

Perspective on Block Scheduling — How Do We Fit In?

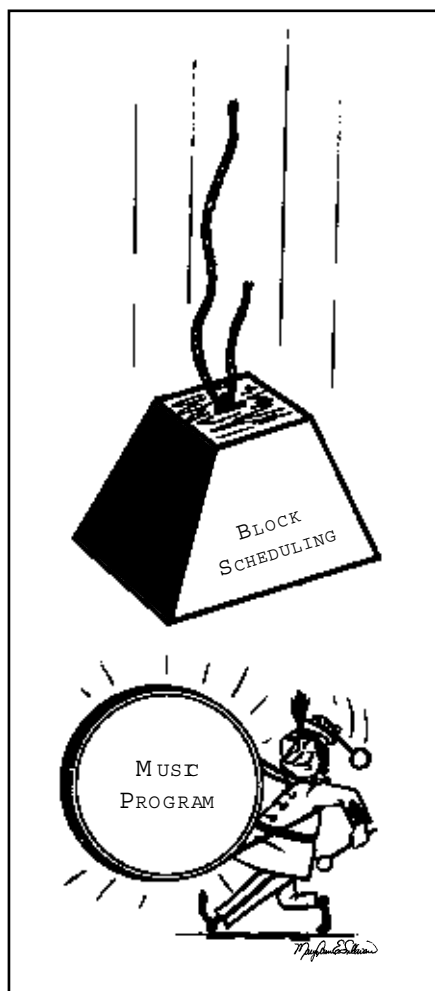
(This article was prepared for MSBOA' Perspectives newsletter and was published in 1997. The views expressed are those of the author.)

This article was prepared in 1997 when block scheduling was being investigated and adopted by many school districts throughout the country. At this writing, many districts have reverted to a regular scheduling scheme after experiencing the block. Some districts have found the block schedule to work for them, while others avoided changing to the block.

By Gary T. Sullivan

About a year ago my high school principal invited me to attend his association meeting in Lansing. The subject of the day- "AlternativeScheduling". The atmosphere created by the various administrators (and "their" staffs) chosen to present was on a "par" with the fervor created by the traveling "medicine men" of the last century. The sentiment was somewhere between "I got what you need" and "I know something that you don't know" or "be the first one on your block", and definitely "we've go trouble in River City". The cure this time, and presented through the latest overused buzz word — "model"— was—you guessed it—BLOCK SCHEDULING.

After a long period of "ultimate models" and during a much-needed break, I did encounter one skeptic. This elderly gentleman (principal from an unnamed district) claimed to have tried Block Scheduling "years ago". And,



well, it didn't really work—then. There is a thread of concern among this and several other skeptics. It has a lot to do with the feeling that the only thing that really matters

in education is that point at which that student meets that teacher. The issue of time structure is not as significant—as long as one meets the students on a regular basis. Block scheduling hits instrumental ensembles hard — in that area of a "regular basis".

Heading Home to "Build" That Block!

Loaded down with the latest stack of "school improvement stuff", we returned home. I ended up on the school improvement team. The program that I represent involves many students, is very historical, and is important to the community. Therefore, I suspect that my position has been some blend of political expediency, "get them on the inside", and from my perspective—damage control. After all, I don't consider this program broken, and to change it is doing so to "fix" other "broken" areas.

I must admit that the staff

members with whom I have been working with are sensitive to the fact that an incorrect scheduling move could dismantle this large, successful and historic program. I have been careful not to be perceived as an adversary. I believe that this schedule change is coming and my job has been to positively explore ways to make things work for our music program while also allowing others to address their perceived need to improve their areas by changing the schedule.

Troubled by what all of this could mean, my basic strategy has been to develop a couple of firm points, stick to them, and constantly reiterate them. I have been put on the spot a few times over this issue, but I try to answer questions and remain positive. But to be perfectly honest, I feel that the word "band" is used an awful lot in our school to describe the adopted schedule and its variations. One thing that has been going for us is the fact that our high school principal understands the importance of daily continuity. He has attended enough conferences to know that instrumental directors lose their programs when they don't have that daily contact.

