

How block scheduling effects academic success essay



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In recent years many educators have voiced their concern about as losing our edge in the global marketplace as well as an apparent decline in American students' achievements. This has become a recurring belief for many teachers, parents, and school districts throughout the United States. As a result, many states have begun to increase the amount of units necessary to fulfill graduation requirements in hope to enhance education and make American students more globally competitive.

As many districts have found, it is not feasible to add more subjects to the already demanding 6-or 7-period days. The problem in doing so is that there was little time for electives. At the same time they began to find that adding classes only took away time from other parts of the curriculum already established. While some districts fumbled with the idea of adding classes and minimizing losses in other areas, a large number of schools, more specifically 25-40 percent of U. S. high schools adopted block scheduling(American Federation of Teachers, 1999). It is apparent the block scheduling craze is thought to be a fix all solution to the problem, at least for those districts and individuals looking for anything to help increase the status quo.

In a nutshell, block scheduling is the practice of breaking up school time into blocks or units of classroom time. More recently we have seen this practice redefined to stand for a restructuring movement for longer classroom periods. Typically average class periods ranged from 45-50 minutes long. Block scheduling has taken this traditional style of time management and have increases class periods anywhere from two to four times longer. As one might be amazed at the novelty of more time in the classroom, it is vital to

understand that number of class periods are correspondingly decreased, thus the overall length of time is virtually the same.

The majority of information gathered and the studies reviewed tend to overwhelmingly represent the results derived from the two we are describing. Hence from this point forward the term “ block scheduling”, as used in this paper shall consider the first two categories one and the same. It has been taken into consideration and concurred that there are many variations of block scheduling, however all research, testimonials, cases, and opinions taken into consideration are of the specific type of block scheduling mentioned above. It has also been taken into consideration that there may be many uncontrollable variables that directly and indirectly skew the results of some of the studies. We have no control over parental involvement, student motivation, and faculty participation, socioeconomic factors or specific demographics that may contrast from one study to another. We do feel however, that all the controlled variables held constant, we can get a great feel about block scheduling and its effects on academic success at the high school level from both proponents and the opposition. There are basically four different four categories of block scheduling: (4×4), (4×4 A, B), Copernican Plan, and the San Francisco Urban Plan. For the purpose of the research study we will focus on the first two categories.

In the 4×4 plan, all the traditional year long classes are converted into half-year long courses of 90-minute classes. A student takes two classes in the morning, usually followed by a break and then two classes in the afternoon for a total of four classes a day. The teachers cover three classes a day with a 90-minute prep period or a 45-minute prep period and a duty. This carries <https://assignbuster.com/how-block-scheduling-effects-academic-success-essay/>

on half way through the year at which time students and teachers receive a new schedule. It is common with this plan to have the schedule for both semesters, the entire year, in place by late summer prior to the beginning of the fall semester. As one might assume there is little or no flexibility in such schedules.

The 4x4 A, B plan is similar to the plan mentioned above with the exception that students have four different classes every other day. Here the student carries the work- load of eight classes for the duration of the year. It may sound a little monotonous, however they meet every other day. Teachers hate this method because they must carry between 150-190 students; furthermore, the variety of preparations can make planning a nightmare (Canady, R. L. ; Hottenstein, D., 1995). Some drawbacks of this plan tend to be the fact that students are picking up subjects, intensely studying them for a day and then placing them on the back burner for a day. This tends to create a focus problem as we will discuss in further detail in exerts to follow. One other common problem associated with this scheduling is the preparations for 3 different 90-minute courses on odd days and three entirely different courses on the even days takes a lot out of teachers mentally as well as physically. It is rarely an incident when the teachers are able to keep up with such practices for any real length of time.

Despite its popularity, very little is known about the effect of block scheduling on student academic achievement, notes a recent AFT report on improving low-performing high schools (American Federation of Teachers, 1999). Many advocates cite the success of individual schools, many of which report drastic increases in grades and test scores, reduced disciplinary
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problems, and increased graduation rates. On the flip side, opponents report negative results and illustrate studies depicting a decrease in student achievement. Although no study has been considered definitive, we will take a look at some of the most common pros and cons surrounding this highly controversial subject.

The Arguments

There seems to be an endless amount of arguments against block scheduling. In order to give a clear unbiased opinion we will focus solely on the arguments that seem to be present among most of the studies conducted as well as schools currently on the block. This can be justified because we believe the one theory shared by both sides. This is to say that in any educational setting, we as administrators, faculty, and a community need to incorporate what is best for the majority, at the same time minimizing the downfalls the minority may encounter. As mentioned above there are many questions and concerns that need attention. For example the concerns about absences and make-up work, transfer students, lost content, grade inflation, learning sequential material, and maintaining concentration. We can go on and on, rather lets take a closer look at what the research says.

