Block Scheduling's Missteps, Successes and Variables

A study finds steady progress in the use of alternatives to the traditional schedule by MICHAEL D. RETTIG AND ROBERT LYNN CANADY

While a few schools have returned to single periods, the vast majority of schools that adopted alternative scheduling models continue to be satisfied with their decisions. We have documented one state's history of adoption, implementation and minimal reversion from block scheduling; highlighted mistakes some schools have made; reviewed how alternative schedules have been used as part of schools' efforts to improve school environment and achievement; and looked at three variables related to school scheduling that affect student learning.

Virginia's Record

Data from Virginia collected over the past nine years indicate that of the state's 303 high schools, 237 have implemented a block schedule in the past 18 years and 231 continue to use some form of this schedule. Six schools, or 2.5 percent, have returned to single-period models. Most schools that moved back to single periods from a block schedule have a story to tell, a particular event or chain of circumstances that precipitated the change.

At the beginning of the 1995-96 school year two high schools in the same district returned to single periods. One of the schools had operated on a four-day, six A/B schedule (A/B blocks Monday-Thursday with all six periods meeting on Friday) for two years before both high schools switched to a two-day block in which all six classes met in single periods on Monday, Tuesday and Friday and three classes met for double periods on Wednesday and Thursday. According to a former superintendent, a change of principal, several dissatisfied influential teachers and parents and poor preparation for teaching in the block combined to precipitate a change back to a six-period schedule after one year of the two-day block. That same year 39 additional schools began block scheduling, increasing the state total to 133, or 46 percent of Virginia's high schools.

Two years later, in 1997-98, another high school returned to a six-period schedule from a 7 A/B schedule. This school originally had adopted a block schedule under the direction of a principal who was following his marching orders from a superintendent who favored block scheduling. After both the superintendent and the principal moved on to new positions, the new superintendent discovered only about 50-50 support for the schedule. The dissatisfied teachers included many veterans from among whom the new principal was appointed. When a new program that permitted teachers to create small, autonomous special-emphasis schools drew off several younger faculty, support for the block schedule eroded even further and the old schedule was restored. By this year an additional 54 schools had implemented a block schedule, bringing the total to 186, or 62 percent of the state's high schools.

At the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year a fourth school changed back from a seven A/B schedule to a seven-period schedule. The principal said the change was made to improve performance on state testing. While the school's performance on end-of-course tests did improve after the change, so did the performance of nearly every other high school in the state, whether or not they were on a block schedule. By that year an additional 37 high schools had moved to a block schedule, up to 73 percent of Virginia's high schools.

For the 2001-2002 school year, a fifth school changed back to a seven-period schedule from the 4x4 schedule. After the departure of the school principal who had initiated the schedule, a small group of influential veteran teachers and parents was successful in lobbying the new principal for a return to the old schedule. That year eight more schools implemented a block schedule, bringing the total to 228 statewide.
For the 2002-2003 school year, a sixth school changed back to seven single periods from a 7 A/B schedule. This change occurred during an administrative transition (new principal and new superintendent) at the urging of two vocal teachers in the school. Staff returned at the end of the summer to find they were back on a seven-period day. The original sponsors, two teachers and a former principal, were long gone by then. That year four other Virginia schools changed to a block, bringing the current total on a block schedule to 231 schools, or 76 percent statewide.

Chancing Back
From our experiences in Virginia and in more than 40 states, we have found the change back to single periods from a block schedule usually involves one or more of the following:

• The use of a flawed decision-making process to adopt a block schedule.

If the school began its new schedule through administrative edict or without significant support from the faculty, parents and students, the new schedule becomes a bone of contention, regardless of the quality of the schedule. If the initiator of the new schedule leaves, a few influential faculty and/or parents may lobby for a change; we believe this reaction has little to do with the schedule itself and everything to do with power and control. We know of schools in which the faculty has returned from summer vacation to find a new schedule in place. Their dismantlement is understandable. We generally recommend a year of study prior to making a decision and a year of preparation if a new schedule is to be implemented.

• Poor preparation for teaching in the block, including insufficient staff development and/or insufficient course offerings.

We believe the success or failure of the current block-scheduling movement depends on teachers' abilities to adapt instruction to the longer periods. Consequently, schools must provide considerable staff development opportunities that address teaching in the block, specifically instructional strategies that promote more active involvement of students.

