

Block Scheduling for Clarksdale High School

A block schedule consisting of fewer but longer class periods has many advantages for both student and teacher. A block schedule would work well at Clarksdale High School and we should begin taking the steps today towards the installation of one type of an extended-period schedule. But before we make an organizational change, we must first make a significant change in our pedagogy, shifting from a **teacher-centered classroom** to employ the "**student as worker**" concept. A new arsenal of instructional methods must be developed if this change in instructional method, and corresponding schedule, will be successful.

There are three main types of block schedules. A **Copernican Plan** calls for fewer classes that meet for longer blocks of time every day of the school week. A year-long course would be taught in one semester instead of two. Normally four courses are taken at once during each semester. In a **collegiate format**, classes meet for longer time periods on fewer days during the week, similar to the scheduling at colleges and universities. In the high school setting, a year-long course would be completed in two semesters and the student would be enrolled in six, seven, or eight concurrent courses. Finally, in a **team time block plan**, subjects are scheduled daily into a team time block at the discretion of a team of teachers responsible for educating a group of students. On one day, science may be taught for two hours, English for one, math for a half hour, and history for two. This is by far the most challenging yet flexible time schedule.

Block scheduling offers many advantages. It reduces the number of: courses a student takes at one time from six or seven to four; different sets of homework assigned to a student; chaotic class changes a student makes each day; teachers with which a student comes in contact; behaviors that are expected of the student; textbooks needed for each course; courses a teacher instructs from five or six to three; students a teacher sees each day from 150 to 75; housekeeping duties (like taking role) teachers must perform. Block scheduling also offers an extended planning period which can be used for team teaching. It allows a student to stay on schedule for

graduation by repeating a failed course the next semester. Block scheduling eliminates the need for summer school and gives students an opportunity to work ahead and move on to more challenging courses. There is more time to discover and still take the necessary courses to pursue an interest in a block schedule, and it increases the variety of teaching methods that may be used during one period of instruction. The actual instruction time is increased in a block schedule by eliminating half of the class beginnings and endings. Finally, in a block schedule: core courses of English, math, science, and history can be completed in two years; there is time to complete extensive labs or projects and to take short field trips in the community; and there are fewer total number of classes to make up when absent.

There are four major negative aspects of a block schedule. First, each teacher or student absence counts as two days of class time. This can be combatted with a strict attendance policy (for example, losing course credit after a set number of absences) and careful selection of necessary teacher absences. Secondly, a block schedule will be perceived by conservative teachers, students, and community members as radical. Time must be spent educating both teachers and citizens of the community to avoid this problem, plus offering exciting courses to the students that are only possible because of a block schedule. A third problem is that transfer students may not be able to adjust to the academic schedule, unless a transfer/remediation team of teachers is created to help students catch up and remain current in their classes. Finally, ninety minutes of lecture is boring. New methods of instruction must be used to maintain student interest. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of a block schedule.

If we, the faculty at Clarksdale High School, are going to take advantage of what the block schedule has to offer, we must first devote ourselves to improving our instructional methods by moving towards the principle of "student as worker." It is important that we develop this goal first, to philosophically change the way we approach instruction, before we make a structural change in our daily routine. Kathleen Cushman, editor of The Coalition of Essential Schools' publication Horace, notes that "When scheduling changes are not driven by educational principles, they risk becoming just another educational fad. The best schedules may actually

change continually, in response to the evolving vision of a particular school." (Cushman, page 2)

In schools where the use of block scheduling has been successful, "changes in their schedules invariably were driven by their commitment to principles of learning that simply could not be accommodated by the old time slots. This progression from pedagogy to schedule change is critical if the change is to work." (Cushman, page 2)

Teachers will embrace the idea of only instructing three periods a day, having an extended planning period, and dealing with 75 rather than 150 students. The greatest hurdle will be to convince the faculty the change of scheduling is to their instructional advantage. In order to do this, it is essential that we obtain materials and information that will tell the teacher not what to teach, but *what to do* in the classroom during the ninety minutes. It will be to no one's advantage if the entire ninety minutes are used for lecture. Ninety-minute lectures *in college* are boring! Time must be set aside for the staff to plan new types of lessons that can be used in the longer instruction period.