The Criticisms & My Responses

When criticized for presenting a firm belief in what is necessary for music program survival, I responded, "Presumably school improvement is for

all of the students and all of the programs. Why would you want to implement a plan of "improvement" that would damage or dismantle a program that involves so many students?"

When it was suggested that we might teach our program more outside of the school day, I responded, "Our staff and students are a part of this school and curriculum. That battle was fought many years ago when music programs were made a part of the curriculum. Additionally, as staff, we pay for proper representation of the bargaining unit and it would be expected that any such move would be addressed through those channels."

Be very careful of the attitude that "your" teaching can be moved outside of the regular school day. (extracurricular) In the "Proposal A climate" anything "outside" of the regular curriculum might eventually find itself "out".

When it was said that "the band" is just like everyone else and shouldn't have special treatment, I responded, "The band is not like any other area in this school. It does require special treatment."

The Main Points

The following "main" points are what I believe to be necessary for program survival under alternative scheduling:

Daily rehearsal of ensembles: To achieve any continuity, students must meet every day. Instrumental ensembles must deal with a variety of

unusual teaching situations including large student numbers performing on diverse musical instruments. If you deal with marching bands, an issue as common as the fall weather and its unpredictable nature will be a larger issue with a schedule scheme that meets every other day. The daily schedule evens out the impact of lost rehearsal and student absence.

Other basic issues include things like those minor instrument repairs that disable practice efforts. Many other issues result when daily contact is lost

Younger students are still developing their embouchures and hand positions. The amount of time that students perform in one session is an important consideration. Daily reinforcement of performance skills produces effective learning in instrumental ensembles.

Band involvement must not be an overly large amount of a student's daily schedule. Student attrition will probably be the long-term result of a schedule scheme requiring instrumentalists to devote disproportionately large amounts of time to what is still a portion of their total schedule. Students will perceive a need to take more classes as they prepare for college. They will unlikely turn down opportunities for the many alternative programs. Eventually, the amount of time expected during the regular schedule would keep students from continuing in ensembles. A better plan

might be to augment the daily schedule of rehearsals with a few extra rehearsals, scheduled as needed, to satisfy your program's specific needs.

Students need to be able to take band and choir. In our program, the Jazz Band and one of the choirs now operates before school to avoid conflicts with other classes. This move to allow music courses to function outside of the "regular" school day puts us one step closer to being excluded from the regular schedule. Music courses deserve to be a part of the "school family" as much as any other area. Keep the music classes in the school schedule.

Music Staff Travel: Limitations on the number of music staff make it necessary for the music teachers to teach and then travel to the junior high building. The junior high schedule must "dovetail" with the high school schedule. It is essential that administrators communicate with teachers concerning scheduling decisions that involve "shared" staff.

The Final "Model"

Charlotte has adopted a "four block" schedule beginning in the fall of the 1997 - 98 school year. Every student will have four blocks per semester for a total of eight blocks per year.

The first block of the day has been identified as a music block. The first block is 105 minutes and blocks two, three,

& four are 90 minutes. The first block can be split into two 50-minute blocks with a 5 minute passing time between. (Blocks 1A and 1B) Ensemble courses will be taught 50 minutes per day for the entire year and a number of classes will be offered in the "long blocks" to alternate with the ensembles. Students in both band & choir will take band in 1A or 1B and alternate with choir in 1B or 1A. If they are only in band or choir, they will take an academic course in the alternate 1A or 1B long block - for the entire year. Students not in these "split" blocks meet in a regularly scheduled block. The additional time provided in this block will be used for announcements, TV, etc., in the other classes.

A couple of agreements had to be made in order for this scheme to work:

1. Since the 105-minute block is being justified by announcements, etc. in the other classes, it is agreed that the ensembles will rehearse during that time. No TV, lengthy PA dissertations, etc., can be tolerated during the 50 minute ensemble rehearsals.

