

1 Planning and Preparing: Getting Ready for the Block

The literature on methods for preparing to move to a block schedule recommends involvement by representatives from all groups who will be affected by the change (Canady and Rettig 1996; Gee 1997; Hackman 1995; *Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent's Bulletin* 1997). School board members, teachers, students, administrators, and parents should all have a voice in the process. Like other school reform efforts, the decision to change to the block schedule should not be a top-down decision. As we've heard from teachers visiting our school, however, this is all too often the case; a building principal makes the decision, for example, and the school community is forced to make adjustments to accommodate the decision. This chapter addresses two issues—how to involve interested others in the decision-making process from inception to implementation and how to facilitate the ongoing or newly created (in the case of a top-down mandate) adjustments and changes needed in a school to make the block schedule work.

School/Community Decision-Making Process

In the years leading up to our decision to implement the block schedule, our superintendent established community action teams which were charged with determining ways in which the yearly goals of the school could be achieved. In general, the purpose of these action teams was to answer this question: What do we want for the learners in this school? Action teams were established based on key topical areas related to the goals, such as technology, curriculum and instruction, and school climate. Teams were made up of members representing parents, the school board, students, teachers, and administrators. Their work over the first several months of the school year was to learn more about where the school was in relation to the goal, determine where they wanted to be in the next two to five years, and examine possible actions that could be taken to achieve the goals with which they were charged. Teams read literature that addressed issues related to the goals, and guest speakers met with groups to present information directly. Some

teams made visits to other schools that had implemented changes or that were known to have exemplary programs related to issues or possible actions the group was considering. The research and learning culminated at the end of the school year with each group presenting its recommendations to the other action teams. Administrators and school staff serving on action teams presented recommendations to the faculty, and we implemented the recommendations over the summer and during the following school years.

Mundelein High School’s decision to move to the block schedule was the result of a recommendation by a community action team which found that traditional ways of using time during the school day were inhibiting what could be done for students. We had been changing the delivery of curriculum for three years before the decision to move to a block schedule, due to our previous decision to detrack most of the first-year and sophomore-level academic areas, and the instructional changes we had made as part of detracking helped lead us toward block scheduling. Students were examining, investigating, and discussing topics of study in their work to reach final benchmark projects, exhibitions, and portfolios, and, while it was possible to fit the types of experiences that would lead to these assessments into fifty-minute time periods, longer class periods offered more instructional flexibility and learning continuity.

Of course, other factors were also considered in the action team’s decision to recommend block scheduling. Academics were consuming most of our students’ schedules, and a tax cap that spanned several years combined with increasing enrollment meant possible increases in class size. The block schedule gave students the opportunity to enroll in more electives and helped maintain current staff and class size, because teachers using the block schedule teach an additional course each academic year.

What We Learned

- Teams need to meet jointly midway through the school year to share some of their discoveries and the directions they are considering. Because of the overlap of issues, a recommendation or plan of action that one group is considering will sometimes have an impact on the decisions of other teams. A joint midway meeting would be a time when teams could see how their plans are leading in similar directions and/or how a recommendation that one group is considering may be a solution to a problem another group is attempting to address.
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- Some decisions like block scheduling were a shock to teachers. When the new superintendent first formed action teams, teachers didn't realize that the teams would truly have a role in decision making—they were not used to committee decisions being carried out—and they didn't necessarily expect that their voices would be heard. Volunteering for committees was not something teachers were compelled to do since their previous experiences with committee work usually spanned several years only to have the issue disappear or to see other concerns become more important before decisions were made. Most recommendations were simply forgotten, and many others were labeled as a nice idea but too costly. If new ways of making decisions are going to be used or if existing structures are going to change, teachers need to know, even if initial announcements are met with skepticism.
- With the complexity of making the change to block scheduling, not all of the implications of block scheduling were considered before making the decision. This made some departments feel like block scheduling answered the concerns of teachers on the committee, while other teachers and departments felt as if this was a decision that wouldn't have been made had their perspectives been considered. Because of the lack of teacher volunteers on action teams, only certain voices were part of the decision-making process, so teams did not always represent the ideas or concerns of the majority of the teachers. Some departments were represented and others weren't, so suggestions for change sometimes seemed self-serving because of the limited perspectives that were available during discussions. Therefore, we recommend steps such as selecting representatives from each department/division to serve on teams, or creating mechanisms by which to seek input along the way from teachers who are not serving on the committees.

