Formative Comparative Implementation Evaluation of A/B Block Schedules in Two Utah High Schools

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The government report *Prisoners of Time* forcefully brought the constraints of the traditional school schedule to the forefront of the reform movement in the midnineties. Since that time, numerous additional experiments with alternative schedules, that were previously abandoned in the eighties, have been conducted. This article seeks to add to both the qualitative and quantitative data concerning the various impacts of schedule change in high schools. The lessons learned from their efforts may apply to other high schools that are considering a similar schedule change.

**Description of the Program**

The main purpose of the A/B block schedule is to improve the quality of the time students spend in classes. Objectives include improving school climate, increasing student engagement and achievement, and providing innovative teaching opportunities.

The schedule change is intended to serve the students, teachers, and administrators at two Utah high schools. The identity of the schools will be kept anonymous. They will be referred to hereafter as School 1 and School 2. Students are expected to experience a richer learning environment, teachers will have more opportunities for instructional innovation in the classroom, and administrators hope to encounter fewer behavioral problems and see the students succeed academically in greater numbers.

The change in class length is the main component of the A/B block schedule. School 1 had been planning and coordinating with teachers for over a year to find a new school schedule. Based on School 1’s research, School 2 made a relatively quick decision to move to a block schedule, which left many teachers at School 2 wondering why they changed schedule at all. Classes went from 45-minute periods to 87-minute periods at both schools. Instead of having the same classes each day, students have each class at School 1 three times a week because of the condensed Friday schedule: two 87-minute periods, and one 30-minute period each week (A/B/C block schedule), see Table 1. School 2 operates an alternating A/B schedule, taking into account weekends and holidays and is also represented in Table 1. An A/B schedule consists of two 87-minute periods of A classes and three 87-minute periods of B classes one week and the opposite the following week to balance the total number of classes in a semester.

### Table 1

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<th>School schedules at School 1 and School 2</th>
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Generally, teachers at both high schools have one 87-minute period per week as preparation time for each subject they teach. Because of scheduling constraints, this was not always possible so accommodations were made with individual teachers. Most teachers have one preparation period each day.

The formative implementation evaluation is sponsored and funded by the school district, with School 1 and School 2 serving as the primary audiences for the evaluation. The students are the primary stakeholders, since it is their education that is ultimately being affected by the schedule change. Teachers and administrators are also stakeholders because changes in class scheduling directly affect their work environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many persuasive arguments about why schools should move to a block schedule. However, the hard data about the effects of this schedule on students and teachers are scarce and vary according to the version of block scheduling being implemented. Prisoners of Time, a 1994 report by the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, forcefully brought the constraints of the traditional school schedule to the forefront of the reform movement in the mid nineties. “Both learners and teachers need more time—not to do more of the same, but to use all time in new, different, and better ways. The key to liberating learning lies in unlocking time.” (National Education Commission, 1994, p. 10).

The traditional schedule has held many schools in a lock-step approach to time within the school day. “New uses of time should ensure that schools rely much less on the 51 minute period. . . . Block scheduling—the use of two or more periods for extended exploration of complex topics or science laboratories—should become more common” (National Education Commission, 1994, p. 31). There are many variations of block schedules, and administrators should be allowed to choose what they think best fits the needs of their school.

The teachers’ need for additional preparation time has been an ongoing issue in most schools. “The daily working life of most teachers is one of unrelied time pressure and isolation. . . . Unlike teachers in many systems overseas, who can take advantage of continuous, daily opportunities for professional develop ment, American teachers have little time for preparation, planning, cooperation, or professional growth” (National Education Commission, 1994, p. 36). An extended teacher preparation period is seen as one of the most beneficial side effects of the block schedule.

An extended teacher preparation period frequently accompanies a school’s change to block scheduling. “The greatest resistance of all [to the extended teacher preparation period] is found in the conviction that the only valid use of a teacher’s time is ‘in front of the class’; the assumption that reading, planning, collaboration with other teachers, and professional development are somehow a waste of time” (National Education Commission . . . , 1994, p. 17). Fortunately, the school district, able to see the benefits of longer preparation time for teachers, enthusiastically adopted this portion of the block schedule.

The body of literature on alternative schedules is mostly qualitative. Articles such as those by O’Neil, Salvaterra and Adams, Stumpf, and many others offer mostly anecdotal support for various versions of block scheduling. Their stories are often poignant and moving, striking a familiar chord of discontent with the status quo. However, they are limited in their audience impact because of their lack of quantitative data to substantiate their stories.

Canady & Rettig offer many suggestions on how a block schedule can be evaluated quantitatively. They suggest that “within the school schedule resides power: the power to address problems, the power to facilitate the successful implementation of programs, and the power to make possible the institutionalization of effective instructional practices” (Canady, 1995, p. xi). Documentation of this “power” as it affects students’ grades is an indirect goal of the block schedule evaluation.

