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B

lock Scheduling

A Collection of Articles

An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.—Victor Hugo

While block scheduling is not a new idea, it definitely is an idea whose time has come. Inspired by the reform movement of the nineties that focuses on the learner-centred school, educators search for ways to enable student learning. Among the innovations attracting attention is the idea of providing sufficient “blocks” of time for students to learn, and learn in authentic and purposeful ways.

By partitioning the school day into larger chunks of time, by looking at the concept of flexible, modular scheduling that accommodates learning, school faculties create a framework that favours the needs of the learner. Moving from the traditional “bell driven schedule” of 50-minute periods, schools choosing block scheduling are redesigning the periods of time into 90-, 120-, and even 220-minute blocks. As advocated by Sizer (*Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, 1984) and Goodlad (*A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*, 1984), the concept is rooted in concerns about creating sufficient time to immerse students in the learning experience.

Block scheduling is about teacher teams, clusters of students, and time to plan and learn.

In this collection, the articles are divided into four distinct sections, aptly labelled, What?, So What?, Now What?, and What Else? More specifically, *what* is block scheduling all about? (defining and describing); *so what* do we do? (implementation models); *now what* are the implications? (staffing and programming); and *what else* is there to consider? (related issues).

More specifically, in the first section, “What . . . is block scheduling all about?,” the four articles define and describe the essence of block scheduling. The discussion moves from Carroll’s conceptual purpose of “organising time to learn” to images of block scheduling at work.

The second section, “So what . . .,” is comprised of four articles that target implementation models. The discussions range from innovative scheduling for primary schools to the Copernican model for high schools. This section ends with an invaluable set of guidelines for implementing block scheduling.

In the third section of articles, “Now what . . . are the implications?,” concerns about programming and staffing are addressed. One piece discusses the instructional methods that are especially tailored to larger blocks of time in the classroom and curricular frameworks that provide holistic “chunks” of curriculum for relevant learning. Another article provides insightful ideas for building staff development time directly into the block schedule.

Finally, in the last section, “What else . . . is there to consider?,” a study discusses student performance with block scheduling and with nonblock scheduling. In addition, Carroll revisits the Copernican Plan and evaluates it from the perspective of eight schools.

Each of the aforementioned sections is prefaced with a brief overview that serves as both an introduction and an abstract of the content of each article, providing the reader with a user-friendly synopsis. While this is by no means a comprehensive collection of the writings on the topic, the selected articles do provide a substantive look at the primary issues that surround the idea of block scheduling.

Section 1

What?

All great ideas are controversial, or have been at one time.—George Seldes

Block scheduling is about the relationship between instructional time and learning. It's about structuring the school day in ways that favour students and foster learning. Rather than continue the seven-period-day slivers in which students are rotated every fifty minutes to another subject, another teacher, and often to another part of the building, advocates of block scheduling divide the day into bigger chunks of time.

These larger allotments of time allow students to concentrate their energies intensely on a single focus—the subject matter addressed during the block of time. In other words, the schedule itself encourages more involved, more active, and more student-initiated learning. To shed additional light on the idea of block scheduling, this first section is devoted to further defining and describing the concept.

As documented in the opening article by Joseph Carroll, interest in block scheduling dates back to the mid-1960s. Lending historical insight into the concept of “macro scheduling,” the author recalls how the seeds of his “Copernican Plan” of block scheduling are grounded in a kind of “best practice” experience. Named for the Renaissance scholar Copernicus, the model challenges the traditional approach to school-day scheduling. While the article's focus is on the high school, readers across the K–tertiary spectrum will find Carroll's discussion of great in-

terest for its historical context and for the common sense evidenced in his thoughtful approach to the issues of children and learning. In addition, the author provides a practical plan and a comprehensive look at the change process.

Delineating the change process as experienced in one high school, Rebecca Shore discusses how personalisation—“the single most important factor that keeps kids in school”—and Ted Sizer’s theory based on this concept dictated her school’s decisions concerning scheduling. The author hails block scheduling as perhaps the most significant among a number of recent innovations and concludes with a discussion of the benefits realised through the experience.

Pam Russell’s article provides a practical outline of one school’s approach to implementation of block scheduling. Her straightforward presentation of the manner in which her school moved from theory to practice provides an easy to follow model for schools interested in moving away from more traditional methods of timetabling.

Roger Schoenstein provides the teacher’s voice in a reflective piece about making block scheduling work. Closing this first section of articles that define and describe block scheduling, the article walks the reader through a number of practical concerns, anticipating and then answering the types of questions that teachers will raise. Beginning with how block scheduling works, the discussion touches on numerous issues—including the benefits of smaller classes, absentee students, advanced placement concerns, sequential courses, and coverage of content and school climate—and concludes with a balanced look at the results of four years of using block scheduling. In response to one final question—“Would you go back to a traditional seven-period day?”—Schoenstein proclaims, “I’d never go back. . . . I just wish this had happened 23 years ago.”

Block scheduling has been and is a controversial issue. Hopefully, these initial essays, with a bit of the history, some definitions, and a sampling of the questions and concerns, will serve to begin a healthy dialogue. Then, on to the second set of articles to find out more about the implementation process.