Block Scheduling: Should We or Shouldn’t We?

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I. Introduction

I chose Block Scheduling as my project because every couple of years the topic comes up for discussion at my school Vanguard Career Center, a vocational school in Fremont, Ohio. The discussion requires input from: students, teachers, parents, community, school board, and administration. The paper I am writing will be used to supply supporting data from the teachers’ point of view. The paper will also take into account that we deal basically with junior and senior level students in the last two years of high school. Our students basically come to our school to learn a trade and complete the remaining requirements for academic credits from their home schools. We also need to remember that the students do come from nine different home schools. I will discuss both the pros and the cons that I have found about Block Scheduling and will report on interviews I had with teachers and administrators at neighboring schools who have tried Block Scheduling.

II. Why schools moved to block scheduling

The high school structure has been essentially the same over the last one hundred years. Student schedules were based on tradition, social needs, climate, and meeting vacation needs. In 1990, Michael Fullan reiterated the idea that the traditional high school schedule had become a powerful myth, ceremonially adopted whether or not it was efficient or effective.\(^1\) Of course, traditions in education are deeply embedded in our national experience, and generations of Americans have graduated from high schools that required the successful completion of a prescribed number of Carnegie units. Unfortunately, the essence of the Carnegie unit is accumulated seat time.\(^2\) The National Commission on Time and Learning published its report, *Prisoners of Time*, which warned that schools must be reinvented to focus on learning, not time.\(^3\) The Commission recommended using block scheduling to give teachers the time to engage students in active instruction.
Several different types of block scheduling have been implemented: the (4X4) which uses four ninety minute periods a semester; the (A/B or eight block) a two day rotating schedule where classes meet all year long but meet every other day; and (modified block or FAN) which uses two or three ninety minute blocks and split or variable forty-five minute classes.

III. Interviews

I interviewed several school personnel at neighboring school who had either tried Block Scheduling and rejected it, or still use it. The first interview was with Judy Driscoll, Director at EHOVE Joint Vocational School in Milan, Ohio. She said that they had tried it in the 1995-1996 school year and abandoned it. Then, in the 2002-2003 school year, tried it again and are still using it. The first try failed due to poor planning and training of the staff. The teachers were given a short two day preschool in-service training and then school started. The teachers were very frustrated and had a bad attitude in trying to implement it. After one year, they returned to their former schedule of forty-five minute classes. The administration learned from the experience. Block Scheduling was again tried in the 2002-2003 school year. This time more than a year of planning and in-service training was involved. The teachers were sent to other schools where Block Scheduling was working to talk with teachers in their subject area and grade level. The teachers were given time to prepare lesson plans and map out the entire year course which would now be completed in one semester. The budget for technology was tripled so classes could have ample computers and other materials. The major opposing force was from the Social Studies teachers. They just didn’t like ninety minute periods. All teachers had to learn new skills and methods of teaching. EHOVE used a master plan developed by Michael D. Rettig a professor at James Madison University. His plan, called Teaching in the Block: Strategies for Engaging Active Learners\(^4\) included balancing the workload of teachers; balancing the workload of students; providing extended learning time; creating a small group, cared-about learning environment; altering policies and grading practices; and increasing the
amount of time students are actively engaged in their learning. He also designed lesson plan models for the teacher using the Block Schedule. He divided the ninety minute class into three parts: one, Homework Review (10-15 mins.); two, Presentation (20-25 mins.); and three, Activity (30-35 mins.). Some time at the end of each class was adjusted in to work on homework. The day of mostly lecture was over and the 90-minute block had to have interactive activities. The teacher was making contact with all the students. The vocational setting only allowed for two ninety minute blocks a day with the remainder of the day used for trade lab time. The good news for the students was they would only have homework from two classes to do. The school had less discipline problems with fewer class changes and fewer detentions issued. Attendance also improved. The teachers had more prep time and a period was added to the schedule for students to be tutored or help given on problems they needed help with. Judy retired last year, but the Block Scheduling is still being used at EHOVE Joint Vocational School.

I then interviewed Ron Auckerman, a math teacher in the Port Clinton City School System in Port Clinton, Ohio. Block Scheduling was tried and abandoned at his high school because of several factors. The schedule allowed for teachers to have a ninety minute preparation period, at which time they could leave school premises. Unfortunately several teachers abused this and were seen mowing lawns and shopping during school hours and a public outcry resulted. Another contributing factor and probably more important, was that upper level students wanting to take some of their classes on college campuses could not fit the classes into their schedule. For the staff, the actual training was not scheduled with enough time to learn the correct techniques and preschool preparation did not give adequate time to generate a pacing guide plan for the semester.

