Block scheduling: Which schools should make the change?

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Abstract

The effect that class schedule has on student achievement, misconduct rates and attitudes towards school have been examined through an analysis of research. The pros and cons of both traditional and block scheduling have been considered. Block scheduling can be effective when the school plans carefully and follows certain guidelines. Block schedules allow the students more time in class to learn and more time for the teachers to organize lessons. Preservice teachers may also benefit from the use of the block schedule by having more intensive training. While block scheduling does have a positive impact on some schools, others have not seen the same results. The class schedule should be customized to fit the needs of the school; therefore, no schedule type can be implemented universally.
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Whether to use a traditional or block class schedule has been an issue of much controversy. It is important to understand that every school has individual needs, weaknesses and strengths, and therefore, can not have the exact same class schedule and curriculum as its neighboring school. So, how does one decide what will be the best choice for a school? The first step in deciding which class system will work best is to become acquainted with the types of class schedules. Next, one must consider the pros and cons of each type of schedule and see which points would weigh the most heavily given the situation. After weighing the pros and cons, one must see what the success rates are for each type of schedule through standardized testing, GPA averages, ACT scores and qualitative data from teachers and students. Finally, it is important to understand the steps to take in making the change, so that the transition is successful. After gathering all of this information, one can make the decision as to whether or not block scheduling will be productive for a certain school.

Background

Block scheduling originated out of many needs seen in the school, mostly dealing with using class time effectively. While every educational leader has a different reason for implementing block scheduling within a school, Gullatt (2006) points out that the original top reasons to switch to a block class schedule were to decrease the number of subjects taught at a time, increase the amount of student focus for each subject, provide a greater selection of electives and offer more vocational and AP courses. Some of these reasons are the same arguments made today. Lewis et al. (2005) mentions that block scheduling, which took off in the 1980s, is one of the more rapidly spreading curriculum reforms in education. By the year 2000,
around 50% of all high schools in America had tried block scheduling, with some states like North Carolina reaching 74% (Gullatt, 2006). While this article does not say how long each school used block scheduling or whether or not it was made permanent, it does, however, show the rising trend with trying block scheduling as a way to improve education.

I feel that is very important for educators to try to keep the curriculum fresh and changing. When student achievement and attitudes start to decline, curricularists should research different options for improving the education program. By considering different class schedules, educators are using the more widely implemented method of advancing student achievement. Switching from a traditional to a block schedule can show an upward trend in a school’s success and spirit. Reasons for this may be due to the core fundamentals of the block design, or because the school made a curricular change, causing a change in the atmosphere. Regardless of the curricular change made to the school, whether it deals with the class schedule or not, the best way to make a successful revision is to have ample knowledge on the subject and to understand the options fully.

Types of Class Schedules

Block scheduling in itself can mean many different things because there are many forms of the block schedule. The block schedule is an alternate to the traditional schedule that consists of six-eight class periods of 45-50 minutes each. The three most common block designs are the alternate, 4x4 and customized block designs. The alternate day block schedule, also known as the AB, odd/even or day 1/day 2 design, alternates the courses from day to day. This design has one set of classes taught Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while the other set of classes is taught Tuesdays and Thursdays. Each class session usually last between 90 and 120 minutes. Lewis et
al. (2005) points out that some advantages of the alternate day design are longer blocks of times that teachers can use to plan future lessons. Also, the alternate day design allows students to take as many classes as students would be able to take with a traditional schedule.

Another type of block schedule which is more commonly used is the 4x4 plan, also named the accelerated schedule or Copernican plan (Lewis et al., 2005). The 4x4 block schedule alternates the courses by semesters, so that fall semester presents one set of four courses and spring semester presents a different set of four courses. Overall, the 4x4 plan offers higher student achievement academically and socially when compared to other class schedules, including the alternate day block (Lewis et al., 2005). Some perks of the 4x4 plan include a larger variety of courses, more time to complete course material and more time to use a diversity of methods. Even though the courses are accelerated, students are still able to comprehend the material and test higher than they did through previous class schedules (Smith, 2007).

The other more common type of block schedule design is the customized block. The customized block schedule accommodates the school’s needs by allowing certain courses more time than others. An example of the customized design would be allowing more time for either English or mathematics, while keeping the other courses shortened. Not much data is collected on the customized block because each schedule is so unique to the school that uses it. One article by Childers and Ireland (2005) reveal how one high school in North Carolina combined a traditional and block schedule successfully after years of planning. The school required every student to take eight classes that were carefully matched with each other; they had either four block and four shortened classes or two block and six shortened classes. After running into some standard difficulties and then hiring scheduling consultants, the school showed accomplishment (Childers & Ireland, 2005). The customized block may be one of the more efficient designs.
because certain courses require more class time than others and this design offers freedom to create a schedule based on the needs of the students and the school.

Pros & Cons

There are many benefits of the block schedule to both the student and the teacher. Supporters of the block schedule tend to like this approach because the students are able to spend more time with the same teacher, have more time with each subject and are able to learn through a larger variety of methods. Students also like this schedule because fewer classes mean less homework and information to sort through daily. Because the students do not have to deal with as much material, they are more likely to receive higher academic scores (Gullatt, 2006). With the block schedule, misconduct can also decrease because there will be less time spent changing classes. Mattox, Hancock and Queen (2005) mention that this schedule style is associated with fewer discipline problems, along with a more positive atmosphere and higher perceptions of the school. It was also discovered that there are more positive social impacts with the students through this approach (Lewis et al., 2006). Corley (2003) surveyed students who have experienced the transition to a block schedule, and he learned that the students agreed that the block schedule successfully demonstrated such learning goals as preparing students better for tests, increasing the level of understanding of the material, improving grades and receiving more help from teachers, among others. Overall, students do better academically and socially.