2. Courses selected to alternate with the ensembles need to be substantial and perceived as "quality offerings" by the students. If students feel that these courses are "frills", they will ultimately drop out of the ensembles in favor of more substantial "needed" offerings.

The possible negative effect of not having substantial offerings is similar to a situation where a full band block is required all year. Students,

eventually, will take themselves out of ensembles to fulfill a perceived need in another course area.

3. Student needs must drive the selection of courses that alternate with the 1A & 1B blocks—not only staff desires. A source of controversy still exists with deciding the courses and staff placed in the 1A and 1B blocks. Teachers perceive teaching in the first block with a yearlong split block assignment as an additional preparation. They actually teach 6 of 8 blocks per year like everyone else. They will, however, see more students than teachers who teach three blocks per day.

Silver Bullet or Trojan Horse

The variety in concepts concerning block scheduling can be confusing. Each district seems to take pride in adapting their "model". Some school improvement teams have gone "on the circuit" (medicine men) and others receive with open arms anybody who wants to take a trial run through their "model". (My school is better than yours.) Some schools are even charging a fee to receive people, and several administrators are now "consultants".

Everyone seems to be looking for the "silver bullet" to deal with a plethora of demons in education, including a lack retention, excessive class loads, low test scores, etc. Be careful that the cure you select has proven the desired effect over a period of time. (Know

your medicine man.) Your job will be to decide if the proposed plan (“model” in the education industry) is a Silver Bullet or Trojan Horse.

Assess Your Current Teaching Environment

All ensembles and teachers function a little differently. We could, for the purpose of example, place programs on a continuum from A to Z. Be honest about your own personal situation. Is yours an “A” ensemble, or a “Z” ensemble?

The “A” Experience Ensemble:

If yours is an ensemble that meets every day, makes guided regular progress, and performs because of daily continuity and systematic teaching, block scheduling may be a problem for you.

Give yourself the “Best Friday” and “Super Monday” test. If your ensemble sounds best on Friday after five days of continuity and ensemble training (Best Friday) or sounds extra bad on Tuesday after a missed Monday (Super Monday), block scheduling plans that alternate days could spell trouble for you.

Yours is an ensemble that makes guided, regular progress because of your daily teaching. Your ensemble approach is systematic and your daily teaching provides many developmental activities that improve tone, tuning and individual technique. You have figured out how to pro-

vide an ensemble rehearsal environment where daily progress is made as an ensemble while the individual player also improves.

In spite of some students who don’t put in as much practice time outside of class as you would like, they still improve because the daily structure is there. A lot happens in your class.

The “Z” Experience Ensemble

If your ensemble contains many musicians who study privately, play hours every day (whether they see you or not) and are musically involved in many other performance activities, a block schedule where you don’t meet every day might not hurt your ensemble as much. This is because you, personally, aren’t providing them the “bulk” of their instruction. Even in a block schedule, the “Z” ensemble students are getting their daily continuity of musical performance apart from your teaching efforts.

Their membership is probably benefiting your ensemble more than you are benefiting them. Your ensemble is probably much like a professional studio orchestra, where the players are so excellent that they can meet, rehearse & record at an excellent level—all on the same day.

Most School Ensembles

Most ensembles are more of the “A” type of ensemble with some of the “Z” ensemble type of players. Those won-

derfully dedicated “Z” ensemble players fill dreams of “if only they would all be in my group during the same year”. Even with all of their ability, the “Z” ensemble players need to benefit from the daily continuity of rehearsal. The “Z” ensemble players also provide support and help improve the ensemble by modeling for the younger “A” ensemble players. Forming that aural image is best achieved by reinforcement on a daily basis.

Know what makes what you do work. Be sure to include all of those affective issues. Once gone, they may never return. The dynamics of a successful instrumental program are fragile, to say the least. Yes, know what you are gaining by revision of the schedule, but be aware of what you are giving up.

