Block Schedule: Why it is a Worthwhile Reform to Consider in the Secondary Schools?

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INTRODUCTION

Secondary schools are under scrutiny when it comes to accountability and higher standards. The set up of the school day and even the sequence of classes taken by students have been under debate for many years. The high schools in the United States continue to receive more pressure because many policy makers want to ensure that the American high school student remain competitive with their international counterparts. After reforms and studies have been released, such as *A Nation at Risk* and/or No Child Left Behind, schools are looking for new ways to restructure the school so that accountability and standards are met on the state and federal level (Zepeda and Mayers, 2006). The nation as a whole was asked to observe the effectiveness of classroom instruction (Gullatt, 2006). Are they being effective or ineffective?

The new trend of restructuring schools come in changing how instructional time is set up. A major wave of school are changing their format from traditional (six to seven periods everyday) to block schedule (Veal, 2000). Dexter, Tai, and Sadler (2006) report that almost 50% of American high schools are in some form of block schedule according to the most recent estimate provided in Wild’s report of 1998. There are several forms of block schedule: 4x4, alternative, and hybrid.

4x4 block schedule is also known as Copernicun plan or accelerated schedule. In this type of block schedule students would only have four classes per semester. These four classes would meet everyday. At the end of a semester, students would have completed a year long course. At the beginning of a new semester, students would have a new class schedule. A traditional one yearlong class would be truncated to a semester long in a 4x4 schedule. Students will have the opportunity to take more classes and gain more graduation units in one school year. This type of block schedule had a slightly lower total of instructional minutes in comparison to
the traditional schedule (Lewis, Dugan, Winokur, & Cobb, 2005). An alternative block schedule has the students taking six to seven classes in one year, in longer class periods (seventy to ninety minutes). The classes would not meet on an everyday basis, but rather every other day (Zepeda & Mayers, 2006). A hybrid schedule would be a combination of a block schedule and a traditional schedule. Students would be in three traditional classes and two block schedule everyday (Veal, 2000).

Administrators are trying to figure out what is the best option for their schools. In what environment will the students be more successful? Which will the school benefit the most from? Which schedule is doable for the school culture?

**Some Advantages**

All studies list very similar advantages of block scheduling. A 4x4 block schedule would offer more class options for students. Students would be able to take more courses in one year and would not be stuck with only six classes a year (Gullatt, 2006). Teachers would have more flexibility in their repertoire. Teachers would not be stuck in just teaching the same old way. Extended periods would allow teachers to try several teaching strategies into their curriculum. For some teachers, it would force them to use a variety of teaching strategies. The classroom can be come student-centered, rather than teacher-centered. More cooperative groups and assignments can be done in a block schedule in all classes (Spellman & Oliver, 2001).

The school environment changed as well. Teachers found their rapport with students improved since teachers got to spend more time with their students. Teachers also had an opportunity to help the at-risk students more since they are in the classroom. Block scheduling has seen a reduction in failures in classes and dropout rates for some schools (Gullatt, 2006). For some schools the whole school environment was affected. Since students were moving less in the
block schedule and they had less to worry about in school, the attitudes of students changed (Spellman & Oliver, 2001).

**Some Disadvantages**

Parents and teachers felt that block schedule would lead to less content. Teachers would be forced to cover more content in one classroom setting causing some classes to cover two to three days worth of content in a traditional setting. Parents felt this would be too fast for their students (Veal, 2000). On the same note, other parents and teachers felt that students were covering less material in a block schedule. With less instructional minutes in a block schedule, parents and teachers were concerned that too much depth is being covered in a block schedule (Gullatt, 2006). Students were not being taught all of the content because Some teachers were still not changing their strategies regardless of the extended period. This would lead to unproductiveness. Students were less engaged (Veal, 2000).

**Results of Studies**

Although there are clear advantages and disadvantages to block scheduling throughout all the literature, the results are still very unclear. Some teachers felt they received more time for planning when they were in a block schedule (Gullatt, 2006). While some studies show otherwise, teachers felt less prepared and less time was given to them in a block setting (Veal, 1999). There is no major significance to change to a block schedule or stay in a traditional settings. Quantifying the success of block scheduling by comparing student GPAs, SAT scores, state test scores to those who are in a traditional setting does not lead to conclusive ideas. Majority of the positive results come from attitudinal effects of a block schedule format (Veal, 1999). Teachers and students favor block schedule. But at the same time, research shows that there are the same amount of complaints from teachers and students. The study on the
effectiveness of block schedule is still very inconclusive. When schools do change from traditional to block schedules, the studies expect schools to provide the proper professional development in order to help teachers and faculty adjust to the new schedule. With a strong wave of schools changing from traditional to block schedules, pre-service teacher education must change and improve as well. Studies suggest that instead of just placing student teachers in traditional settings, one of the assignments be placed in a block schedule so that they can gain the experience in an extended period (Veal, 1999).

**MY OPINION**

As a high school student, I got the opportunity to attend a school who tried alternative block scheduling (classes would be on a rotating schedule) for three years and transitioned back to the traditional schedule my fourth year. My class was the first group to graduate from the high school. Administrators were more willing to try something new since the school did not have any history. I never knew the reason why it changed to a traditional schedule.

