Teaching in the Block

Middle Ground, Volume 2, Number 3, February 1999

ON TARGET
BLOCK
SCHEDULING

John Gallagher

When Kevin Crotchett walks into his seventh-grade class at Jackson Middle School, he looks forward to having a two-and-a half hour period each day to teach a combined language arts and social studies course. A flexible block schedule adopted by Jackson and most other middle schools in Portland, Oregon, enables teachers and students to arrange class time as they see fit, so they can delve into subjects instead of speed through them.

For example, a typical day in Crotchett's class might find students reading silently or writing about a topic for the first 15 minutes, then moving to a whole-class lesson on ancient Egyptians or another social studies theme. Next, some or all of the students might go to the library to begin a related research topic, but Crotchett also has time to teach mini-lessons about writing bibliographies, taking notes, or other skills that will help students with their projects. All the while, he walks around the room, talking to students who have problems, answering questions, making sure everyone stays focused on the assignment. For the last 15 minutes of class, the students return to sum up the day's lessons.

"We're very mobile, very social," Crotchett said. "Even if they're not in the library, they're up, moving to another section of the room to find space, or maybe working with somebody."

Although many educators would find this deviation from the standard 50-minute class period daunting, Crotchett considers the expansive block of instructional time exhilarating. Because of an odd number of children in the seventh grade, Crochett teaches the same group of students for most of the day but also collaborates with colleagues who are part of his team. The school schedule provides 115 minutes a day for Crotchett to teach math and a similar amount of time for science.

The extended class periods at Jackson are one of the results of block scheduling, an innovative and increasingly popular method of restructuring time during the school day. Instead of adhering to the traditional system of six or seven periods a day, schools with block schedule, reorganize classes to give teachers fewer periods a week but more time with each. Proponents argue that the product is more in-depth study that benefits both teachers and students.

"We don't have to worry about watching the clock," Crotchett said. "If the kids are moving on something, I don't have to say, 'We're out of time.' From my perspective, that teachable moment is essential."

The impetus for block scheduling is simple enough. Although time is always in short supply during the school day, the bigger problem seems to lie in its distribution. When so many subjects are crunched into small time slots, schools tend to operate more like factories on overdrive than as centers of reflective learning. Given the amount of each class period that is devoted to housekeeping—attendance, assignments, and homework collection—teachers have very limited instructional time with students. For example, a 1984 study by researchers at Southwest Texas State University found that on average only 28 minutes of a 50-minute period at the high schools they evaluated were devoted to teaching.

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"Teachers will admit to me that a short period of time limits anything they can do in terms of a lesson plan," said Robert Lynn Canady, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Virginia and co-author of *Teaching in the Block* (Eye on Education Inc.). "By the time they get their kids in there it's time to leave and go to the next class."

Canady, who has consulted with schools in more than 30 states, said the solution is to "take the time we've got and package it differently". What if we meet four classes a day for 80 minutes each? Plus, we gain back at all that transitional time.

"If you have 90 minutes (per period), you significantly increase the chances that a social studies teacher will go to where the Internet is set up and let kids do something because they have the time to get them there and get them back. Students can get the first draft of position papers done at school. A teacher is more likely to do a Socratic seminar."

Although the phrase "block scheduling" is regularly employed as shorthand in discussions of flexible school scheduling, implementation varies widely. Some schools adopt "4x4" scheduling in which four classes are distributed throughout the day, every day. Under that system, students complete a years worth of work in a semester and begin the second part of their course load in the second semester. Some schools use "A/B" scheduling in which two blocks of four classes meet alternate days. Other schools adopt "modified blocks" in which some class periods run longer than usual while others continue as 50-minute sessions.

Park View Intermediate School in Lancaster, California, uses the latter system. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays the traditional seven-period class schedule prevails. Wednesdays and Thursdays are called block days, with three classes meeting for 110 minutes each. Meri Kock, an eighth-grade math teacher at Park View, said the school's three-year experience with block classes, adopted at an administrator's urging, spurred her to expand her instructional repertoire.