Measuring the impact of change is frequently deceptive. Anderson, Brozynski, & Lett propose ten benchmark outcomes as a result of changing to a block schedule. While these outcomes may not all occur at every school, they are a helpful guide to what can be expected in changing to a block schedule. These ten outcomes are (a) increased average GPA, (b) increased junior-class scores in reading, math, science, and social studies, (c) increased standardized test scores, (d) increased average daily attendance, (e) decreased number of discipline referrals, (f) increased number of classes taken, (g) increased student time on task, (h) increased supervised homework in
class and less to take home, (i) increase in teacher-student engagement resulting in three or more activities during a class period, and (j) improvement in school-community relations (Anderson, 1996, p. 26).

Changing the school schedule is not a panacea for all teaching and learning problems. Canady & Rettig (1995) caution that "regardless of a school’s time schedule, what happens between individual teachers and students in classrooms is still the most important thing, and simply altering the manner in which we schedule schools will not ensure better instruction by teachers or increased learning by students" (p. 240). Hence, educational change agents must ensure that schools and school districts provide adequate inservice training and time for teachers to be able to adapt their teaching materials and style to the extended teaching period.

Teachers have to “continue to be the ‘owners’ of everything about the new idea and be active participants in molding all the aspects of the new schedule” (Cunningham, 1996, p. 29). Inservice can only encourage teachers, providing ideas on how to adapt. Through active participation, teachers are more likely to accept change and often bypass the psychological hurdle of not knowing where to start.

Some teaching strategies are not as effective as others for an extended teaching period. Straight lecture especially needs to be restrained. The following tested teaching strategies have been shown to be effective for the block:

**Primary Issues In The Evaluation**

The following issues for the A/B block schedule evaluation were considered by school representatives and the evaluation team:

1. What changes occur in school climate, attendance, discipline referrals, and quality of classroom time?
2. Does the decrease in total minutes per class adversely affect students, especially students in A.P. classes?
3. What are the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents to the A/B block schedule?

**METHODOLOGY**

While this study spanned a one-year period, it will be presented summatively. These data will be presented, where possible, to suggest trends that can enhance decision making. However, this presents several problems in how well the A/B block schedule changes can be evaluated. To show the effects of the A/B block schedule, the evaluation needs to continue for several years so that a more complete evaluation of a mature program can be produced. This evaluation report briefly documents the process of implementation and explores the initial results of the changes.

Observations were conducted intermittently throughout the school year at School 1 and School 2 in randomly selected classrooms to determine what types of activities occurred compared with a traditional classroom. Frequency checklists were created after several initial observations, so as to encompass as many behaviors as possible, but then were discontinued because most teachers began to use a greater variety of activities in their teaching.

Eight teacher focus groups were held in the middle of the school year, four at each school, to add qualitative data to the numbers being col-

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**Teaching Strategies**

1. Warm-up activities
2. Movement during the class: Changing seats
3. Cooperative learning: For sharing ideas as well as socialization
4. Media center: A “change of scenery” whenever appropriate
5. Computer lab: Investigative activities or reports, etc.
6. Video’s: When appropriate, an entire 90-minute film
7. Other media: Music, speeches, poems, plays, novels, and drills etc.
8. Large group discussions: Guided, higher-level questions
9. Interactive lectures coupled with discussion
10. Thematic integration
11. Peer teaching: Students who tutor lower achievers
12. Guided practice
13. Discovery method/creative projects
14. Games and puzzles as transitional activities

(Cunningham, 1996, p. 32)
lected and to help direct the end-of-year surveys. Gathering qualitative data from the teacher focus groups and the open-ended survey questions helped to ensure that unanticipated issues were not overlooked in the evaluation.

To collect attitudinal data, survey forms were drafted for teachers, students, and parents. (Survey forms are available on request.) Contact persons at both high schools provided some formative feedback in the development of these surveys. Approximately 700 parent surveys were administered at both School 1 and School 2 during the two evenings of parent conferences, March 5 and 6, 1997, with a collective return rate of 67%. Five-hundred additional parent surveys were sent home with students for parents who did not attend the parent conference. School 2 had a 25% return rate for these surveys. School 1 did not have any parent surveys returned from parents who did not attend the parent-teacher conference nights.

Analysis of the surveys from parents not attending parent-teacher conference at School 2 showed slightly lower opinions in all areas. However, no other significant difference was found between the results of parents who attended the parent-teacher conference and those who did not attend. Hence the attending and non-attending parent data were considered together.

Teacher and student surveys were administered during the last two weeks of the 1996-97 school year. Surveys were put in teachers' boxes with an administrative note at School 2, and personally distributed during the final staff meeting at School 1. Across both schools, approximately 90% of the teacher surveys were returned.

Student surveys were administered in English classes in a stratified random sample across grade levels. The intention was to select students from all ability groups. (Sample student questionnaire is available on request.) Neither high schools had remedial English classes, so they elected to choose an additional English class to be represented in the student survey. By administering the student survey in English classes and holding the teachers accountable for returning the surveys, we were able to achieve a 98% student return rate. To the extent that the students sampled in the English classes are representative of all students—the administrators felt they would be—the student data are representative.

FORMATIVE RESULTS

The data were collected from school observations, teacher focus groups, teacher surveys, and student surveys. The data from both high schools reflect the growing pains of a new program. When measured against Anderson, Brozynski, & Let's proposed benchmark outcomes, only a few outcomes are relevant after the first year of operation. These outcomes are discussed in relation to the primary issues of the evaluation.

