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More and More Schools Putting Block Scheduling to Test of Time **By Meg Sommerfeld** **Vancouver, Washington**

By 7 a.m., senior David Cone's day at Evergreen High School is already under way.

While some of his schoolmates are eating their Wheaties, brushing their teeth, or otherwise preparing for the day, Mr. Cone is in class--working on a geography assignment.

He is putting in an extra 30 minutes before many of his classmates show up for the day as part of an increasingly popular way to organize the time students spend at school.

Block scheduling is a "less is more" approach in which students take fewer classes each school day, but spend more time in each class. Evergreen High School here is in its second year of using such a schedule.

Most class periods here at Evergreen last an hour and 20 minutes, and instead of the traditional six courses per semester, students take four each trimester.

Courses that used to last a semester now last a trimester, and courses that used to continue for a year now run for two trimesters.

And for those students who, like Mr. Cone, play in the school band, school starts a little bit earlier.

'The Missing Element'

A 1994 report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, an independent panel temporarily convened by Congress, called time "the missing element in the school-reform debate." The report urged that the traditional six-hour school day and 180-day year "be relegated to museums as an exhibit of our education past." (See *Education Week*, May 11, 1994.)

Then and now, most high schools offer six periods a day that last about 50 minutes each. Among other suggestions, the report advised schools to be less rigid in how they use time and urged the use of block scheduling and an extended school year.

At least 14 percent of high schools nationwide use some form of block scheduling, according to one recent national survey conducted by the National Association of Biology Teachers, and interest in alternative forms of scheduling has been growing steadily.

For example, less than a decade ago, only three schools in Virginia used some form of block scheduling. Now nearly 45 percent of the state's high schools use it; in neighboring North Carolina,

nearly 40 percent of high schools use it. Block scheduling also is used in a significant number of schools in Colorado, Florida, Maryland, and Texas, according to Robert Lynn Canady, an education professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

In recent months, magazines such as *Educational Leadership* and *The High School Magazine* that primarily target school administrators have featured articles about rethinking the structure of the school day. And education associations say they are busy organizing workshops to respond to the steady flow of inquiries from their members.

Block-scheduling advocates say longer classes create more opportunities for hands-on lessons and allow students to concentrate on their work for longer stretches without being interrupted by the ringing of a bell.

Moreover, they say, less time is wasted: In a 55-minute class, only 28 minutes is devoted to instruction, a 1984 study by researchers at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, shows. The researchers studied five high schools in central Texas to determine how much time students spent actively engaged in learning.

In theory, a block schedule carves out more time for instruction by reducing the amount of time students spend walking from class to class and the time teachers spend taking attendance or getting a class to settle down and concentrate on the day's lessons.

While some high schools, such as Evergreen, are experimenting with a four-period trimester system, others are trying different plans:

* 4X4: Students take four 90-minute classes a day and complete them in a semester rather than a full year. For example, a student might take math, English, Spanish, and art in the fall, and biology, history, physical education, and music in the spring.

* A/B: Each semester students take eight 90-minute classes, but classes meet every other day, four on day A and four on day B.

* 75-15, 75-15: Students take four classes for a 75-day fall term, followed by a 15-day intersession for enrichment activities or remedial work. The pattern is repeated in the spring.

"Teachers would just pass out if someone asked them to prepare eight different classes every day. Why is it we think students have time to do that?" said Mr. Canady, who is widely referred to as "the block-scheduling guru."

"You have got kids who are just as busy after school as teachers are," he said. "When are they supposed to get seven or eight different preparations done? Even our best students are under tremendous stress."

Variations on a Theme

The 18,000-student Vancouver district sits on the state border, just across the Columbia River from Portland, Ore. It is one of the fastest-growing school districts in the state.

Houses and strip shopping malls gradually are replacing the farmlands that edge Evergreen High School as more families are drawn by jobs at high-tech companies and taxes that are lower than those in Oregon.

Like many teenagers, David Cone tries to grab as much sleep as he can. It's tough at times because he must be at school by 7 a.m., a half hour earlier than other students at Evergreen High because he plays in the band.

As has been the case elsewhere, when Evergreen first considered adopting a block schedule two years ago, music teachers were concerned that their students would suffer if they could not rehearse year round.