"I basically supplemented my existing style," she said. "Having the block time allows me to have the students conduct an experiment, take measurements, play mathematical games, collect data, and then analyze what we've done while everything is still fresh in their minds. If the students want to explore some aspect of an activity further, I know I can take off in that direction with them without having to watch the clock or worry about the bell interrupting us."

Kock said she tries to think like a science teacher when planning her block classes. She seeks an experiment or laboratory exercise to develop with math concepts. One of her most successful activities asked students to measure the playground equipment at a public park for a lesson on drawing to scale. For a unit on ratios and proportions, Kock used the average lengths of bones in the teenage body as reference points. Instead of relying on the textbook numbers for calculations, Kock asked her students to take their classmates' measurements and compare those figures to the ones in the textbook.

"They were up moving, doing something, and connecting to the material in a more relevant way than if I had just handed them the information," she said. "I look for a lesson or (an) activity that can get them either out of their seats, or doing something different from listening to me talk... The kiss of death to a block period is a straight lecture."

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Kock made a fairly smooth transition to block scheduling. For a few months, she was nervous on block day, wondering if she would have enough material to last until the end. Instead, she found that she often over-planned because she was able to cover topics or greater depth than before. After a brief adjustment period, block days became her favorite time of the week.

Kock said the adolescents seem to have "more enjoyment of the subject matter, a better understanding of what they are learning, and more enthusiasm about attending those classes where the teachers do something exciting with the time."

Such testimonials have helped build the appeal of block scheduling for educators looking to bring a higher quality of learning to the classroom. Robert Lynn Canady cited a variety of the benefits detected in studies of block scheduling. Behavior problems regularly decline at schools that adopt block scheduling, he said, in part because students spend less time in the hallways getting into trouble. Teachers also get to know students better. More importantly, Canady said, without the constant clanging of the bell signifying the need to rush from one class to another, the atmosphere in schools often becomes more relaxed.

"One of the things I feel we can guarantee with block scheduling is that we can change the stress level for both teachers and students," he said. "We're finding attendance goes up in block schedule schools for both teachers and students. How do you explain that if not by morale and stress factors?"

Unfortunately, the apparent merits of block scheduling can lead administrator, to adopt it without giving teachers enough time and training to understand it and use it well. Some schools consider block scheduling the answer to every problem, a kind of educational panacea instead of a tool that can help them make more substantive and difficult changes. In such cases, block scheduling often backfires. It becomes the target of staff members' distress over their inability to make thoughtful, collective decisions about the school's mission and direction.

"A lot of places I've visited are foisting it on staff and telling them it's the best thing since sliced bread and buttered toast, and the staff doesn't understand why they should be doing this," said Michael Wronkovich, a guidance counselor at Coventry High School in Akron, Ohio. He studied the changes in student achievement as a result of the school's switch to block scheduling. "Too many people are trying to take one solution and drop it into their school district and say that if it works in Columbus, it will work for them," he said. "Maybe, maybe not."

Block scheduling doesn't always produce the kind of academic progress that administrators seek. An in-depth study of Coventry's four-year experience with block scheduling found that it did lead to significantly higher test scores in English and biology, but not in world history and geometry. Wronkovich speculated that Coventry's results might reflect the difficulty many history teachers had moving beyond straight lectures. Math teachers at Coventry also have been reluctant to abandon their traditional approaches he said: "They are real concerned about gaps in learning. And maybe they have a point."

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So far, most of the research about block scheduling has been confined to high schools, about half of whom have adopted one of the models, according to the Educational Research Service. And much of the collected data has been more anecdotal than quantitative. According to Canady, the advantages include a reduction in student tardiness, lower failure rates, an increased use in technology and media center materials, and high levels of parent satisfaction. The major drawbacks include the difficulty of finding room in the schedule for exploratory classes, such as band and art, and the possibility that students will forget key concepts if they don't take core subjects year-round.