1. What changes have occurred in school climate, attendance, discipline referrals, and quality of class time?

A. The school’s average daily attendance should increase

- Teacher:
  I haven’t really noticed that [absences] have changed very much. But when students are absent, they do miss a lot more. When you don’t see them very often, you almost feel like you are going back into a time tunnel to help them out when they finally come. The absences really count a lot more, even though in the students’ minds they don’t view it “like, no big deal, I’ve missed a day” but they really have missed more than a day in terms of content.

- Teacher:
  [Students] are much more likely to think twice about getting out of class to go to this thing or that thing or whatever. I know my theater students and my tech-class students before would do anything to get out of class any day. I would say “Can you come in and help me with this for this period? Oh, yeah!” I can’t get them to do it this year. They say, “No I have to go to class.” They are much more serious about being [in class].

Teachers at both high schools are concerned because no strict, district-wide absence policy exists. Each school has it’s own site-based absence policy. Teachers sense that some parents don’t understand how important it is for their students to be in school every day. Without a district-wide attendance policy, teachers are
afraid that too many students will get behind on the block schedule and give up on school.

However, teachers also see more students who are beginning to develop a sense of responsibility for their own education as they begin to realize what missing class can really do to their grades. Low-level students are making this adjustment more slowly than their peers. Students commented that they felt it hurt their grades to be absent in a class because they felt they were missing twice as much information. However, they did not volunteer that they were less inclined to miss school because of the schedule—an issue that should be pursued in later cycles of the evaluation.

School-wide attendance data were not available for School 2. School 1 had only 1997 data available. School 1’s average attendance rate for the 96-97 school year was 76%. Without comparative data, it is impossible to determine any significant change in either school’s average daily attendance.

Generally there has been a positive change in school climate. Because of the longer blocks of class time, both teachers and students feel less rushed. The one exception being the Friday schedule at School 1 which caused more tension. The overall quality of class time at both schools has improved as measured by focus groups and survey data, however there is still considerable room for improvement.

B. The school’s number of discipline referrals is expected to decrease

• Teacher:
  I used to go in the halls anytime during the day, and you could see 10, 15, 20 people scattered in corners, who should be in class. Now you go out in the halls and there is nobody there. It is empty. So students are either not coming, or I think students say, “Ninety minutes is too long to hang out.” So they go to class or they don’t come.

• Teacher:
  In my mind, I say the halls are less full of bodies.

The teacher focus groups were not able to comment on a decrease in discipline referrals. However, they did think that there were fewer people in the halls between classes (i.e., fewer students cutting class). A more detailed analysis of any decrease in discipline referrals could not be included in this report, since the data were unavailable for both high schools.

C. Teachers engage students in three activities or more during a class period

• Teacher:
  I think the key is having a variety of how and what you teach. It forces you to change; you can’t get stuck in that rut of doing the same thing every day, because the kids can’t sit through it that long. So it forced me to find more things to do with them. It helps me teach better.

• Teacher:
  I have little segments of video’s and things like that to mix things up. It might be a ten-minute video or maybe a worksheet, maybe even a crossword puzzle. That helps keep down the boredom of that long of a period.

• Teacher:
  You absolutely have to be on top of your plan and have specific things to keep the class moving. I think it is like inheriting a new subject; after you do it for a year or two you can become comfortable with it and work out the bugs.

Observations at the beginning of the year at both high schools showed only moderate use of several activities during each class period. As teachers and students began to adjust to the changes in the schedule, more activities have been included. Many of the teachers in the focus groups were eager to share their experiences on how they had coped with the increased length of class time.

Students commented on their survey forms about some of their frustrating experiences with “filler activities.” They expressed considerable concern about not covering all the material they felt they needed for college, A.P. tests, or life in general.

• Student:
  I feel like time is wasted in class—there is a lot more “free time” because teachers seem to have a hard time filling up the class. They don’t seem as organized.
• Student:
I don’t have any classes that really use the full time, and that has been a real hindrance to the AP classes.

• Student:
It makes classes that you don’t like long and boring.

In figure 2, almost half the students (48%) at School 2 felt that to some extent the extra time in class was used for in-depth learning. Of the students at School 1, a little more than half (57%) agreed, as shown in Figure 1. A “3” in Figure 1 and Figure 2 represents no opinion. Twenty-nine percent of the students responding at School 2 and 18% at School 1 felt that some of the extra time in class was not used for in-depth learning.

The similarity in student responses from both schools suggests that despite the difference in lead time to prepare for the schedule change, both schools continue to need teacher inservice on how to maximize the benefits of an extended class period. However, that half the teachers at each school are using the extra time well is a positive sign and appears to provide a foundation for further growth in the future.