Ensemble Impact with the Main Block Plans

Eight Block (“see ya later”)

The “eight block” is the “killer of continuity” in instrumental music. In the most common arrangement, students come to class every other day for a 90-minute block, and attend an additional compressed time on the fifth day. Illness, weather, field trips, etc. can damage the continuity of the ensemble with any scheduling scheme.

Meeting every day on a traditional schedule smoothes out the interruptions and minimizes the absences for any one class. The “traditional” schedule (one where students

meet you in a class every day) helps ensembles by spreading the impact of a day's absence and distributes the loss of instruction time. But on the eight-block schedule, if the day out of class, for whatever reason, falls during your Thursday rehearsal —"see ya next week".

Four Block

(You might be told, "Your band will be great because you get the kids daily for 90 minutes". Read on.)

I am really alarmed at the number of instrumental people who are jumping on this "bandwagon". The veiled "cure" for us is the possibilities presented by having more teaching time every day. Students can take, after all, four classes per semester or a total of eight classes per year.

One-year classes can be compressed into one-semester 90-minute blocks and more offerings are available for everyone. This is potentially a real "Trojan Horse." First of all, should a student dedicate 25% of his school day to instrumental music? And what about the English, math & science departments who, like us, feel that "since we now have 8 blocks per year" elect to also expand their offering to the entire year! Before long the six hour day (which has been a scheduling problem to music teachers) begins to look like a four-hour day. Believe me it will happen. When the blocks are scheduled during the day has an impact on the curriculum. If you think single sec-

tion conflicts are a problem with six periods per day, wait until you must fit students into four blocks. They will have to make a choice & it probably won't be for your "elective". How do you like the horse now?

Our solution was to expand the first block and split it. Some students and teachers, in effect, operate on two traditional periods during the first block.

Additional Block Issues

Seminar Times

(A possible "catchall" that you can't own.)

Be careful of being told that you can run ensembles, jazz bands, sectionals, etc. during "seminar" or tutorial times. You can't own that time. Short of having a "scheduling Czar", everyone will want to lay claim to students during that time. Is that the type of ensemble experience that is consistent & predictable?

Tutorial Times - Remediation

Some people report that ensembles are being targeted for "remediation pull-outs". When this happens, the instrumental class is being viewed as less than substantial. This is a slant on "my class is more important than music classes".

The attitude that students can be pulled out of music classes and it doesn't matter is really "Neanderthal". Beware of any scheduling scheme that places your

ensemble in a schedule slot counter to remediation.

Lumping & Dumping

If it is a fact that students function best in heterogeneous groups, avoid scheduling elements that "lump and dump" your music students into remediation labs, learning labs or other "easy" scheduling flips.

Students are very socially conscious. They are sensitive to situations where they are "typecast". They shouldn't be put into "forced" situations because of their music involvement.

Hard Data

(To counter the "Hardly Data")

Has there been any experience with block scheduling and instrumental ensembles? Yes! Is it good? No! What is your role? Damage control! Here is "the other side of the story".

The following studies contain surveys of music educators who have had experience with a variety block scheduling schemes. This reform that has been sweeping the nation has put many music educators in a reactive mode. By reviewing these materials, a better understanding of the problems already encountered is possible:

"The Effects of the Four-Period Day on Colorado High School Performing Arts Classes"

(M.A. Thesis, Adams State College by Gary Hall.)

The preface states, "This

study was conducted to assist Colorado music educators in assessing the impact of the “four period day” scheduling system on Colorado high school music performance arts classes”.

This “abstract” is fairly lengthy, hard-hitting and very detailed. The study is organized to provide a powerful tool to music educators facing decisions regarding “block scheduling”.

The beginning sections provide a review of the literature that provides support for arts in education. This material cites current trends in education that provide obstacles for arts education. The material presented here is some of the best for presenting a rationale for music education and arts education in general. It challenges curriculum decisions that are selective in their use of data.