Roy Wasson High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, was among the first urban high schools to adopt block scheduling in 1990. Since then, representatives, from 400 schools have visited Wasson to study its approach. But social studies teacher Don Breeding cautions that block scheduling should not be considered a one-size-fits-all pattern.

"We identified our problems and went out to find the system that research proved would help our problems," he said. "The thing that was the most common denominator was how to use time. That eventually led us to the concept of a block. It was ground-roots, research-based decision. It wasn't mandated by a principal or school board. It was teachers, working toward a goal together."

Choosing the right format is critically important, said Howard Miller, an associate professor middle level education at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Although block scheduling seems to offer a good foundation for learning, middle school should study it carefully and seek to avoid some of the problems that high schools have encountered. An "A/B" block schedule, for example, can be extremely difficult for young adolescents who are already dealing with a slew of emotional and intellectual transitions. "Middle school kids need continuity in their programs," Miller said. "By classes meeting every other day, its very hard to carry a thread through. If a kid is absent, it's like being absent for two days from a particular subject area."

Sue Smith, an assistant principal at William Monroe Middle School in Stanardsville, Virginia, recently wrote her dissertation on block scheduling in middle schools. Smith observed three Virginia middle schools closely and concluded that the most consistent message from educators was the need for training. She cites one district that made a commitment to fund a week-long in-service for teachers "so they could start to coalesce as teams and plan for strategies up front." That kind of commitment indicates to teachers that the district is willing to invest in their success.

Wronkovich, the Coventry High School teacher, said that "unless teachers are trained... you might as well anticipate having trouble." He said the superintendent of his school district provided 10 paid in-service days so teachers could study block scheduling before the school year began. The staffs focused on what Wronkovich called the "nuts-and-bolts" questions of strategy. For example, teachers asked visiting block-scheduling experts how to use cooperative learning and select other instructional activities that would work well with the block. Then the superintendent paid the consultants to return four more times during the year to help teachers overcome problems.

Meri Kock, the Park View Intermediate School teacher, said that despite the efforts of a supportive principal, her school was unable to provide adequate training for teachers. As a result, many of her colleagues had trouble adjusting to the block schedule.

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"We have some teachers who are very resistant to the schedule, whereas others dove right in and did what they could, and others are thriving with it," she said. "They are all amazingly good at what they do, but sometimes their individual styles just don't match what is needed for a block approach."

Block scheduling requires teachers to rethink how they work. More time does not mean more of the same. Although lectures and direct instruction are still possible and desirable in some cases, they can no longer be the only methods teachers use. Block scheduling enables teachers to try a range of techniques and students to become more active learners. But matching different methods with individual preferences can be difficult.

"Some kids learn fine through the typical lecture style," Smith said. "Others learn if they just write it. Then other students need to talk about it. Some students need to see it in a video or do some type of project. The more variety you have for students to give you feedback, the better. You have the kids engaged and you have them beginning to understand what the information is."

At Jackson Middle School in Portland, Crotchett and his colleagues have used the block schedule to expand an annual science class expedition to the Columbia River Gorge into an interdisciplinary project that also includes language arts, math, and social studies. In addition to studying fish and water conservation and rock formations, the students explore the impact of the gorge's historical changes on native cultures; they write poetry about the scenery; and they use mathematical calculations to estimate the volume of water the gorge displaced in various stages. With flexible scheduling, Crotchett said, "there seems to be a greater invitation for teachers to communicate and really plan a program for the kids that connects."

Howard Miller said such synergy makes block scheduling worthwhile in many cases. But success results from the flexibility of the schedule, not the rigid adherence to a model. The key is allowing teachers to decide how to best use their time. "Flexible block scheduling goes hand in hand with being an interdisciplinary team," he said. "One hundred kids, four teachers, and a block of time. You figure it out."

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Original publication information:
Gallagher, J. (1999). Teaching in the block. *Middle Ground, 2*(3), 10-15.

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