2. Does the change in schedule adversely affect students, especially students in A.P. classes?

A. General impression of effects on all classes

i. Students have more homework work in class and less to take home

• Teacher:
A lot of times the kids will ask questions, and then you are able to expound a lot more because you have that extra time. (math)

• Teacher:
I give them less homework, simply because I don’t want them to go home and do it wrong. I don’t see them for 24 hours, and if they memorize and practice it, I would rather they do it in class, do it right, and then practice at home. (foreign language)

• Teacher:
I teach in the technology area. I think as a group [we] are positive about [the block schedule]. I think we are at an advantage on that kind of schedule. Even though we have a little extra preparation time, I think the overall pressure from the changes is on our presentation styles. I think the quality of the work I am seeing [from students] is going up. I think for those students who do miss school, it significantly impacts them. Those who are not here on a daily basis are in trouble.

Generally, teachers felt they give about the same amount of homework as they did on the traditional schedule. Teachers’ responses differed, depending on the grade they taught, the
subject, and the teachers themselves. Several teachers mentioned feeling pressured to give less homework and grade students more easily who had missed assignments.

Activity-based classes, such as computers, art, sewing, and shop, generally thrive under the block schedule because of the lower ratio of set-up and clean-up time to instructional time, which allows for greater student productivity and additional projects to be completed. They also felt that they got to know their students better and received better quality work.

The block schedule has different impacts on different classes and on students with different levels of ability. To a large extent, perceived success of the block schedule by the teachers depends on the content being taught, as well as on the abilities of the students and their preparation. It is more difficult in A.P. classes to cover the required content because the curriculum is test driven and therefore less flexible.

At the other end of the academic spectrum, in classes in which the students lack basic understanding, their attention span is shorter, and it becomes more difficult to teach for the extended period of time. Special education and resource teachers have typically commented that "for some students, the time is too long—even divided into several activities. For most, it is a good learning situation."

ii. Interruptions to class time

• Teacher:
  I don’t like assemblies at all anymore. The kids are out of my class, and I have just lost too much. . . . I skip a day before I see them again, and it hurts.

• Teacher:
  I am more annoyed by interruptions over the intercom. When it happens, I start cursing. It bugs me, because I feel the need to push the material. When you stop, the whole class stalls, and it takes additional time to start it up again and get [students] back on track.

Teachers are reluctant to allow any student to miss their class. They feel that the impact on the student of being out of class is greater no matter what the reason. Some teachers at both high schools have communicated their concerns to their students in this regard.

• Student:
  A teacher told us that on the block schedule we lose the equivalent of two weeks [per subject], and I am concerned that time lost will affect how well we can compete when we get to college.

• Student:
  Some teachers have adapted well to [the new schedule], and others haven’t. I understand it is hard to compact two days into one, but whatever isn’t done in class is sent home.

• Student:
  The A/B block schedule is very inconvenient for my A.P. class because we have less class time.

When students feel they are at a disadvantage, it has the potential to affect their performance adversely. It is almost as if they are expected not to succeed in their A.P. classes because of the A/B block schedule. Some students have already been given a scapegoat to blame if they do not do as well as their parents or teachers may anticipate. If these negative expectations are passed on to students, it becomes very difficult to tell if lower average achievement scores on A.P. tests, should they occur, are due to reduced class time or self-fulfilling prophecy. A.P. scores for 1996-1997 were extremely positive. More students took A.P. classes than ever before and although the ratio of students taking and passing their A.P. classes out of the number enrolled was marginally lower, the total number of A.P. tests passed was considerably higher than past years at both high schools.

B. Perceived effects on A.P. classes

• Teacher:
  My regular economics class is working better because we have time that [students] can do computer simulations. It gets the whole class involved, and they
are competitive. But in my A.P. economics class, because I have so many reduced days, I have to cram material in. The classes are heavy, and if [students] miss a day it really hurts.

• Teacher:
  I don’t think you can be too creative with math. You have so much material that you have to teach for your AP tests. I am trying to find out if this is a better system. I am not afraid to challenge the new system. I am still trying to find out why the hell we changed.

• Teacher:
  Minutes-and-seconds-wise you end up with probably three or four weeks less classroom time. When you have something as structured as the A.P. class, you must cover such and such. However, I find that in my advanced classes (my AP French class) we can do more. [Students] can handle this stuff for 90 minutes because they know enough French that we can do more.

• Teacher:
  My students have done more group work, more independent work. But I feel like they have interacted with each other more, and I have kind of sat back and let them do the work. I go home not as tired.

• Teacher:
  I have had many more parents this year come and tell me, and the implication is that I am a bad teacher, that their child who has always gotten A’s in English is now failing in an Honors class. They don’t ask, “What is your problem?” but that is the implication. The only difference I can see between what I am doing now and what I’ve done for three years is the block schedule. I have told parents that, and reiterated the need to study every night. But it is frustrating, especially when they imply, that . . . it is my fault. So I am blaming the block! I am refusing to take responsibility for it.

• Teacher:
  I work with a lot of concurrent enrollment students who are going to college and a lot of the concepts need some time [to develop] after they mature in their minds. They are appreciating—instead of having so much shoved at them everyday—to have a couple of days to think about that concept and do the homework and get together with their study group. They are in our math lab all the time trying to get extra help. I have just seen a great change. They are loving it. They need the time, and they are really glad that we are taking the time. In a hour and a half I can give them a lot more help with the problems they are working on. They seem to really enjoy it. But like you say, these are the kids that are responsible, that are coming in getting extra help; they want to do it. They are keeping their bluebooks and doing all the things to keep themselves organized. They are really serious about getting good grades and going to college.