The section entitled “Conclusions and Recommendations” provides a summary of effects created by block scheduling. The survey uses a professional and statistical approach. It provides the type of data that is needed to present effective evidence of the proven damage of various scheduling schemes. Music teachers responding to the survey were allowed to provide some anecdotal responses.

A few of the “high points” include the following:

Of those music directors experiencing the “pure” form of the four period day (where there are four classes that meet every day for approxi-

mately 90 minutes), 91% experienced a drop in music ensemble enrollment and none experienced any growth in student population.

Of those music directors experiencing the “eight block” schedule (where students are on a four period day that has a rotating a/b schedule and they take four classes on one day and then a different four classes on the next day for the entire school year) 14% experienced a drop in music ensemble enrollment. 72% maintained a static enrollment.

91% of music instructors perceived that scheduling conflicts accounted for the largest number of student drops from performing ensembles. 80% of those indicating a problem with scheduling conflicts, cited required course conflicts to be the biggest problem. 74% indicated conflict problems with other electives.

86% of all respondents agreed that inconsistent student participation had an effect on the literature chosen for performance.

60% of all respondents felt that only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the rehearsal time was productive.

Only 26% of the respondents perceived their administration as feeling the performance arts are an important part of the child’s education. 46% reported that students are being counseled by the counselors & administrators of their schools to drop performance arts classes.

74% of the total respondents felt that student attitudes had turned less positive with 91% of the respondents from a

“pure four block” noting a less positive attitude.

63% of the instructors had a perception that students view performance arts classes as less important than other curricular offerings and 43% of the respondents reported that parental pressure was exerted on students to drop performance art classes in favor of other curricular subjects.

Upper classmen and college bound students are more likely to drop out of performance classes due to schedule conflicts.

When students plan to drop out for a semester and intend to return, few do. Their original proficiency is impaired and slowly regained.

Student proficiency and artistic-aesthetic sensitivity has not improved since adopting the four period day.

Fluctuation or inconsistent student enrollment has led to balance problems which has a negative impact on the music curriculum and on the selection of music literature chosen for performance.

Fatigue and attention span is a problem with longer rehearsals.

Loss of students; inconsistent student enrollment; schedule conflicts, a perceived lack of administration, parent and student support are causing frustration and possible stress in instructors of performance arts.

“How To Save Your School Music & Arts Programs”

(“A Handbook for the Arts Advocate” by Dr. John L. Benham)

This is a general handbook on how to prevent cuts to music programs. In addition to other items of interest, it shows music people how to present the economy of music programs and their value.

The handbook shows the reader how to be a positive advocate for the arts program. It also has a brief section on “block scheduling”. The handbook is available from: Music in World Cultures, Inc., 6425 County Road 30, St. Bonifacius, MN 55375.

The assumptions regarding block scheduling are stated & analyzed. For instance, even though it is asserted that in block scheduling students will have greater flexibility and will be able to take more electives, Dr. Benham demonstrates that “curricular continuity is difficult, if not impossible to maintain”.

He also challenges the assumption that longer time in class sessions is better than shorter amounts of instruction over an extended period of time.

By demonstrating that with block scheduling “3 out of 4 of the teachers will be teaching at any one time, instead of 5 out of 6, fewer sections of classes will be available, again creating more conflicts in scheduling.”

“An Examination of the Four Period Day and Its Impact On Performance Based Music Classes”

(A National Survey by Kevin Meidl)

This is an national survey that surveyed music teachers in 13 states. This survey compiles many of the same type of statistics found in the Colorado survey. It is available from Kevin Meidl, Appleton West High School, 610 N. Badger Ave., Appleton, WI 54914.

The survey has outlined many of the disadvantages of block scheduling. Much to my personal chagrin, he has even pointed out a possible “pitfall” to the variation in block scheduling that my school will be using in hopes that new scheduling doesn’t dismantle our music program. The following is a sample of this survey.