Equally important, especially in this age of high-stakes accountability, is the need to revise course pacing guides. Several of the first schools to adopt the 4x4 schedule did not create or revise their course pacing calendars to the new timetable and consequently during the first semester of implementation some teachers arrived at the Thanksgiving holiday only to realize (belatedly) they were far behind and the “year” was nearly over.

• Unclear goals, overpromising or not meeting promises made.

Regardless of the change or program being implemented, it is important to identify clear and reasonable goals and outcomes expected. Block scheduling is not a panacea for all that ails high schools, and a school that expects major increases in standardized test scores just by changing to blocks from periods is likely to be disappointed. While many schools that have made impressive gains in student achievement often will point to a new schedule as one strategy within their overall school improvement plan, just changing the bells is not the magic bullet.

The implementation of a block schedule is not a goal in and of itself; the focus should be on the desired outcomes, such as improved discipline, reduced stress for students and teachers, improved student achievement for a specific group or course or increased course-taking opportunities. A schedule is one of many tools, albeit an important one, which might be used to meet these goals.

We also are aware of situations where schools were promised additional staffing to lower or maintain class size or perhaps to provide an unencumbered, daily, full-block planning period for teachers. If these promises are not kept, an understandable backlash and erosion of support for the new scheduling concept will result.

• Poor scheduling decisions in the adoption phase.

Some school leaders attempted to develop support for a change to a new schedule by striking bargains with various interest groups. For example, music educators and their active boosters have been wary of the 4x4 schedule because it is inexorable to schedule performing arts groups for only one semester. To assuage their concerns in some schools, band, choir and orchestra programs were allocated a daily block for the full year, an equivalent of two of the eight credits available to students annually.

Similar deals were struck with advocates for athletics, AP courses, ROTC and journalism and yearbook classes. As a result, students who elected to be in the band for four years would expend 25 percent of their available time (eight of 32 credits) just to participate in this one program. Seniors who enrolled in two year-long AP courses and a year-long choir block would have room for little else in their schedules.

We recommend that the decision to “double-dose” a course be done sparingly. A more reasonable alternative is the creation of a modified schedule that, while predominantly 4x4, includes some year-long courses that meet either every other day in blocks or everyday in “skinnies,” or single periods. We believe the best schedules are hybrids that are based on students’ needs.

• Budgetary concerns.

We occasionally have heard of a school district that has changed back to single periods, claiming it was less expensive. We must emphasize that a block schedule is no more expensive to operate than an equivalent single-period schedule.

An eight-period schedule, an eight A/B schedule and a 4x4 schedule all require the same level of staffing, if teachers instruct six of the eight classes. Obviously, if teachers in the single-period schedule instruct seven of eight classes (a brutal regimen); this schedule will be cheaper to staff. The percentage of available periods or blocks taught by each teacher and the class size allowed per section determines the staffing level necessary—not whether a school operates a block or single-period schedule.

• The lack of a rigorous formal evaluation.

It is a sad and embarrassing fact that many programs in education drift in and out without ever measuring their impact because they were never rigorously evaluated. Block scheduling is no exception.

Once clear goals and expected outcomes are identified, we recommend an evaluation of the effectiveness of a new schedule be designed before implementation. This evaluation should include both quantitative and qualitative academic and environmental data. Because we believe block schedules carry a differential impact on different kinds of students (college prep, general track and students at risk of dropping out), we suggest data be disaggregated for these various subgroups. Results should be regularly and publicly reported. Not conducting a formal evaluation leaves any program vulnerable to the whim of a leadership change. A new school board member, superintendent or principal may arrive and “evaluate” the schedule based upon his or her own experience or criteria. As has been said many times before, without data it’s just another opinion.

Implementing Well
Based on a growing body of research and our work in hundreds of schools that have operated either the A/B schedule or the 4x4 schedule for five or more years, we can say the following with confidence:

• School management problems are reduced because students spend less time in highly congested areas, such as in hallways and dressing rooms.
The amount of class tardiness is reduced;

- Teachers make better use of technology and engage students in more active learning strategies;

- Stress is reduced for both teachers and students because they meet fewer classes during any one school day or term;

- Time lost to general administrative duties, such as calling roll, setting up and cleaning up and getting students into an academic mode of behavior is reduced;

- The number of courses students may take increases if a change is made to either the eight A/B or the 4x4 schedules from a six- or seven-period day, without a commensurate increase in stress. More time is available for student support and extended learning.

