

The Success of Block Scheduling in Bringing About Positive Atmosphere in The Classroom: An Examination of High Technology High School

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Lengthy class periods used to be a dreadful concept to many students. For a teenager, the idea of remaining in a single high school class for more than the mandated forty-six minute period meant a long stretch for a short attention span. But increasingly, schools are turning to the restructuring of the length of a class period, and students and teachers alike are appreciating the positive effects of the idea. Block Scheduling, as it is sometimes called, is being implemented in schools around the country to effect the classroom atmosphere. In many of these schools the concept is proving to be very effective in improving the quality of learning as a result of a more positive classroom environment.

The SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, in a study sponsored by the Washington D.C. based Office of Educational Research and Regional Improvement, resolved that block scheduling can indeed positively effect the quality of learning in a school via a constructive change in the classroom atmosphere. Listing the advantages to such a plan, SouthEastern explained that block scheduling can encourage the implementation of more engaging instructional practices each day during the longer class period (Kadel, 1994). The engagement of the students, made possible with the help of block scheduling can lead to an improvement of teacher-student relationships, and in general create an atmosphere conducive to providing students with the courage and comfort to be motivated to perform the tasks set before them (Kadel, 1994). By working on a classroom level and affecting many elements of teaching and learning, block scheduling provides the learner with a better experience.

The overall atmosphere of the classroom is being positively effected at Center High School in Center, Colorado. Terrilee Day points to the positive atmosphere in her class as a result of block scheduling, and the effect it has had on her ability to teach effectively, "my students get to know me better than they would with a traditional schedule. This helps keep a positive classroom atmosphere that leads to fewer disciplinary interruptions" (Day, 1995).

The conducive atmosphere for effective teaching and school wide change which Block Scheduling provides is confirmed by an Educational Research Services report. In the report the Arlington, Virginia based group notes that in schools studied, instructional activities were being varied often by teachers and teachers were getting to know their students better due to block scheduling. At Thomasville High School, a survey conducted concerning the three year old system of block scheduling resolved that student and faculty sentiment was favorable towards the implementation of the ninety minute periods in that it improved the school environment (Cawelti, 1994).

For the teacher, the climate of a classroom is often structured by the time constraints imposed on him or her to get things done during the course of a class. When the structure

is altered, the classroom environment can change and more positive things may occur. The philosophy of the Principal of High Technology High School, Dr. William Pollock exemplifies just how important the nature of the classroom atmosphere can be for the teacher and the learning process of the student, "learning and teaching can be at the total control of the teacher without worrying about the bell ringing and everyone running to their next class when block scheduling is in effect." This, in turn, provides a focused atmosphere for students as they follow the instructor's plans without unnecessary interruption.

At HTHS Monmouth County a student's day is divided into five periods and the typical class lasts for seventy minutes. Almost twice the length of a typical New Jersey high school class period, the "blocked" seventy minute period is providing a healthy atmosphere for teachers and has been a major element in promoting a positive environment for the classroom and the school at large. The nature of the schedule brings about a dynamic force which drives teachers and students forward through flexibility and which keeps the classroom in a constantly forward moving stream.

The positive atmosphere in each classroom at the high school has fostered innovative lesson ideas which have provided the students with dynamic days, consisting of varied types of learning strategies. A teacher from each and every subject department in the school has provided lessons using the internet and other computer on-line services. These exercises have been innovative and exciting elements of lessons which would normally require a good deal of time to implement. Thanks to the seventy minute schedule, instructors have had the time to allow students to explore the world wide web as they download images for research reports, contact important experts in the necessary fields, or compile information from databases around the world. Such work could not be done within a forty minute period, for computer "startup" and "shutdown" procedures alone require ten minutes to complete.

In addition, new brands of courses have been developed, thanks in large part to the nature of the schedule. For three days of the week, Freshman and Sophomore students participate in discipline integrated 145 minute classes. Biology, Technology, and Computer Applications teachers work together to present students with a general education course, while English, Latin, and World Cultures teachers combine to facilitate 145 minutes of cross-curricular learning as well. All state mandated criteria for teacher-student contact time are met in an innovative and dynamic learning environment.

These exciting activities and the outgrowths of block scheduling in general are seen favorably by students at the school. Based on a poll, 87% of the students feel that longer periods allow for a better classroom atmosphere. One student mentioned that the longer period provided for a more "relaxed atmosphere," while another stated that the blocked time gave the students a sense of maturity, an "adult feeling" to the classroom in that they were working as many post-secondary students are required to work at the college level. Yet another student at the high school expressed the idea that the lengthier classes, which only meet three days of the week, allow for a less mundane classroom environment. Finally, it was cited by at least one pupil who was surveyed that the longer periods allow

for greater interest in the subject since the teacher is afforded the opportunity to involve the students to a greater extent and at a greater level.

High Technology High School's distinctive "brand" of block scheduling has been put into place and the monotonous, often-time routine structured day has been reconfigured to provide a less repetitive and less mundane way of life for the teacher and the student. No day of the week is similar to the next or the previous as each one provides the teacher and student with a different schedule. The dynamic schedule provides a more favorable environment for all.

Block scheduling is not easy to adjust to. Students at High Tech expressed the difficulty in gearing up for an extra-long activity or discussion. At least one teacher who moved from a more traditional schedule to the High Technology High School block schedule stated that "there is a big difference from 40 minutes...at first the 70 minutes takes time to get used to."

This tough transition seems to be discouraging many educators around the country from implementing the idea of block scheduling in their school programs. Only 11% of the nation's schools are utilizing Block Scheduling as a means of improving instruction and learning. Schools which have stated that this system is not even planned for next year amount to 61%. Traditional ideas concerning scheduling remained fixed and static. It must be realized that the idea of Block Scheduling is not necessarily a new one, but an idea that has existed for a long time and is now proving to be effective in improving the atmosphere of the classroom and the school as well (Calvetti, 1994).