

Block Scheduling—Its' Effect On One Major School System

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Many secondary art teachers have raised questions concerning block scheduling and its effects on secondary art programs. What is block scheduling? What effect does it have on visual art enrollment and instruction? What is the rationale for block scheduling? Are there benefits for students and teachers in using block scheduling? A recent survey conducted with Charlotte-Mecklenburg art teachers offers some possible answers.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System (CMS) is a large city-county school system in the southwestern part of North Carolina. It has a total of 130 schools comprised of special programs, magnet, and traditional school settings with a student population of over 90,000. The system employs 5,400 teachers and has a total of 10,000 employees. Art teachers account for 165 teaching positions, K-12.

Site-based management brought alternative forms of scheduling into focus as teachers and administrators sought greater flexibility for using the time in the school day. Two types of block scheduling are currently being utilized in the CMS system: a 4/4 semester plan and an A/B alternate-day plan. In the 4/4 semester plan, a student registers for eight classes per year and attends four classes every day for ninety minutes each for the first semester, and four different classes for the second semester. On the A/B alternate day plan, eight ninety minute periods, over a two-day time frame, are scheduled for the year. Periods 1, 2, 3, 4 meet on A day, and periods 5, 6, 7, 8 meet on B day.

The implementation of these block schedules has had overwhelmingly positive results on the visual arts program. One very evident change that has occurred is increased enrollment in secondary art classes.

Enrollment

Many students, in the past, have only had room in their schedules to register for courses mandated for entrance to any institution of higher learning. Now all students have a greater opportunity to enroll in the visual arts program and as a result the number of art teachers has increased dramatically. Before block scheduling, secondary schools averaged one or two art teachers. Staff numbers now range from two to four teachers on the middle school level and from three to five on the high school level. Block scheduling has also increased opportunities for the visual arts departments to offer new specialized courses focused on particular media, as well as the traditional art I, II, III and IV courses.

Rationale for Semester and Alternate Day Scheduling

Alternative scheduling offers greater flexibility for both teachers and students. Longer class periods allow students more time for lab work, hands-on activities, thorough discussion, and a chance for in-depth study. Benefits to teachers and students from the 4/4 semester plan and the A/B alternate day plan include the following:

- Improvement in student success and achievement.
- Increased opportunity for more individualized and personalized attention and instruction.
- Greater opportunity for fewer classes to prepare for in a twenty-four hour period.
- Additional opportunities for students to assume responsibility for their own learning.
- Improved school climate through reduced stress and a calmer school day.
- New opportunities for in-depth development and application of key concepts.
- Two evenings for students to complete class assignments on the A/B plan.

- Four classes for students to prepare for each day.
- More time for students to focus on the art processes to develop their potential.
- More time for a variety of teaching techniques to reach individual learning styles.
- Better opportunities for teachers to evaluate learning and to give appropriate feedback.
- More opportunities to use a variety of instructional strategies.
- Increased student involvement in peer critiquing and peer modeling.

Instruction

In North Carolina, the newly written 1996 Visual Arts Standard Course of Study identifies the objectives and implications for learning and teaching that must be included in all offerings. Block scheduling allows teachers to capitalize on the ninety minute periods with an in-depth exposure to standards, art principles and concepts. However, to utilize the time effectively in a ninety minute period, a teacher should include the following:

- Variety of mental and physical activities, learning and teaching styles, and activities of varying intensities and length.
- Smooth, logical, and clear transitions between activities to eliminate confusion.
- Varied times for presentation of new information by the teacher, or student, rather than constant student-centered activities.
- Guided practice time so errors can be corrected before they are learned or imprinted incorrectly.
- Review time of previous day's activities and materials as well as those of the current day, to keep students thinking about past and present progress.
- Careful planning by the teacher in order to utilize time in the most educationally sound manner possible.

Is it a Panacea

The entire staff must be willing to accept change, or block scheduling is doomed from the beginning. All students can learn and no single learning style can be applied to all students. The block scheduling models are designed to house several modes of instruction within a class period. A diversity of activity is possible in the ninety minute period, including more complex problem-

solving exercises, more in-depth critique, class discussions with fuller participation by the students, and more effective use of current technology. Students have greater opportunities to understand and master challenging subject matter, unique symbols, images, and visual expressions. The teacher has time to develop the maturing student's thinking, working, communicating, reasoning and investigating skills.

In the survey of CMS art teachers, the response was generally positive about the block scheduling. However, many teachers did reply that it took effort to make it work successfully; and simply changing to block scheduling does not mean automatic support from the administration. The art teachers remarked that having extra periods in the schedule did allow an opportunity for students to take advantage of elective courses, and on occasion, students who have no interest in art were registered in art classes. Absenteeism can also be a problem, since students miss more information in a ninety minute class. However, the nature of the block structure allows students to ascertain instruction missed more easily. In the 4/4 semester plan, because art classes meet only one semester and not the entire year, there were possible problems preparing students for Advanced Placement exams, art portfolios, scholarship applications and entries to competitions and exhibitions.

In general, the pros for block scheduling certainly outweigh the cons. Teachers believe that students are very positive about the block scheduling in the visual arts departments. Teachers who teach with this type of scheduling have competed extremely well in contests and have managed to build strong, sequential programs that include Advanced Placement, Honors and International Baccalaureate courses. Block Scheduling has led to a strong presence and a new respect for visual arts in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School setting.

Additional References

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