Advance placement teachers agreed that they were concerned that the block schedule actually gives less seat time to prepare their students for the advanced placement tests. Instead of being able to give their best students a richer educational experience, some teachers feel their students will be less well prepared because they have not been able to discuss things in-depth and have had to focus on desperately trying to cover all the content.

Many advance placement teachers feel they and their students were working twice as hard to do the same work they accomplished under the traditional schedule. These sentiments were tempered according to the content areas being taught. Advanced placement English and history, which heavily rely on discussion and independent reading, do not feel as impacted as math and foreign language classes.

In response to the advanced placement issue, I contacted several high schools that have been on various forms of the block schedule for several years or more. The principals and assistant principals I spoke with were surprised by my concern for the A.P. classes. They did not remember experiencing any drop in A.P. pass rates when they changed to a block schedule.

At the end of the first year, it does not appear that the decrease in total minutes per class adversely affects any group of students. Although there has been considerable concern for students in A.P. classes, until the A.P. test results are available we cannot assess the true
impact on A.P. students. Data from other high schools in Utah do not suggest that A.P. students have been negatively affected.

C. Perceived effects on math and foreign language classes

• Teacher:
Positive! For Calculus and for College Algebra 3 classes, it’s fantastic! I love it! They love it! It is wonderful! I teach a geometry class where the students are not as focused, and it is really a problem there. It is like my printer when the buffer gets full—it stops and does not print anymore, and these kids, for their level, two hours or one and a half, they just can’t take anymore.

• Teacher:
My lower level, Algebra 1 students have a hard time paying attention. It is also at the end of the day, so whether that has anything to do with it, I am not quite sure. But my Algebra 1 [students] at the end of the day are just tired! They don’t want to be there anymore. They are frustrated, whereas my upper-level kids can do a lot of group work. We have a lot of fun with activities.

• Teacher:
I would like to see [students] daily and have them practice daily.

• Teacher:
I have done a worse job of teaching my students this year.

There are concerns about the lower-level students and advanced placement students in math and beginning language classes. Teachers and students reasoned that if beginning college language courses are taught everyday, they should be taught daily in high school. Students have so much basic information to memorize that they often seem to reach their information saturation point before the end of the extended class period.

For example, trying to fit two vocabulary lessons into one day results in an overload; hence, fewer vocabulary words are given and learned. Teachers expect a decrease in language proficiency by the end of the course. Creating adequate foreign language lesson plans for substitute teachers was also an issue. The block schedule, compounded by not knowing if substitutes would know the language, created additional frustration.

Similar examples of content overload exist in many math classes as teachers see students overwhelmed with more math concepts to learn each period than on the traditional schedule. Teachers mentioned that they have to review more often on the block schedule to maintain minimum proficiency in the concepts their students are taught. Students commented that their math classes are harder to stay focused in and are often the most boring classes they take.

3. Attitudes toward the A/B block schedule after one year?

A. What is better on the block schedule?

i. Teacher perceptions of what is better

• Teacher:
Because of the new schedule it is more peaceful for the teachers, there is more time to plan, less to call roll—because you only have to call roll four times a day. And more time to organize in class.

• Teacher:
I am not here until five in the afternoon anymore, I can actually go home an hour before [dinner].

• Teacher:
It allows us to finish projects basically in the class period, so in about three days we can just about get the project done. We are not [omitting] substance.

Initially, some teachers thought the block schedule would allow for smaller classes. There is some support in the literature for this theory. Class size might have been reduced at both high schools if there had not been an unexpected influx of students. As a result, class size was not reduced at either school. Hence, some teachers are disillusioned with the schedule change.

Most teachers agreed that they appreciated the additional preparation time. Having
longer classes created a calmer work environment that consisted of less busywork, such as taking roll. In some classes, the longer time allowed for more cohesive presentation of concepts. However, ease of presentation depended greatly on content area, level of students, and time of day.

ii. Student perceptions of what is better now

• AP sophomore:
I like having an extra day to do my homework—since you have each class every other day, it gives me two nights to do my homework.

• Sophomore:
I like having fewer classes per day. It’s easier to do homework in time, and the day goes by faster.

• AP junior:
At the beginning of the year, it was hard to adjust to the long class periods, but now I really like the A/B block schedule.

• Junior:
It actually helps you get your homework done.

• AP senior:
It makes class projects or labs more meaningful.

• Senior:
I like the A/B schedule because the days go by a lot faster and you are able to get more into the lessons.

Having fewer classes per day makes the day seem to go faster for many students. Because this is a comparative reaction to how students have traditionally expected school to be, this trend is not expected to continue. Similarly, the effect is expected to be the same with any of the numerous comments about enjoying having extra time to complete homework. As the schedule becomes the accepted norm, this feeling will probably wane in strength. However, students will continue to value the additional flexibility in being able to choose when to complete their homework and will grow into the more adult expectations required of them.

B. Teachers’ preparation for the block schedule change

• Teacher:
Prepared? Sort of, you learn a lot just by doing though.