A teacher from Huron High School was also briefly interviewed. He stated that Block Scheduling had been tried and abandoned at their school. The major reason was also scheduling conflicts with students taking college courses. Huron has a branch of Bowling Green State University called Firelands College.
which is two miles from their school. Students in good academic standing can take college courses at no cost. Many students wanted to save money and get a head start on their college classes using this Post-Secondary Options Program.

IV. Reasons for going to Block Scheduling

Schools moved to block scheduling for many reasons. Two of them being: the amount of time lost changing classes six to nine times a day, and allowing educators to bring about fundamental changes in the learning experiences, by organizing a course around one semester of ninety minute classes. It was felt that two semesters of forty-five minutes lessened the quality of learning taking place.

The advantages found were: 1) lengthened classes reduce the amount of instructional time spent on classroom administration; 2) lessons can be extended and maintained with greater continuity; 3) discipline improves in direct response to the reduced number of class changes; 4) a less fragmented schedule allows students to focus on fewer courses at one time; 5) teachers benefit from additional planning time; 6) when absent, students have fewer courses in which to make up work; 7) students who need remedial assistance or who fail a course during the first semester have the opportunity to repeat the course during the second semester; 8) advanced students have the opportunity for acceleration and enrichment; 9) most schools using block scheduling are able to offer a wider variety of elective courses; and 10) additional class time enables teachers to engage students in interactive learning. 

V. Reasons against Block Scheduling

In the journal article *The Case against Block Scheduling* by Jeff Lindsay, the author gives his reasons against Block Scheduling and the data supporting his opinions. He states that block scheduling would be a step backward in the educational and learning process. The author even suggests that parents and students are not being told about the risks to the student’s education. He cites comments from parents, administrators, professors, and teachers about the problems with block scheduling.
He states major scientific studies on teenage attention span. These studies confirm twice as long in class with a double period, does not enable twice as much material covered. He describes the fun activities which are required to hold attention as watering down the class. He sees retention as a major restriction for high school students. He points out that most college students, who pay for classes, are more mature, have longer attention spans, and realize the need to retain, would be more likely to be successful with block scheduling. The lower levels: High School and Middle/Junior High School have many students who are there just to be there and lose interest fast.

He uses the term spacing effect. This common-sense objection is also supported by extensive research on the spacing effect, as summarized in a review article by Frank M. Emptier and R. Farris, *The Spacing Effect: Research and Practice*. In short, the spacing effect says that a topic broke into segments is retained better than when presented in one longer time period. One ninety minute class is less effective than two forty-five minute classes according to this author. He quotes Dr. Frank Y. H. Wang, President of Saxon Publishers, a highly respected textbook company and publishers of the Saxon Math series, as being totally against block scheduling.

**VI. My recommendations for implantation for success**

For block Scheduling to be a success I feel the following recommendations should be realized.

Teachers must develop and follow a plan of the semester with weekly goals achieved. The lesson each day should change and presentations vary, with different instructional activities being used. Different assessment practices should be used. The teachers should use the whole class period everyday. Outside activities should be incorporated into the lesson along with other creative activities. Teachers should constantly check that all students are participating in both small and large group activities. The successful teachers should mentor the teachers having trouble with block and show the better methods for success. Continuing staff development should be provided by directors and administrative staff.
team should be developed to give constant feedback and support for Block Scheduling. The monitoring team should also check that the pacing plan is being followed in all classes. Directors should supervise and enforce the pacing guides for all teachers. Directors and mentors should create improvement plans for teachers having problems. Superintendents should provide ample time, a year in advance, for pacing plan development and implementation. Substitutes should be addressed in the budget to allow for visitation of grade and subject classes in other schools where Block Scheduling has been a success.

Finally, boards of education should make sure all stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, administrators, and community members are involved with the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of Block Scheduling.

VII. Conclusion

My original reason for this project was to study Block Scheduling and be able to make an educated recommendation to my fellow teachers on whether we should be in favor or not in favor of its implementation. The subject may be coming up soon, possibly, the next contract negotiation. Having reviewed the pros and cons on the subject, I feel with the proper preparation and support from the administration as I described in my previous section, Block Scheduling would have merit at our vocational school. The neighboring joint vocational school EHOVE which boarders on our Eastern side has been using Block Scheduling successfully for several years; but, did try it once before and abandoned it. If we pattern our Block Scheduling off their experience and implementation program we wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel because the course has already been set. If on the other hand, we choose to try to implement Block Scheduling by short changing course pacing development, teacher development, not allowing outside visitation to successful schools, and no additional budge increases for additional technology (remember EHOVE’s budget tripled), then it would not stand a chance of being a success.
In my opinion teachers are in the profession of educating students. If Block Scheduling is a way to enhance my teaching and will benefit my students I welcome the challenge, given what I have observed through this project.

VIII. Work Sited


IX. Other Sources