To make the adjustment from a seven period day and seven courses per year to a four period day and eight courses a year, we must first start out with a taste of the longer class period format. During the first two years of a three-year process, I propose keeping the seven period format for three of the five days each week (the "Type A" schedule, see appendix) and using a block schedule twice a week (the "Type B1" and "Type B2" schedule, see appendix) which includes time set aside for teachers to meet together weekly in order to develop lesson plans. It is important that the entire faculty make this change because block scheduling is best introduced into the school schedule by using it at every period of the day. "Curricular and pedagogical reform must be embraced by the whole staff, not be regarded as just an "enrichment program" involving a few longer classes... the lengthened class periods and extra time (enjoyed by the teachers instructing longer class periods) has caused divisiveness." (Cushman, page 3) This transition time will allow teachers to experiment with the longer instructional time while maintaining the familiarity of the regular class period. It will force the faculty to develop new lessons that include a variety of instructional methods, but it will not have to be done all at once.

Once the teachers feel that the change to a ninety-minute period can be made, then the full block schedule can be put into effect.

During the second year of the three year period, the course offerings can be expanded to accommodate the upcoming third year in which each student will be taking eight courses a year on the full four-period-a-day block schedule (the "Type C" schedule, see appendix), completing an entire course in one semester. Four courses will be taught in their entirety during the first semester and four other courses during the second semester following a Copernican Plan. During the L.A.S period, businesspeople from the community will come to tutor and monitor students on their lunch breaks. This will allow the teachers to meet together for a solid block of time while involving the community in the educational process. This will be the activity study period of the day: computer terminals and library facilities will be open during this period.

If all of the aspects are carefully inspected, I feel that the needs of both the students and teachers of Clarksdale High School will be best served by a block schedule.

APPENDIX

• "Type A" Schedule

Period 1	7:55 - 8:55	60 minutes
Period 2	9:00 - 9:55	55 minutes
Period 3	10:00 - 10:55	55 minutes
Lunch/Period 4†	11:00 - 12:20	55 minutes
Period 5	12:25 - 1:20	55 minutes
Period 6	1:25 - 2:20	55 minutes
Period 7	2:25 - 3:20	55 minutes

† Lunch/Period 4		
First Wave	11:00 - 11:25	
Second Wave	11:25 - 11:55	
Third Wave	11:55 - 12:20	

• "Type B1" Schedule

Period 1	7:55 - 9:32	97 minutes
Break	9:32 - 9:40	8 minutes
Period 3	9:40 - 11:12	92 minutes
L.A.S*	11:12 - 12:18	66 minutes
Period 5	12:18 - 1:50	92 minutes
Break	1:50 - 1:58	8 minutes
Period 7	1:58 - 3:30	92 minutes

• "Type B2" Schedule

Period 2	7:55 - 9:32	97 minutes
Break	9:32 - 9:40	8 minutes
Period 4	9:40 - 11:12	92 minutes
L.A.S*	11:12 - 12:18	66 minutes
Period 6	12:18 - 1:50	92 minutes
Student Dismissal	1:50	
Teacher Meetings	2:00 - 3:30	90 minutes

• "Type C" Schedule

Period 1	7:55 - 9:32	97 minutes
Break	9:32 - 9:40	8 minutes
Period 2	9:40 - 11:12	92 minutes
L.A.S*	11:12 - 12:18	66 minutes
Period 3	12:18 - 1:50	92 minutes
Break	1:50 - 1:58	8 minutes
Period 4	1:58 - 3:30	92 minutes

*L.A.S = Lunch/Activity/Study

First Wave	11:12 - 11:34
Second Wave	11:34 - 11:56
Third Wave	11:56 - 12:18

During the L.A.S period, businesspeople from the community will come to tutor and monitor students on their lunch breaks. This will allow the teachers to meet together for a solid block of time while involving the community in the educational process. This will be the activity study period of the day: computer terminals and library facilities will be open during this period.

Bibliography

Canady, Robert Lynn and Michael D. Rettig, "Unlocking the Lockstep High School Schedule," Phi Delta Kappan, volume 75 number 4, December 1993, pages 310-314.

Cushman, Kathleen, ed., "Scheduling the Essential School," Horace*, volume 5 number 4, May 1989.

Edwards, Clarence M., Jr., "Restructuring to Improve Student Performance," NASSP Bulletin, volume 77 number 553, May 1993, pages 77-88.

Gainsburg, Julie, "Behind Schedules: A Look at Scheduling in an Essential School," Here, Thayer, and Everywhere**.

* Horace published by The Coalition of Essential Schools, Box 1969, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

** Here, Thayer, and Everywhere published by Thayer Junior/Senior High School, 85 Parker Street, Box 7, Winchester, NH 03470.