Not only do the students benefit from the block schedule, but the teachers do as well. The teachers have more time to plan a lesson due to the increased amount of time during their non-teaching period. Lewis et al.’s (2006) research support that classroom assessment techniques were stronger with teachers that taught in a block schedule as opposed to a traditional schedule.
Another benefit to teachers is the freedom to vary lessons and activities so that students with learning disabilities or different learning styles can progress. According to a study by Fang and Ashley (2004), preservice teachers agreed that teaching in a block schedule gave them more confidence through this accelerated training method. Block scheduling allows teachers to spend more one on one time with students, helping both the student understand the material and the teacher better exercise his/her abilities. Block scheduling can be a great training tool in helping new teachers become better acquainted with the profession.

While there are many reasons to be fond of the block design, some people still stand by the traditional schedule. Supporters of the traditional schedule tend to like this more intensive approach mostly because it is what they know the most about. The traditional schedule allows students to take many courses simultaneously in 45-50 minute class intervals. The traditional schedule will keep the information fresh in the students’ minds, better preparing them to take tests like the ACT. Harmston et al. (2003) discovered that out of the 4x4, AB and traditional schedule designs, the traditional design was the only schedule to show a constant increasing trend in ACT scores across a seven-year period of the 450 public high schools in the study. While not all research trends in this direction, it does make sense that traditional schedule will keep the lessons more current in the students’ minds in preparation of tests.

Supporters of the traditional schedule may be against the block schedule because there is more time away from the material on off days or semesters with the block design, making it harder for students to remember the information. Also, because the block design has more information taught per day, absences will put a student further behind in a class than with the traditional schedule (Mowen & Mowen, 2004). If one wants to consider the block design, student attendance should be an accompanying factor to pay special attention to. Corley (2003)
discovered an increase in attendance at a school that he worked for after the change to the block schedule. While the issue of attendance might make some skeptics worry about the block design, previous research shows that attendance actually improved after the switch. This implies that not only did the students’ attitude toward learning change, but that their attendance was reflected in that as well (Corley, 2003). This shows that possible negative outcomes may surprise educators by turning into something positive.

**Student Achievement**

Positive outcomes have been the tendency for many schools’ academic standings. High schools’ led the movement in converting from the traditional schedule to the block schedule. Research shows that there has been an improvement in high school academic achievement, especially within mathematics and English. Corley (2003) mentions that one Indiana high school had an increase in students’ GPA, exam grades, honor roll percentage, proficiency scores and SAT scores. Nichols’ (2005) research on block scheduling’s influence on grade point average in English and language arts show a slightly positive impact. All five schools included in the study saw a significant improvement at .05 or .01 confidence level between the 1992-1993 school year and the 1998-1999 school year after the schedule change.

Along with an improvement in English and language arts, block scheduling also shows an academic improvement in mathematics for high school students. Lewis et al. (2005) saw an increase in mathematics with the 4x4 design. The 4x4 design produced higher scores than both the traditional and AB designs in regard to 11th grade ACT test scores. Lewis et al. (2005) encourages future researchers to consider block scheduling for other subjects like reading, where it is believed to provide an even stronger increase in GPA and standardized testing scores. An
urban high school in Philadelphia saw an increase in students’ scores after installing a 4x4 block design with English and mathematics being taught all-year-long (Smith, 2007). Most literature being discussed emphasizes English and mathematics as needing the extra amount of time given with the block design.

After seeing the positive results in high school settings, middle schools started implementing the block schedule design as well. They too have seen higher academic achievement with the students. A study examining the outcomes of mathematic scores through a state-mandated test consisting of both a computation and application section shows a significant increase in middle school students’ scores after the switch from a traditional schedule to a block schedule (Mattox, Hancock & Queen, 2005). The researchers chose mathematics as the subject to test the schedule change, because it is a subject that is required by all students and is in the curriculum for every grade level within the middle school.

Making the Change

After learning of the successful experiences other schools have had, many other schools consider making the change to a block schedule themselves. Before jumping into the excitement of changing the curriculum, educators need to follow a series of steps before switching to a block schedule. Educators Mowen & Mowen (2004) suggest that curricularists should consider different schedules, determine the school’s needs, draft several different schedules, conduct a pilot, make the decision, provide training for the teachers, inform community members about the change, gather feedback and then make the necessary modifications. Having well-thought-out organization and planning strategies insures for a smoother transition. Paying special attention to each step individually will provide the best results and the less amount of stress on those who
will be implementing the schedule change. Going into the process knowing that the first attempt may not be perfect will better prepare the ones who are hearing all of the feedback and are responsible for making the alterations when needed.

Overall, it is crucial to examine each school in isolation to see what the best class schedule will be. While many schools have benefited from the block schedule design, others have not (Gullatt, 2006). If a school is continually improving academically, a schedule change may not be necessary, or if the schedule change is carried out, it may not produce highly significant results compared to before. However, if a school is need of academic improvement, a class change may be a good option to consider. Most success has been seen with the 4x4 block compared to the AB block according to research conducted by Lewis et al. (2005). Making a class schedule unique to the needs of the students is more likely to show the best results, suggesting that a customized block design is probably the best option.
References