- In eight-course models, “double-dosing” classes (meeting in a block every day all year long) allow additional learning time for students at risk of failing key courses such as Algebra I and English 9 or required state examinations.

Extra Benefits

In addition, the 4x4 (semester/semester) block schedule offers several other benefits. We recommend a modified version of this schedule that embeds an A/B schedule into one or more blocks of the 4x4 to provide yearlong contact with some courses, such as band, orchestra, choir, Advanced Placement classes, ROTC and journalism.

- Students who know they are failing do not waste an entire year in a class with no motivation to attend, to behave and to learn. They can begin a new course second semester. Once students know they are failing and have no chance of graduating with their class, they are more likely to drop out. The 4x4 offers the possibility of catch-up acceleration and therefore a glimmer of hope.

- A balanced workload can be provided for both teachers and students. Teachers have fewer preparations at any one time, a factor especially important for small schools, and each semester students can focus on fewer courses that carry high homework, test and project requirements. This can be a critical factor for students’ success in school as standards are raised. Increasing expectations must be accompanied with extended learning time and additional support for some students, such as providing tutorials during school time.

- In preparing students for tests at certain dates and/or high school years after grade 9, some courses can be delayed until reading/writing and math skills are improved sufficiently to increase the odds for success in later courses. For example, if a state assessment is given in science at the end of 10th grade, selected students in grade 9 may be double-dosed for English 9 and/or Algebra I, with additional tutorials in both, and postpone taking science until 10th grade. During 10th grade these same students can take two science courses in consecutive semesters. Similar arrangements can be made for other courses when delays are needed to build skills for later courses.

- The 4x4 schedule is conducive to accelerating advanced students. For example, it is easy for students to complete four or more years of two different foreign languages or to complete 6-plus years of one language. In many schools we find students in the 4x4 completing additional math courses.

Three Key Variables

Simply changing the bells offers no guarantee of increased student achievement. A schedule is merely a tool educators use to manipulate the time variable, one of three key factors in student learning:

The time variable: Increasing the amount of time provided for students to learn is the primary way school personnel have used a block schedule to improve student achievement. Because some students need more time to learn than others, providing the same scheduled learning time for all students is illogical. As greater numbers of students from varying backgrounds are expected to master challenging standards, the amount of learning required of all students is becoming constant. Time must become the variable. For years the reverse has been true.

Essentially there are three ways to alter the time variable. Selected classes can be provided extended learning time. Some schools offer classes with high failure rates with two years of instruction within one school calendar year by double-dosing. Others build in tutorials during school time for selected students. Some both double-dose and offer tutorials. Still other schools create a plan for highly sequential classes such as Algebra I, which includes a schedule of periodic interventions. While each of these ideas is possible in almost any type of schedule, we find them used more frequently in block schedules than single period schedules and more frequently in the 4x4 schedule than in A/B schedules.

The teacher variable: Doing nothing more than extending the time variable may not do anything but double the misery for both teachers and students. What teachers do with the extra time is the critical factor. Is the curriculum aligned to the standards being tested? Are supports for students provided? How does the teacher relate to students? What instructional strategies are used?

Evidence suggests teachers who are most successful in improving the performance of at-risk students learn how to make it difficult for students to fail, but also make it difficult for them to receive high grades without much work and re-work. These teachers know how to raise the bar of expectations and how to support, cajole and nag until students experience the feel of success. They believe in and direct an effort-based model of teaching and learning. We contend teachers who tend to be this way can be more effective in a schedule that balances the workload and limits the numbers of preparations for them during any one semester or school year.

The student variable: Schools can alter the time variable and teachers can align curriculum, provide supports and relate to students in positive ways, but all of these efforts may be wasted for those students who will not attend school on a regular basis and work once they come to school. Sometimes we find school policies and grading practices that work against student-effort models of instruction. Policies that prevent students from making up work because of an unexcused absence tend to dig the hole deeper for students, especially for those who don’t plan to make up their work and who are not motivated by grades. It seems unwise to support policies that discourage students from doing work.

While a few high schools have returned to traditional single-period schedules, the vast majority of schools that have adopted block schedules continue to modify and refine their models. To the extent these schools can avoid the missteps of the few and address the variables of time, teachers and students with careful planning and thought, block scheduling may become an even more valuable tool for school improvement.

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