But the staff came up with a solution: create a two-hour period that starts a half-hour early. Then divide it into two traditional 50-minute periods, one for music and one for an academic class.

Mr. Cone starts his day with this companion class, Contemporary World Problems. It encompasses psychology, sociology, economics, and geography.

On one recent day, the regular teacher was absent, and a substitute teacher sent the students to the library. Fifteen minutes into the period, most of the class had disappeared from the room. But Mr. Cone and a few of his classmates remained to help fill in country names on a blank map.

At 7:50 a.m., it was time for band.

Mr. Cone, who plays the clarinet, warmed up with the rest of the band for a few minutes before diving into the song "Sunset Boulevard." At 8:45 a.m., he departed for Computer-Aided Drafting, his first extended-length period of the day.

As he walked through the hallways to class, there were no students shouting and no locker doors being slammed shut. One reason the passing period is less frenetic is that students have 10 minutes to get to class, instead of the typical six.

"One of the best things the block does is it slows down the school," Mr. Canady said. The old way "is just a treadmill--we give them five minutes to go to the bathroom, go to their locker, and get a date. Then they come in late, and we send them back for a tardy slip."

Principal Nancy Bush-Lange agreed. She said since the block schedule was implemented at Evergreen High, discipline problems have decreased and morale has increased. There are fewer fights, and 75 percent of students and 73 percent of teachers report that they are less stressed.

Like his classmates in the drafting class, Mr. Cone doesn't waste time getting to work. The students progress at their own pace, tackling each unit as they are ready.

Dixie Beaver, who teaches the class, strolled around to look at students' work and answer questions. But mostly the room was silent, the atmosphere more like an office than a classroom.

Mr. Cone, who wants to be an architect, said he especially enjoys having a long period in this class. It gives him time to figure out if he has made a mistake in a design, correct it, and move ahead.

"I find the day goes by much faster now," he said. "You get more engrossed in what you are doing."

"They get just as much done as before--if not more," Ms. Beaver said.

But classes that are less hands-on can be a struggle.

"It was hard to get used to it," Mr. Cone said. "Sitting in the same class for a long time--sometimes I'll just be waiting for the end to come, and it seems like forever."

Other students agreed: If teachers are good and keep their interest, block scheduling is terrific. But if they are bad, it can be awful.

The drafting class ended at 10:20 a.m., and already it was time for lunch.

Both teachers and students enjoy the longer lunch periods, Ms. Bush-Lange said. On the previous schedule, there were two 30-minute lunch periods. Now there is a common 50-minute period, allowing everyone to eat at a more leisurely pace.

But for Mr. Cone, 10:20 a.m. is just too early to eat, so he usually waits until he gets home to have lunch. He is not taking a class 4th period this term, so he is finished at 12:30 p.m.

Like many students here, Mr. Cone uses the lunch period to participate in extracurricular activities. Many clubs meet during lunch instead of after school. And students can get extra help--math faculty members take turns staffing a tutorial at which students and teachers can eat and work.

Beyond Hands-On

Mr. Cone spent his lunch period in the cafeteria selling tickets for the senior graduation breakfast. Forty tickets later, it was time for English.

For the first seven minutes, teacher Rosemary Fryer took attendance and returned a quiz. Then she handed out a new quiz on vocabulary from "Macbeth." The class spent about 50 minutes reading Act IV of the Shakespearean drama aloud, stopping every few minutes to discuss some of the more complex passages.

And though teachers say they try to use the longer periods for more innovative activities, some students complain that their teachers still lecture--just for longer. And they say some teachers use the time to allow students to do homework in class.

But on the whole, Mr. Cone and his classmates say they like the block approach. A 1994 North Carolina education department study found that about half of the students following block schedules in that state said classes were more interesting under the new schedule, and 15 percent found them less interesting.

Faculty members at Evergreen High are enthusiastic about the block schedule. In order to adopt it, 80 percent of the teachers had to support it. Even some who initially opposed it now say they would never go back to the old way.

Teachers here say they have fewer students each term--about 90 instead of 150--and they can get to know those students better. What's more, their in-school preparation time has nearly doubled, from 50 minutes to 90 minutes a day.

"I don't think we are as tired, where before, by the end of the day, I'd just want to collapse and be brain-dead," said Janet Railsback, a home-economics teacher.