I can say from a student’s perspective, the alternative block scheduling was doable and did not spread me too thin. Students nowadays are pressured and expected to carry a full load so that they can remain competitive in college admissions. I was not an exception to this expectation. The alternative block schedule enabled me to handle the rigorous schedule of Advance Placement, Honors classes, along with student government and an athletic schedule. Not seeing my classes on an everyday basis allowed me to spread my time efficiently, rather than try to do work for six classes everyday. The block schedule made high school life easier to handle.

The block schedule made the classes more enjoyable. Teachers were not rushing the content and it made each class different. Teachers were more innovative in their classroom
setting. When we went traditional, the teachers and students were pressed more time. I had more lecture style of teaching in my senior year. While in the earlier years of high school, classes offered a lot more variety in the classroom.

One of the downfalls of an alternative block schedule was whether I liked the class or not. Whether it was the subject or the teacher, a block schedule made certain classes endless because of the lack of interest in the class. I was not like every other student, because I liked school and was interested in most subjects. Majority of my peers did not like a lot of classes and it made school unbearable. A block schedule made it hard for certain students to get through to the day. Sometimes it was not the content that made school difficult, but the teacher made it hard to appreciate the subject. There were some teachers that block schedule did not suit. Teachers continued to lecture for the entire period or did activities that could have been done in less than a class period.

As a teacher in a traditional setting, schools would be benefit from the block schedule. Before the readings, I did not even realize that there was a difference in block scheduling. I would offer the alternative block schedule to my administrators as an option for restructuring the school day. Although 4x4 block schedule would offer more classes to students throughout the year, I think the school’s state testing scores would not benefit from it. Since our schools are pressured to reach their goals of accountability, a 4x4 block schedule would be suitable. Any kind of testing, AP tests and state tests, that is only offered at the end of the school year would not benefit from the 4x4 schedule. I would think students would find it difficult to remember the content learned in the Fall semester and go through high stakes testing on the material a couple of months later. It is not fair to the students and it does not truly reflect the hard work put in by both teacher and student. The school is getting punished rather benefiting from a 4x4 schedule.
The alternative block schedule would be a better option for the school because I see a lot of my students go through a day of six classes and they are burnt out. Teachers expect their students to devote a lot of time and effort on one class. Sometimes teachers forget that their students are not solely registered in one class. The quality of work would be different, rather than getting sloppy work or no work at all. Sometimes the students choose one class over the other, depending on the severity or importance of the assignment. If we help students by giving them more time to complete assignments and/or less time worrying about juggling six classes, I think that students would be more successful. This type of environment would help students not only with busy school schedules, but also for students who might need to work after school. Knowing that they only have four classes to worry about, rather than six or seven would alleviate some stress and anxiety about school and work.

The alternative block schedule really suits my teaching practice. I enjoy seeing my students work in cooperative groups. In the traditional schedules, I find myself rushing through assignments because the bell cuts my class short. Sometimes I cut the students in the middle of their productivity because there is not enough time. It is hard to regain that same focus the following day. I see a lot of time wasted just to get the students to refocus on the task at hand and expect them to pick up where they left off the day before. In a science classroom, labs would be more worthwhile. It is similar with the other cooperative group assignments. If students can see this get done in one class, rather than two or even three days, the students can see the connections better and I can help them make those connections better. I would be able to teach content, and do an activity such as a lab to reinforce the concepts all in one class session. A lot of the researches show that a lot of science teachers end up covering less material in a block schedule. A new question of breadth versus depth arises (Gullatt, 2006). If the students truly
understand the concept, that depth becomes a little bit more important rather than breadth of information.

Trying to change the whole school environment does not only appear in the schedule changes but it appears more so on the “buy-in” from the faculty. One of the hard sells, regardless of studies and benefits, is whether the faculty as a whole would agree to the new philosophy of the block schedule. Research indicates that in order for block scheduling to work, faculty and staff must receive the appropriate training in order to maximize the time in the classroom (Stokes and Wilson, 2000). Teachers must change their teaching styles if a block schedule is implemented. The classroom cannot just be lecture for ninety minutes, but teachers need to implement new strategies into their repertoire. After the faculty has been educated about block schedule, the community (parents and students) needs to be educated in the reasons behind the restructuring of the school day. Support is needed in order to be successful in the changes implemented in the classroom.

Although block schedule decreases instructional time, the quality of instructional time needs to be different. Teachers take it for granted that students come into the classroom on an everyday basis. Teachers will need to see that students need to be engaged in the classroom for a longer period of time and add more variety in the classroom setting.

In a large high school setting, some studies have shown to improve the school setting with block schedule (Spellman and Oliver, 2001). Although this part of the research might still be unclear, all schools need to see what resources they have in order to improve the school settings. Educators know that student achievement is also based on these outside factors that have nothing to do with the content. If block schedule has helped alleviate some of these outside factors, it might be more worthwhile to look into.
Reference


