

Block Scheduling

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Through the 1990s an innovative approach to structuring the school day, called block scheduling, enjoyed widespread adoption in American secondary schools. Block scheduling allows schools to break from the traditional fixed-time class periods in order to implement a schedule that is flexible enough to allow extended sessions for courses that would benefit from more time. Theoretically, block scheduling is intended to provide classroom teachers and students with more time to (1) thoroughly cover a particular subject area, (2) integrate different perspectives on a single unit (e.g., history, English, and science approach to studying the impact of technology on American life), and (3) devote to research projects, class discussions, lab experiments, etc. A primary goal of block scheduling is to structure time in a way that maximizes student learning within each course while providing teachers with enough time for planning and collaboration (Durkin 1997).

As with most educational innovations, the case for block scheduling sparked debate. Many schools that have implemented block scheduling have reported their good and bad experiences in a wide variety of publications.

There is no lack of information on this topic. The Web alone has more than one million sites addressing this topic. A search of the ERIC database reveals three full-text ERIC Digests and abstracts of more than 500 ERIC (ED) documents, journal articles, and monographs devoted to the topic of block scheduling. However, only ten of those documents focus on block scheduling in the context of the school library media center, and none reports findings based on designed research studies.

This article briefly describes the topic, lists some of the pros and cons, and addresses the implications of block scheduling for library media services and resources drawn from various sources found through the ERIC database. It concludes with some ideas for researchers and practitioners on conducting research in this area.

What Is Block Scheduling?

Block scheduling has been described as a reorganization of school time around longer class periods (Scheduling Foreign Languages 1998; Zepeda 1999). While there are many alternative methods for structuring the school day, block scheduling appears to be the most frequently implemented in American schools. The most well-known and widely used model of block scheduling is the Copernican model as advocated by Joseph Carroll. With the Copernican model, students attend longer classes in a shorter period of time (e.g., a 2.5-hour class for two subjects

within a ten-week semester) (Wronkovich 1998; Durkin 1997). By 1999 close to one half of all U.S. high schools had implemented some form of block scheduling (Zepeda 1999).

What Are the Potential Pros and Cons of Block Scheduling?

A number of advantages and disadvantages of block scheduling have been described in the literature found in ERIC. Some of the potential positive effects of block scheduling are:

- It enables teachers to use strategies that promote active learning and student motivation (Teger 1996).
- It provides more time for students to study material in depth and use computers (Marshak 1998; Teger 1996)
- It allows more time for individualized attention and student evaluation. (Black 1998; Marshak 1998; Skrobarcek et al. 1997)
- It allows more time for mentoring, action research, and professional development (Zepeda 1999).
- It requires less time for management tasks, such as attendance and equipment setup (Eineder and Bishop 1997)
- There is less interruption, more student accountability for their own learning, better planning and implementation of lessons (Marshak 1998; Teger 1996).
- There is more time for principals to observe educators and give feedback (Zepeda 1999).
- Fewer physical transitions from class to class often results in a decrease of disciplinary problems (Cobb et al. 1999; Santos and Rettig 1999; Irmscher 1996, ED393156).
- Alternative scheduling may have a positive impact on drop-out rates. (Sharman 1990).

Some of the potential negative aspects related to block scheduling are:

- It may negatively affect students with short attention spans, particularly those with some types of learning disabilities (Santos and Rettig 1999)
- Different blocks in different semesters may affect end-of-year school and national tests (Wronkovich 1998).
- It may present difficulties for transfer students (both in and out) and for students who miss several days or weeks due to illness, death in family, etc. (Hamdy 1998).
- Research on the impact of block scheduling on student learning is mixed (Black 1998)
- Spaced learning may be superior to concentrated learning particularly for some subject areas (Scheduling Foreign Languages 1998; Hamdy 1998)
- Students may experience significant gaps of time between linked subjects or topics. (Wronkovich, 1998)

Implications for Library Media Services

In the past five years, there have been some articles written that focus on the impact of block scheduling on library and information services and resources. Most of those articles are descriptive in nature; that is, they are anecdotal rather than research-oriented. For example, Kirschenman (1998) recommends an proactive approach to help teachers maximize their time with students by setting up learning stations, team teaching opportunities, and individual student

research projects. Geiken et al. (1999) describe their personal experiences and lessons learned from block scheduling implementation in their schools. Their observations indicate that block scheduling may, in fact, reduce the amount of time students spend in the library due to bus schedules, elimination of study halls, and crowded conditions during class time. They also describe a positive impact on collection development and collaboration with classroom teachers.

There has been very little research on library media centers in schools with block scheduling. Shaw (1999) provides a wealth of useful information about preparation for and implementation of library programs, services, and resources in schools with block scheduling. She provides survey instruments and other forms for collecting data that help in planning and development. She also reports on the results of surveys given to library media specialists on the impact of block scheduling on their library media specialists. Shaw devotes one chapter to four descriptive case studies written by four library media specialists on the implementation and impact of block scheduling in their high schools.

Gierke (1999) posted an informal survey of LM_NET users to determine changes in library use. She received more than one hundred responses that indicated an increased demand for library services, more opportunities to work with individual students, need for better planning and scheduling, difficulty in scheduling lunch and other breaks for the library media specialist, decreased student recreational reading, and more time to use a greater variety of resources and technologies.

While anecdotal information and informal surveys are useful, planned research activities that explore the impact of block scheduling on library media centers (staff and staffing, programs, materials, etc.) are needed. Longitudinal studies that look at the effects of block scheduling on library services and resources over time, studies that compare the effects of block scheduling across several school libraries, studies that look at schools with and without block scheduling, and the effects of block scheduling on student learning of research skills at the middle and high school levels are just some potential areas for investigation. Additional ideas for action research on this topic are provided in an article by Woolls and Loertscher (1999).

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