• Teacher:
Well, last year there was a career ladder day; we were told we could go to other schools to observe how other teachers were doing it. I think there is a really good point to that, because my children’s school is Viewmont, and it has been on the A/B block schedule for ten or twelve years now. The teachers like it. Students like it. My children went there, and they like it. The school had a great Special Ed department. There is advice we can get from other schools to help us deal with the problems [surrounding block schedules].

• Teacher:
It just seems to me that we were kind of dropped into this with very little prior preparation as teachers. I was also on the committee that made the decision, and the block schedule has a lot of appeal to it. But we did not receive a lot of inservice training before we stepped into our first day as block schedule teachers. Maybe a lot of our frustration comes from the fact that we are feeling our way.

• Teacher:
When you are so worn out—I am exhausted—I find myself—saying, all right, we are going to work on this. We spend more time working on that and we are not covering what we should be doing. I am not giving them my interaction with them; I am just plain too tired to keep up with it all.

Teachers at School 1 generally felt better prepared for the change to the block schedule than the focus group teachers at School 2. Like any other organizational change, a new schedule is taxing on teachers. However, teachers at both schools felt they were getting better at teaching on the block as the school year progressed.
Teachers at School 1 responded they felt much more prepared than the teachers at School 2 for the schedule change. Many had a year or more in which to consider how they would teach their classes differently on a block schedule. Teachers at School 2 did not have this same advantage. The decision to implement the schedule change was not communicated to the teachers at School 2 as early, which has contributed to the increased psychological stress on the teachers. They have had to adjust to the new idea of block scheduling, as well as adapt their teaching techniques.

C. How students like the block schedule

i. Teachers' perceptions of how students liked the block

* Teacher: Some [students] like the A/B block schedule, some don’t—it’s still school.

* Teacher: They say the classes are too long. Others say they like to know they only have four classes in the day. They think it makes the day shorter. So I think it is a function of different personalities, depending on the class and teacher. If [students] have a teacher that lectures all period, they hate the class. It is too long to lecture. But if they do a lot of different activities, they seem to think it is all right, and [the block schedule] makes the time go quickly.

* Teacher: They are complaining about not being able to see their friends—which I could not care less about. They are also complaining about the homework assigned, because they are getting double homework every other night, and they see it as just double homework. They don’t want to do it, so they don’t do it.

* Teacher: I asked my students what they thought of the A/B block. They said, “We like the A/B block because if we have a job we have an extra night to get homework and the reading or whatever done, and if we don’t like the teachers we don’t have to see them every day.”

* Teacher: Our sophomores are having a lot more difficulty than others; perhaps it is too much transition for them. If there was a way to get them thinking about [the schedule change at] the end of their ninth grade year, so they are mentally prepared for that additional transition.

According to teachers, sophomores appear to be having the most trouble adjusting to the block schedule. Further, students who did not use planners before the change in schedule, and continued not to use them after the change, are more greatly impacted by the change in schedule because the consequences of forgetting an assignment are greater.

ii. Students' comments on how they liked the block

* Sophomore: The thing that is hard about the block schedule is that when you don’t know how to do your homework, you won’t see your teacher for two days.

* Sophomore: I think it will run more smoothly as the years pass.

* Sophomore: You learn so much more on the block schedule. If you don’t understand something, the block schedule allows more time to discuss the concept. It is a great way to prepare students for college.

* Junior: You get confused about what is
due on what days, and I often find myself asking if it's an A day or a B day.

• Junior:
  It makes it easier to do a thorough job of my homework--more time.

• Senior:
  The extra time is taken differently by each teacher. If your teacher gives you more work because there is more time, we hurt for time to do it.

• Senior:
  I really like having the extra day for homework. It helps me to get organized better.

Students at both high schools had a wide variety of opinions about the new A/B block schedule. The most frequent comment by students of all grades at both schools was the increased flexibility in regard to doing homework. Generally, they thought they had more time to do their homework and enjoyed being more responsible for their education.

Many students feel that they know their teachers better than in previous years; 51% (Figure 3, School 1) and 44% (Figure 4, School 2) of the students responded that there has been some improvement in how well they know their teachers.

Although many responses were recorded at both ends of the continuum, suggesting that some students find the block much more stressful, Figures 5 and 6 show that over half of the students at both high schools believe they have less stress in school because of the block sched

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**Figure 4. School 2.**

**Figure 5. School 1.**

**Figure 6. School 2.**

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**Key:**
1= Have LESS stress
3= No strong feeling
5= Have MORE stress due to the schedule
ule. To avoid the possibility of institutional discrimination, an effort should be made to determine who is most impacted by the schedule and why their stress level increased.

Most students liked the opportunity to take an extra class because of the block schedule. In Figure 7, eighty-two percent of the students at School 1 liked being able to take an additional elective class, a figure that corresponds to the 78% of students at School 2 who felt the same way.

![Figure 7. School 1.](image1)

![Figure 8. School 2.](image2)

Key:
1=Like an additional elective
3=No strong feeling
5=Do NOT like an additional elective

Some students like seeing their teachers fewer times per week. As shown in Figures 9 and 10 approximately two-thirds of the students at both high schools like seeing their teachers only two or three times per week. Seventeen percent of students at School 2 would rather see their teacher more frequently, whereas only 9% of students at School 1 felt that same way.