If a student is under block scheduling, the student misses the equivalent of two days of instruction under this system (Guskey, T. R., ; Kifer, E. 1995). This poses an even greater question. What if a student is absent for a week or even longer? This is equivalent to missing more than two weeks of instruction. In certain courses there might be ways around this, however

math, science and physics just to name a few are classes that demand more help in learning the material. In classes that are sequential a student could possibly be a step behind for the duration of the year. The worst case could mean the student would be forced to repeat the class because it can be demanding keeping up in other classes while trying to catch up in one and learn material that the instructor is covering in the present. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule. However, for the majority this is a major concern. Now lets turn the table a bit. Suppose a teacher has an emergency or has an unexpected illness causing them to be absent. In block scheduling, students will be missing two days of instruction everyday a teacher is absent (Guskey, T. R., ; Kifer, E. 1995). This is because it is often impossible to find a substitute teacher certified to teach in such a system. For whatever reason a student or teacher may miss class, the bottom line in this valid argument is this system detracts from instruction at least twice the current rate.

Transfer students face enough problems transferring into new environment and having to deal with social acceptance. Block scheduling only adds to the already high level of stress transfer students face. Under diverse economic conditions it is rather normal in this day and time to see families moving with children already in high school. Suppose a family is new to the area with a child in 10th grade. There stands a good chance that the student is transferring into a school where block scheduling is a new experience for them. Under block scheduling a student would be taking 4 subjects at a time and covering the material at twice the speed of classes in a normal 6-8 period day. Any student moving into this new system would be a great deal behind. A student moving in 1-2 months after the academic year has begun

will be close to 2 months behind. This compounds sequential classes such as math, biology and a foreign language even more. For the majority of students in this situation, this means hiring a tutor, a major expense for many families. For others this could mean having to take non-sequential classes the duration of the semester and waiting for the next go around. In this case students are often in classes repeating material they had taken at other schools before they transferred until they reach a point where they had left off. Many families have chose to go with a private or parochial school for the duration of the year until the start of the new year at which time they can enroll them into a district on the block. Again, this means a major unexpected expense for families not to mention the anxiety associated with getting used to a new surrounding, only to find another change in the very near future.

Content lost is another common problem associated with block scheduling. This type of scheduling is based on four 90-minute classes. If you replace two 49-minute classes with one 90-minute class, then we lose 8 minutes per class. Now 8 x 90 days is roughly 15 traditional class periods which translates to two or three weeks of a course. This is just the tip of the ice burg. Lab sciences under traditional instruction meet 6 periods a week. in the college prep level. Under the block, they are reduced to 5 periods a week, a 16% reduction that when added to the above 8 minute daily reduction combines to a 25% total loss of time (Guskey, T. R., ; Kifer, E. 1995). Even worse, courses evaluated by standardized testing, advanced placement classes, up to 50% more time is being added to combat the effects of block scheduling. This is a cure for the symptoms, however if our

children are in college-prep, honors, modified college-prep or tech prep, then they will have to get used to less time (Guskey, T. R., ; Kifer, E. 1995).

According to most proponents, the fact that grades increase under the block is always part of their argument. Also, the statement that students learn less, however they learn it better is commonly used. Administrators say, "Less is more." A principal currently under the block admits that under such a system students learn less in a given course. This still doesn't give us much of an answer as to why opponents are complaining about grade inflation under block scheduling. This should help us to get a better idea. Suppose you were a student in an algebra class that covered 20-25% less material during the course. It is fair to assume that you would do better because there is less to learn. One step further, if you received a 95% on all your tests and you were only taught 80% of the material (20% less), your 95% of 80% translates to 76% under traditional systems (Polos, 1969). In this particular case your "C" grade becomes an "A" under the block. In our society it is a dog eat dog world. Often times it does come down to who knows more when landing the big job. This is the harsh reality of it all. So I ask you this, is less really more? We had mentioned earlier in our research the problems surrounding the block and the effects on sequential material. I am sure you get the picture and can understand the consequences of such a schedule. There is no need to beat a dead horse with respect to the effects of sequential material and block scheduling, however there is still another common concern about the block. That is maintaining concentration. Can you remember sitting in class and not having a clue about what is going on? It is likely you had something else on you mind or you just weren't your best

