a subject area, but argue that students go into each subject more in-depth. If this is, in fact, the case, the benefits of such a distinction are dubious at best. Some subjects, such as science, math and foreign language, do not lend themselves to an emphasis on intensity over breadth. In an AB program, where students study subjects on alternating days, students lose the benefit of daily repetition and drill needed for mastering science formulas, mathematical concepts and language skill. (Even colleges, where most classes meet 2-3 times a week, hold foreign language classes every day for students in the first and second year of the language.) The 4X4 schedule poses even more problems. Students try to cram a year's worth of learning into one semester and then perhaps go a whole year or more before the subject is revisited. In subjects that build on previous knowledge-- science, math and foreign languages-- retention is greatly harmed. In the case of testing (achievement tests, APs, etc.), students who finish a subject the previous semester may have grown rusty, while those covering the material that semester may not have completed the material. The College Board recently found that, with the exception of English, AP scores drop measurably for students on a block schedule vs. those on a traditional schedule.

- **Grade Inflation and Lower Achievement Test Scores**

- Some schools that have implemented block scheduling have reported that student grades and attendance are up, and failures and dropout rates are lower. There is some indication that block scheduling provides benefits to learners who have not thrived in the traditional classroom setting. Block scheduling may indeed be a worthwhile alternative for reaching a school's most at-risk students. Properly implemented, it can provide greater opportunity for one-to-one student/teacher contact and the use of individual instruction plans often recommended for non-traditional and low-achieving learners- perhaps even reducing failure and dropout rates. However, for regular and advanced students, the benefits are unclear. Higher grades in and of themselves do not indicate increased learning, and standardized tests have yet to bear out claims of increased achievement under block scheduling. Testing data for block scheduling is slim, but several Canadian studies (by Dr. David J. Bateson (1990,1996) and Dr. Dennis Raphael et al.(1986)) have found that full-year students consistently outperformed students in semester block scheduling programs on science and math achievement tests. There is little verifiable evidence that schools in the US have seen significant gains on achievement test scores as a result of block scheduling.

Strike Up the Bandwagon Schools and school districts around the country are eagerly jumping onto the block scheduling bandwagon despite the lack of concrete evidence of its benefits. Too often schools are switching over unprepared and unsupported by the communities they serve, with their staff backed by little to no professional development to ensure solid implementation. In response to the growing consensus that the old system isn't working, proponents and those eager to be "change agents" of any sort embrace block scheduling as a shake-up of the old system. As is too often seen in the inside-the-box, trend-of-the-week "reform" movement, that amounts to change for change's sake, rather than improvement based on verifiable and significant gains in student learning. Block scheduling is certainly viable under ideal circumstances. It must target appropriate student populations, teachers must receive proper professional training and it must be undertaken with the consent and knowledge of the community. At best, block scheduling is peripheral to the core issue of student achievement. At worst, it is a distraction from and a delay of significant systemic reform. As discovered by the National Commission on Time and Learning in its report



Prisoners of Time, schools should test innovative ways of employing alternative time schedules, and many have succeeded in doing so. However, the key is the flexibility afforded by administrators to schools to make changes that may better meet the needs of their students, rather than forcing upon schools a top-down mandate that may not fit all schools. As with any potential innovation, it should be something done at the bottom-most level and with options for parents who don't agree, so that teachers are not just substituting one bad structure for another. When it comes to considering the introduction of block scheduling to a school or district, the possible merits need to be measured against the very real problems that concerned citizens and educators face. Block scheduling should not be a diversion from increasing parental choice and involvement, high and meaningful standards, high-stakes assessment, and student, teacher, school and district accountability. When it comes to children and learning, less is not more.

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