“Structuring models with “skinny” classes built into the program tend to work only in specific schools and generally smaller programs. Other classes such as physical education, or keyboarding would need to rotate with music, or music students would be programmed into a study hall (punishment for being a music student). Other teachers wishing to teach year long “skinny” soon find out that they are teaching more students, and often have more preparations than teachers working with the block. Interest fades quickly.”

“If music goes all year in a straight block, will other classes consider doing the same?” (This goes along with my argu-

ment that the 4-block schedule can quickly decrease from eight offerings to four per year as certain classes seize the opportunity to expand into their “rightful” time space.)

Mr. Meidl concludes that 68% of the music teachers surveyed believed that block scheduling had been detrimental to their performance based music classes.

“Block Scheduling: Implications for Music Educators”

(An overview by Larry Blocher and Richard Myles – Morehead State University, Morehead, KY).

Morehead State University professors Larry Blocher and Richard Miles prepared an overview of the effects of block scheduling for the Kentucky Coalition for Music Education. This documents the inevitable decline in the number of students enrolled and in the quality of musical performance programs in schools that use the 4 x 4 system. Results are similar to earlier cited studies.

“Modifying Block Schedules To Salvage Music Programs”

(A magazine article by Glenn Patterson on Block Scheduling)

This article, published in the January 1997 issue of “The Instrumentalist” magazine, provides some possible alterations to the block schedule. Mr. Patterson also cites some actual examples of schools using these plans.

Did You Know?

The Houston Independent Schools District incorporated the four period day during the 1973 – 74 school year. They justified their change to “block scheduling” using many of the same viewpoints advanced by today’s proponents of block scheduling.

The district returned to the six period day after five years on the block schedule. A desire for increased flexibility in scheduling, attention span concerns, difficulty for both students and teachers to inter-relate effectively for 80 minutes, the desire for continuous exposure to specific areas in the curriculum (foreign language, science, math, etc.), the requirements in special areas such as vocational education and special education, and the disadvantages to the music program under the four period day, drove the return to the traditional schedule.(extracted from the Hall thesis)

Lake Braddock High School in Fairfax County, Virginia voted against the “4x4” last year because of what it would do to their award winning (music) program. (Letter to “NEA Today”, National Education Association Magazine, in response to a recent article on the “4x4” block schedule.)

Coda

In spite of so many negative studies regarding block sched-

uling across the country, there are directors who are writing positive articles about block scheduling. Some seem to have adapted to one of the various block-scheduling schemes to fit their particular situation. Others, I fear, have not had the “long haul” experience with this type of teaching situation to make an informed assessment that will hold up over time.

In the states where the experience is long-term, strict adherence to block scheduling has not been positive for performing ensembles. As I initially stated, if this move to block scheduling is for “school improvement”, we are part of “school improvement” too, and decisions need to reflect the rights of students to have quality performance arts experiences.

When reading an article written by a music director and proclaiming a positive slant on block scheduling, determine the time-span of the experience. Remember the “Hawthorne Effect” which refers to the stimulation to output or accomplishment that results from the mere fact of being under observation. Much of the impact from this type of scheduling results from complicated relationships of diverse factors and quite possibly the fact that it is different.

As many concerned teachers report “perception” or “affective” issues, remember that those types of issues are very central to the effective instrumental program. The perception of the value of what we do is closely tied to every-

thing from funding to retention.

My personal opinion is that the more an ensemble works toward the fine points of performance, the more disruptive this scheduling will be. If those fine points have never been achieved, their absence will probably never be noticed.

One of my current projects is the construction of a “history” of the Charlotte band program. I find myself the leader of a large band program that started in the early 1920s as “The Symphony Six”. Since those meager beginnings, the Charlotte program has grown to three high school bands and has, for many years, enjoyed many successful performances and honors.

If that young teacher from the 1920s were to return to us in the late 1990s, it would be my wish that he could view his program that has so wonderfully evolved, rather than view the 90s version of his “Symphony Six”. That chapter of our history is yet, unwritten.

Note: Refer to the recent “updates to block scheduling” also published on this web.

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