that day. For whatever reason, I will bet that the classes were in a traditional setting. That is to say a regular 49-minute class. Teacher shave trouble keeping the attention of students for 49 minutes. How can we expect them to do this for 90-minutes? Is there any correlation between the length of television sitcoms and desire to sustain audience attention? Even news programs like " 60 minutes" divides their hourly show into three 20-minute presentations to retain audience attention (Polos, 1969). It has been argued further that if television can not sustain a longer format, then it is ridiculous to expect teachers and students to be able to. Special education is yet another concern. It is the law that schools are to provide education to students in the least restrictive environment. As it is students with special needs are often mainstreamed into regular classrooms for many parts of the day. Most school districts face the problem of limited resources for meeting the needs of these children in a traditional setting. With this in mind, the need of special education students will be far from being met with such intense scheduling.

These are just a few of the most commons problems and concerns surrounding block scheduling. It is safe to say that the block does have its shortcomings, however it is only fair to examine some of the benefits of using block scheduling.

The BenefitsSupporters of the block cite endless benefits to the system. The most common benefits found often surrounding the subject are better grades and less failures, less time lost in halls between classes, more time for student-teacher interaction, teacher planning, off-site work experience, less stress, and more class time due to less start up time at the beginning of

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class. We could spend hours discussing all of the benefits. In an attempt to stay objective we will discuss a few of the outcomes from school districts already on the block.

Education World (1995) cited a few studies: Thomas Edison High School in Fairfax County, Virginia submitted some rather positive results after a five-year study on block scheduling. In their findings students' SAT scores rose from a combined average of 978 to 1029; the percentage of students who earned a 3 or higher on Advanced Placement exams rose from 70 to 81; the dropout rate decreased from 805 to 509 percent and the percentage of students who earned an Advanced Studies Diploma increased from 51 to 60 (p. 1). Another study conducted between 1992 to 1995 of 371 schools in North Carolina found that students scored equal to and slightly higher in some subjects on end of course statewide tests than those not on the block (Education World, 1995). Still another study conducted by the University of British Columbia and released in 1995, found that students learned more science in year long classes than traditional (Education World, 1995). We can all agree that when used effectively the arguments supporting the block have their advantages. As a teacher I could benefit from less set up time and more student-teacher interaction made possible with block scheduling and longer classes. It certainly makes sense to have 90 minutes to fully cover more intense topics without the worry of getting half way into a lesson and trying to pick up where we left off in the next session. Students are in class for longer periods of time, thus reducing the time for them to potentially get into trouble outside the classroom. As mentioned above there are statistics and real studies illustrating the benefits of block scheduling. As a teacher I

can play devils advocate and see both the good and bad associated with such a system. ConclusionThe controversy surrounding block scheduling is one that doesn't appear to have a solution in the near future. After reviewing the literature above I have come up with a few suggestions that seem to be a step in the right direction. Again, there are so many variables involved in proving the efficiency and inefficiency of such a program. A variety of variables make it tough to generalize the benefits of block scheduling. I have come up with few suggestions. If you are in a district planning on implementing the block, consult a district already using it. Many of the reasons why block scheduling fails are because districts don't put forth the effort to do their homework before adopting the latest so-called "cure all". Schools on the traditional system considering the block should make sure they have the resources to train their teachers on how to utilize such a system. We need to think outside the circle so to speak. "You cannot just change the bell schedule and expect things to improve," says Rex Bolinger, principal of Angola (Indiana) High School. Schools need to create a schedule that benefits the students (Parents for Academic Success, 2000). Far too many districts adopt the block in hopes of increasing an overall low performance. Teachers have to make a deliberate effort to examine how they are delivering instruction. If the block is going to work in any district teachers must have multiple opportunities to develop reflective teaching styles in various disciplines (Education World, 1995). As we mentioned earlier the goal of any change and educational instruction is to do what is beneficial to the majority. Personally I believe that with all things held constant, block scheduling at this point in time has a substantial bit of ironing out to do before it is seen as a benefit to academic success. The most

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common arguments for block scheduling seem to be a list of benefits for the administrators and the teachers. Sure, I would love to have more time for one on one interaction. I have yet to see a research study that has proved block scheduling is beneficial to academic success. What we do have are examples of districts that have made it work. At this point there is no concrete evidence to show that block scheduling was the sole reason for increases in students' academic success. There does however, seem to be an overwhelming amount of literature and studies conducted in various parts of the nation illustrating the problems associated with the block.

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