Choosing the “Right” Block Schedule

Many schools consider block scheduling a way to help students prepare for the challenges of the workplace and/or a way to improve school climate. But whatever reason is driving the decision to move to the block schedule—whether it's a principal who is attempting to change the way instruction is delivered, a solution to a state-imposed mandate for increased graduation credits, or teachers finding it difficult to deliver curriculum that addresses the needs of learners in fifty-minute periods—research on the various forms of block scheduling needs to be done. Some schedules, for example, address the concern that English teachers have for the large numbers of students they see each day and the

resulting daily paperwork load, while other ways of organizing the school day have been created so that there are no large gaps of time between courses, as can happen, for example, when students have an English course in the fall of one year and then aren't enrolled in another English course until the spring of the following school year. A general description of the most common block schedules follows, but it is likely that no two block schedules being used in schools today are the same. Most schools look at sample schedules as a starting point from which to begin drafting and personalizing a schedule that works for their students and teachers. (See the charts in Appendix A for models of how courses are scheduled in each of the block types discussed below.)

Copernican

Joseph Carroll (1990) introduced the Copernican Plan, named after the sixteenth-century scholar Nicolaus Copernicus, in the early 1970s. Carroll suggested a schedule of two 85- to 90-minute required classes along with one or two electives, all meeting each day for 90 days, after which time students would demonstrate mastery of course objectives. Credit for a course is earned when objectives are met, a plan that challenges the traditional Carnegie-unit-driven schedule of six 50-minute courses per day for 180 days.

Alternate Day

In this approach (known variously as Block 8, A/B, Odd/Even, or Day 1/Day 2), students are enrolled in a total of eight 90-minute classes for the entire school year on an alternative-day block schedule. Each day, four of the eight classes meet. Many schools use the school colors, say, red and gray, to designate which classes meet on which day. For example, four classes meet on red day and the other four meet on gray day. Red and gray days alternate throughout the school year. Although there are day-to-day gaps in instruction with this type of schedule, it offers the advantage of meeting all year long, and it is easier to enroll transfer students. A student transferring in November, for example, has attended approximately forty days of 45- to 50-minute classes at his or her previous school. When transferring to a school on the alternate day block, he or she would have missed twenty days of 90-minute classes at the new school, which is nearly the same amount of instructional time. Transferring to a school on a 4x4 schedule, however, the same student would have missed nearly forty days of 90-minute classes, or one full semester.

Four-by-Four Block (4×4)

On the 4×4 block schedule, students are enrolled in four classes that meet for ninety minutes every day for a “semester” (a time period that usually needs to be relabeled in schools on this schedule). One year’s work is thus contained within a traditional-semester time period. Courses that typically earned half a credit or that met for only half a year on the traditional schedule would meet for only nine weeks (one term) on this type of block schedule. Teachers teach a total of six classes during the year but only three classes each day (Schoenstein 1995).

Trimester Plan (3×5 Trimester Plan)

With the trimester schedule, students are enrolled in five classes for approximately sixty days, or twelve weeks. Class periods are usually 70 to 125 minutes long. Some electives that need to meet for the entire year, such as newspaper, yearbook, band, and chorus, meet for 60 minutes each day. A typical teacher load is four classes a day, with about twenty-five students in each class for a total of approximately one hundred students per trimester (Geismar and Pullease 1996).

Examining and Changing the “Nuts and Bolts” of Doing School

As soon as the Mundelein High School (MHS) action team’s recommendation to create an alternative schedule incorporating extended class periods was announced, the halls, offices, teachers’ lounge, staff dining room, and faculty meetings were filled with a host of “what about” questions: “Well, what about graduation requirements? Couldn’t a student graduate in three years?” “What about attendance? One day absent from school would be like missing two days on the block.” These questions revealed the genuine concerns of the people who were going to be affected by the block, and these concerns needed to be addressed prior to putting the new schedule in place. Teachers, parents, and students at MHS generated the following list of concerns, recognizing that policies, procedures, and the work we did in relation to these areas would need to change.