The difference in student opinions may be explained by the different Friday schedules. Students at School 1 see all their teachers three times every week. Students at School 2 see their teachers twice one week and three times the next week on an alternating schedule.

On average, students felt they understood the class material better than they had in previous years. At School 2 (Figure 12), 38% felt the schedule allowed them to understand the material better, and 51% at School 1 (Figure 11). The block schedule was not perceived as having a significant impact on their understanding by 38% and 34%, respectively.

Students at School 2 seemed to like having an alternating schedule for the whole week. Sixty-four percent of the students at School 2 liked the alternating schedule. There were only a few comments about the possibility of having one day a week when they would attend all eight classes. However, at School 1, 57% of the students disliked the Friday schedule on which they attended all their classes for a shorter time period.
Student comments at School 1 were full of pleas to get rid of the Friday schedule and go to an alternating block. Some of the reasons cited were not having enough time to get to their lockers between classes, teachers not using the short periods effectively, and having too many tests on Fridays. Twenty-four percent of students at School 2 (Figure 14) would rather have one day a week to see all their teachers, whereas 28% of students at School 1 (Figure 13) actually liked the condensed Friday schedule. The benefits of having one day a week when students have all their classes need to be carefully weighed against the additional stresses created for both students and teachers.

In Figures 15 and 16, 49% of the students at School 1 and 42% of the students at School 2 rated the A/B block schedule as overall “good for my education.” And approximately 22% at both high schools felt that the new schedule was “very good for their education.” Only 11 to 16% of the students felt that the block schedule was some kind of hindrance to their learning environment.

D. How parents and community feel about the block schedule

i. Parents’ perceptions

- Parent:
  Prepares my child for college. Allows students in athletics to take more academic classes—wonderful. Please continue!
• Parent:
If student is ill or misses a block class, he gets further behind than missing a regular class. Classes are overcrowded, and it's difficult to make schedule changes. Ninety-minute classes are a disaster for those who find it difficult to stay on task.

• Parent:
I believe it needs to be consistent—don’t change it for at least a few years. You can’t really judge the effectiveness after only two-thirds of a year.

• Parent:
Few teachers teach well for two hours.

• Parent:
My children claim that some of their teachers let them out early, watch movies, or do homework. None of these help my children understand the material better.

Most parents have discussed the A/B block schedule with their students. Only 3% of the parents at both schools had not talked to their students at all about the schedule change. Twenty-six percent at School 1 and 29% at School 2 had talked to their students a lot about the A/B block schedule.

Parents feel that their student knows their teachers slightly better than in previous years. Forty-four percent of parents at School 1 and 47% at School 2 do not know if their students know their teachers any better. An additional 31% and 30% respectively believe that the difference is only marginally better or worse. The data are noncommittal—it may be that parents are not sure how well their student knew their teachers on a regular schedule, so they have little information to compare it to.

Parents perceived that their students, overall, have less stress in school because of the block schedule, 60% at both schools. It should be noted that the 6% and 12% respectively who felt their students had much more stress suggests that some students found the block much more stressful than others. More research is necessary to determine what type of students find the block schedule more stressful and why.
Sixty-three percent of parents at School 1 and 52% at School 2 perceived that the extra time in class is used for in-depth learning. Approximately 20% of parents at both schools did not know how well class time was used.

There was no way to break away from the data collected on the question which classes are perceived at not utilizing the extra time for more in-depth learning but it was apparent from the range of responses and previous in-school observations that there can be considerable differences between classes.

Most parents liked their students having the opportunity to take an extra class on the block schedule. Only 7% at School 1 and 9% at School 2 disliked the option of taking an additional elective. The reasons for this were unclear.

Parents perceived that their students moderately liked seeing their teachers fewer times per week. The split at both schools was almost a third positive, a third negative, and a third of parents unsure how their student felt on this issue.

Overall, a third of the parents seemed uncertain whether their student understood their class material better than in previous years. Fifty-five percent of parents at School 1 and 43% at School 2 felt that their students understood their class material better. On average, the block schedule was perceived as having a moderately significant impact on student understanding.

Parents at School 2 seemed to like having their student on an alternating schedule for the whole week (59% in favor). However, there is no way to tell if that is an indication of lack of support for a day during the week which includes all the classes. Parents at School 1 already had Friday when students had all their classes. Thirty-four percent of the parents at School 1 liked the Friday schedule; 34% were unsure.

Overall, 73% of parents at School 1 and 66% of parents at School 2 rated the A/B block schedule as good or very good for their students. Although the responses were mainly positive, there was a wide range of passionate responses. Approximately 14% of parents felt that overall the schedule was somewhat inconvenient for their student.

ii. Teachers’ perceptions of how parents feel

• Teacher:
Most of the things I have heard [from parents] have been fairly positive about it.

• Teacher:
I’ve heard that parents like it. I think they feel that... the biggest thing was the elective; a student now could pick up another class.

• Teacher:
I had a parent at parent-teacher conferences just jump on me about the A/B/C block. She said she had been a student at East High, and it had been a miserable failure there. She was highly upset about what was happening here at Jordan because of this block plan.

