

TEACHER LEADERSHIP / TEACHER RESISTANCE:

A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL'S SHIFT TO MODIFIED BLOCK SCHEDULING

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Introduction and Purpose

Following the passage of the far-reaching Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, a middle school in suburban Boston engaged in an internal process of reflection concerning its educational objectives and classroom practices. Responding specifically to the "Time and Learning" section of the Act, the school shifted to limited but significant block scheduling in Fall 1997. The school utilizes block scheduling four days a week, for half of each day, for two-thirds of the year. While some feedback from students and teachers had been gathered, systematic assessment has not taken place before this study was initiated.

Over the past dozen years, almost half of the secondary schools in the United States have shifted from a daily schedule consisting of six, seven, or eight periods of 45, 48 or 53 minutes to "block scheduling," a schedule which includes fewer periods including blocks of classroom time lasting from 90 to 135 minutes (Canady & Rettig, 1996; Cawelti, 1994). This has been one of the few shifts in the "regularities" of schooling which have been implemented on such a large scale at such a swift pace (Cuban & Tyack, 1996). Yet after a dozen years of block scheduling, limited research has been conducted to assess the relative success of the implementation of this particular educational reform. The field of educational research cries out for studies focused on this area, even as policymakers and district leadership increasingly mandate this under-studied innovation.

During August 1998, the principal of the middle school approached me, seeking assistance in analyzing the effects of block scheduling on teacher work, student learning and identifying the successes and failings of this change. He also sought assistance in identifying potential areas for professional development and making recommendations regarding improvements in the implementation of block scheduling at the school.

This study provides an in-depth look at ways in which teachers and students at this middle school have experienced and responded to the advent of block scheduling. Utilizing a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods (surveys, classroom observations, interviews, document review, focus groups), the study aimed to assess the relative success of the shift to block scheduling, make recommendations for improvement, and assist the school with suggestions for resources and professional development opportunities. The project commenced in October 1998 and the data gathering phase ended in May 1999.

The Research Study

My study had three major objectives: (1) To understand the effects of the shift to block scheduling on teaching and learning at this middle school and document successes and failings; (2) To make recommendations regarding ways to improve the implementation of block scheduling at the school site; (3) To support faculty by suggesting potential areas for professional development and locating relevant materials and resources to assist with lesson planning.

These objectives guided the design of this research project and suggested specific research methods to be utilized in investigating specific aspects of block scheduling. A variety of research methods were employed by the investigator to assist in fulfilling these objectives:

- o Surveys of faculty, administrators, and a randomized selection of students were administered.
- o Classroom observations of three teachers took place. These teachers were observed teaching within the block and teaching outside the block. They were also interviewed about block scheduling for this study.
- o Focus groups of teachers were organized to sample opinion and observe social dynamics surrounding block scheduling.
- o Document review focused on key documents concerning block scheduling which have circulated at the middle school: drafts of schedules over various years, discussion in the school's newspaper, information which appeared in memos to school educators and parents.

Surveys from 28 teachers and administrators and 239 students were returned and analyzed. Seventeen teachers participated in focus group discussions and seven teachers and administrators who were key to the shift to block scheduling (primarily leaders or opponents) were interviewed one-on-one.

Findings

Of the teachers surveyed, 55% agreed that the modified block schedule used by the school provides students with "a better opportunity for learning," than the previous schedule which included no blocks. This response, along with other data from the survey and interviews, indicates that a majority of teachers at this middle school support the new schedule. Yet a significant portion of the teachers (approximately 23%) believes the new schedule has provided a "worse" opportunity for learning for students and would like to eliminate it from the school. Along with other data from the survey and interviews, this response suggests that a significant segment of the teacher population at the school continues to oppose and--ample evidence suggests--sometimes covertly or overtly undermine the new schedule.

Additional findings of significance:

- o Social studies and English teachers were strongly supportive of teaching in the block; science teachers were generally supportive, and mathematics teachers were generally opposed to teaching in the block.
- o A majority of teachers believes that their teaching style and lesson plans have changed significantly due to the shift to block scheduling and they are making

greater use of cooperative learning and project-based curricula, and less frequent use of direct instruction than before block scheduling.

- o The modified blocked schedule introduces a number of new challenges for some teachers, among them: (a) difficulties making up for lessons lost due to snow days, holidays, and other changes in the teaching schedule; (b) difficulties holding the attention of some special needs students; (c) difficulties reconceptualizing teacher role, lesson planning, and diversifying instructional methods.

- o A majority of teachers surveyed indicate that they believe block scheduling has improved student learning, yet the school had made no plans to assess student achievement before and after the shift to block scheduling and gathered no specific baseline data to this end.

- o Teachers are divided on how the shift to block scheduling has affected their workload. A plurality of teachers believes their workload is the same (46%) while significant groups of teachers believe their workload has increased (31%), or decreased (23%).

The paper presentation at AERA will address three key areas: (1) The overall findings from the study; (2) An analysis of the data focused on teacher resistance and teacher leadership on the shift to block scheduling; (3) Recommendations for ways in which the school might continue utilizing their modified block schedule, but improve its effectiveness and assist teachers who are having the most difficulty. The presentation will also include a discussion of the recommended staff development needs for this school, including an analysis range of materials available to schools aiming to implement block scheduling (Canady & Rettig, 1996; Conti-D'Anotonio, Bertrando & Eisenberger, 1998; Gilkey & Hunt, 1998; Marshak, 1999).

Importance of Study

Despite the trend towards greater use of block scheduling, there are only a few studies available focused on the implementation of this shift in the scheduling regularities of schools (Cawelti, 1994; Reid, 1995 March 15; Pisapia, J. & Westfall, A., 1997 January). This paper offers a look at one school's experience with a shift to modified block scheduling and highlights ways in which teachers can both lead and resist such changes, as well as the various ways this scheduling change impacts teacher work, pedagogy, and assessment.

This paper also is valuable because it takes seriously, gives voice to, and attempts to make sense of the perspectives of teachers, many of whom have struggled to accommodate countless shifts in schedule, preferred teaching methods, and curricular materials during their careers. Additionally, the voices of middle school students, rarely considered as central to assessments of reform efforts (Wasley, Hampel and Clark 199y), are included in this paper when they assist in clarifying or completing the teacher data. A separate paper focused on student response to block scheduling is currently being prepared.

Citations

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