- Master schedule
 - Student schedules
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Homework (department policies)
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- Open house and parent-teacher conferences
- Flex schedule/compensation time
- Teacher evaluation
- Deans’ and counselors’ access to students
- First-year orientation program
- Advisory period
- Graduation requirements
- Field trips
- Assemblies
- Add/drops and suspensions
- Grading
- Title I
- Attendance requirements
- Progress reports/semester grades
- Final exams
- Physical education waivers
- Announcements
- Failures
- Student privileges (parking, lunch, entering and exiting building)
- Student support services
- TFC (truant from class) failures
- Makeup time
- Inhouse substitution

Even though forming committees was generally seen as a negative way to address school problems at our school, teachers were beginning to see that committee work could result in action when the principal asked for committee volunteers to address the list of concerns generated by the action-team recommendations. He promised that groups would function for a short period of time—only long enough to arrive at a decision or process to address the concern. Committees were established from a pool of volunteers who indicated their interest in specific issues. As much as possible, meetings were held during common planning and lunch periods and before and after school. Some issues, such as the master schedule and teacher evaluation had a large number of volunteers wanting to serve, while first-year orientation and announcements had fewer numbers of teachers wanting to be involved in the decision-making process. By approaching committee membership in this way,

teachers felt like their ideas and concerns were heard, and although decisions might not have turned out exactly as they had expected when they arrived at the first meeting, it was the learning they did in arriving at the decision that made suggested changes acceptable.

Committees approached their decision making from the same research-learning perspective that the action teams had used. Committee members read articles, attended conferences, visited schools, talked to educators with experiences related to the issue(s) they were considering, and shared and talked with each other about all they were learning. Rough draft ideas and the rationale used to arrive at them were presented to the faculty at all-faculty, department, or luncheon meetings and were summarized in follow-up memos. After presenting and gaining feedback, committees met again to reconsider and revise their ideas. Once all committees had gone through this process, final presentations were made and policies established.

What We Learned

- Ideally, membership on committees should include a representative from each department in the school so that all needs and perspectives will be considered in arriving at a decision. When some of the Mundelein committee decisions were presented to the faculty, for example, it didn't appear that they had thought about the decision in relation to the demands on an English teacher or the approaches that are unique to the teaching of English. These perspectives (the realities of our unique teaching situations) could have been considered if, as a department, we had identified one person to serve on each committee.
 - Some teachers volunteered for committees for personal reasons—to eliminate certain ways of doing things and/or to make sure certain structures remained the same. For example, some teachers wanted to eliminate field trips, announcements, and passes to the deans and counselor's offices altogether. Serving on a committee with this type of agenda made it important for groups to agree on purpose(s) as related to the issue before arriving at a decision.
 - Many teachers and administrators are uncomfortable with the unknown and need to know that there are firm plans in place before making educational changes. They want to be certain that their planning and decisions are going to work—that they won't be in the middle of carrying out the new plan only to discover that a different option would have worked better or that other considerations should have been addressed. The English teachers felt this way several years prior to block scheduling when rewriting the curriculum. We wanted to get it right;
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we wanted to make sure we had thought of everything. When our anxiety was at its peak, our superintendent asked, “Is it the best final draft you can create?” The team of teachers responded with a confident yes, to which she replied, “Then that’s all you can do—final drafts can always be revised. That will be the work you do next year as you learn more with your students” (Hanson 1992). The same advice held true for block planning—there comes a point in time when you’ve fine tuned your plans as much as possible. Eventually you have to try them out knowing that with experience and learning you will need to go back and revise.

- Too much planning and preparing for the block can lead to anxiety. Toward the end of the school year in which we planned, we found that many teachers were more concerned than they had been several months before—they just needed to quit planning and start teaching.

Committee Decisions

Tentative answers to the “what about” questions that we had during our 1995–96 planning year can be found in Appendix B. Open forums were held in the spring of the school year prior to changing to the block schedule to give parents and students an overview of how school would be different. New policies and procedures were included in the student handbook, which was distributed to students and parents at registration and open house. We discovered that many of the decisions, once articulated, weren’t decisions related specifically to block scheduling; most were effective ways of working with students regardless of the type of schedule. For example, calling a parent if a homework problem exists—one of the block scheduling homework “procedures” outlined by the homework committee as a strategy teachers should use—is a strategy that should be used regardless of the type of schedule.

Although all of the issues listed earlier in this chapter and described in Appendix B will have an impact on the professional life of an English teacher, the decisions that were made about homework, Title I, and field trips are examples of issues that directly influenced the teaching of our English classes. Specific English department procedures on these issues follow the schoolwide decisions.