• Teacher:
Statistically, about 80% of our kids are going to go to work. You think this is a big change to go from a 45-minute block to a hour-and-a-half block: what is it going to be like to go from an hour and a half to a eight-hour day. Are we really preparing them?

In the focus groups at both schools, most teachers reported hearing no complaints from parents. They heard positive comments about students being able to take an additional elective. Teachers reported few incidents of negative parent attitudes.

The school-to-work teachers and the work-site supervisors liked the longer periods, which allow the students to be at their job-experience site for longer blocks of time. The school-community relations seem to have generally improved as local businesses prefer having student workers for the longer periods.

After the first year, most teachers, students, and parents think the A/B block schedule is good for students’ education. Teachers especially like the longer preparation time but are concerned that students find it difficult to pay attention for the full 87 minutes. Students like the opportunity to ask more questions and to get into more in-depth discussions. However, students become frustrated with activities that appear to be busywork. Most parents have positive attitudes towards the A/B block schedule. Parents are more concerned about the impact of
missing school under the block schedule and have some misconceptions that need to be addressed.

Most teachers, students, and parents want to continue with the A/B block schedule.

4. Other Issues

A. Substitute Teachers

*Teacher:
[Substitutes] are why I have just been real negative [about the block]. The fact is that I come sick more times than not because I don’t dare leave my students with a substitute for an 87-minute block. I don’t think a substitute can handle what I want. I can’t give them work to do, and I can’t create busyness for 87 minutes for a substitute or [I would have one] come today. That is true. I am saving the district a whole pot full of money when I am not feeling good.

*Teacher:
You don’t know what is going to come, and I mean what, not who, is going to come to be a substitute that day. Whether they can help the kids with your subject or not, or if the room is going to be in one piece....You have no clue.

Teachers are less willing now to miss work when they otherwise would have called in sick, because of a lack faith in the substitute pool to deal with their classes on the block schedule. They worry about the substitute not being able to handle the 87 minutes, especially for classes like history, in which the teacher typically does a lot of talking.

B. Magnification of existing problems

Many problems from the traditional schedule are perceived as being exacerbated by the block schedule. What were annoying problems on the traditional schedule, which could be recognized and dealt with while still small, quickly grow out of control on a block schedule. Absence from class is a typical example of this type of problem. New policies and procedures are needed to ensure that students understand the impact of missing school and do not become disillusioned with their ability to make up schoolwork.

C. Friday schedule

There are mixed reviews about the Friday schedule. Teachers at School 2 would like to try having a day when they would see all their students. Teachers at School 1 enjoy teaching with all their classes, but find Friday’s schedule to be generally too rushed and difficult to teach something meaningful. They think the change in class time breaks their teaching rhythm and is often not used as productively as possible.

Students from School 1 complain that they often have to prepare for several tests on Fridays. Students also say that it is next to impossible to make it to their locker in the six minutes between periods on Fridays, even though the amount of time between classes is exactly the same as the rest of the week. They have more classes between major breaks so they have to lug more of their books around during the day.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite problems, when asked in the final analysis if they personally liked the block schedule, most teachers said they did not want to go back to the traditional school schedule. The majority of students either had no preference or liked the A/B block schedule, thinking that it was good for their education. Parents were mostly positive in their final evaluation. They also wanted to keep the block schedule.

The Formative Comparative Evaluation of A/B Block Schedules at Two Utah High Schools seeks to add to both the qualitative and quantitative data concerning the various impacts of schedule changes in high schools. Understanding how teachers and students react to a dramatic schedule change can help the troubleshooting process in the initial stages of implementation. The formative data contained in this report are intended to help guide the remainder of the implementation process and assist in the planning process for coming years.

The lessons learned from the implementation process about tracking student achievement data, about how a block schedule can be perceived as impacting A.P. classes, and the pressing need to help teachers adjust the curriculum and their teaching styles to the longer teaching blocks may help other high schools considering a similar schedule change to resolve these issues in a more timely manner. Both high schools have been cooperative and worked hard
to make block scheduling a success at their schools. We can learn much from their implementation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were drawn from the formative data.

1. Continue with the A/B block schedule for at least the 2-3 years before a binding decision is made.
2. Provide inservice for teachers on block scheduling techniques: how to be successful, teaching by content area and grade level, avoiding “filler” activities. A.P. teachers can find out how AP class is taught at other high schools operating on some form of the block schedule.
3. Train a pool of substitutes in successful teaching strategies for teaching on block schedules.
4. Develop school and district training materials for new faculty on the most effective methods for teaching on the block schedule.
5. Develop, clarify, and disseminate an attendance policy that would encourage students who miss one day to go into missed classes the following day to get their assignments.
6. Track student achievement data to evaluate possible impact of the block schedule, such as average GPA, ACT scores, and AP scores.
7. Encourage teachers to share “success stories” from their classes with other teachers—especially in AP classes.
8. Continue to promote parent and student understanding of the block schedule and how it can help. Emphasize that missing one day of school is the same as missing two days of work in those classes, and homework that isn’t done in one class is like not doing homework for two days of that class.

References


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