

Block: Don't jump to conclusions

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At first glance, findings of an independent evaluator's two-year study of block scheduling at Farmington High School indicate definite bumps in the road.

These include the following findings, in an evaluation by Susan Axelrad-Lentz of Green-tree Research Development Services. Findings were made following focus groups and surveys (at the end of 1997-98) of 70 faculty members and 693 students.

■ A slight drop in the percentage of top-achieving students, with about 25 percent attaining a 3.5-or-better grade-point average in 1998, compared to about 33 percent before the block was implemented.

■ A widening gap between top students and those at the lower end of the achievement scale, in terms of whether they like block scheduling.

■ Lower Scholastic Aptitude Test scores in mathematics, dropping from 581 to 568 in 1997-98, the second year of block at FHS.

■ An increase in the number of ninth-graders struggling with grade points of under 2.0, from about 22 percent in 1996 to 31 percent in 1998.

Wait a minute

But Farmington district officials urge people to take a second, closer look. They warn

against making any judgments just yet, simply because Greentree is now in the third year of its evaluation and because there are good reasons for any drop in student performance. Besides, they see many more positives than negatives in the Greentree report.

"If there are some down sides, it's not necessarily because they're down sides of block," said FHS principal Judy White. "It's just that there are down sides of education in general and issues we're going to always have to be conscious of. Students who fail, who don't do well in school, that's always been an issue."

According to Judy White, assistant superintendent of instruction for Farmington schools, there is a good explanation for the drop in percentage of students achieving a GPA of 3.5-4.0.

"One could say, 'Oh, block scheduling is lowering grade-point averages,'" White said. "Or one could say, 'Students are taking more classes than they did before, getting involved in more rigorous (learning), driving to a deepening understanding... creating more challenges for them.' That is just what White believes is happening at Farmington High, and what will happen when block is implemented over the next two years at North and Harrison high schools."

"Kids are being more challenged, and the top kids are

What's next?

■ A parent information meeting on a proposed block scheduling plan at Harrison High School. The meeting will take place at 7:00 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 9, in the Harrison auditorium.

■ Barring any major parental outcry at the Feb. 9 meeting, Harrison's block plan is expected to be approved by the school board during the Feb. 23 meeting, which begins at 7:30 p.m. at the Lewis Schulman Administrative Building, located at 32500 Shilawasseo. Also that evening, a plan for North High School also likely will be approved.

Note: If the proposals are OK'd, block scheduling will begin in 1999-2000 at North and in 2000-2001 at Harrison.

being more challenged," White said. "What's frustrating about all of this is, other school districts across the country have not collected this kind of data."

Among positive findings were the following: more students are taking Advanced Placement classes, and doing well in them (the number of kids qualifying in at least one area increased by 10

percent from 1996-97 to 1997-98); most students value the seventh class; more students reported being satisfied with the high school experience than at North and Harrison; "high initial concern, expressed by teachers in most core academic and foreign language departments about meeting curriculum objectives in a block schedule declined"; more faculty members and students said they are getting to know each other better.

Reports such as Greentree's is a way to "hold ourselves up to an extremely high standard," particularly in the assessment of new programs, White added.

Greentree's Axelrad-Lentz also guards against making early judgment calls, particularly since data is continuing to be collected. "One year's data does not indicate a trend."

In her recent summary, Axelrad-Lentz stated that Farmington High students and staff "are growing more comfortable with the block schedule. Curriculum is being modified to emphasize 'big ideas' and class time is being used for more active and interactive learning."

Another factor is that block scheduling requires that students take a larger quantity of more-demanding classes, involving critical thinking and problem solving.

"We are no longer just saying, 'Come to class, memorize these facts, give it back to us on a test



Work in progress: According to Judy White, assistant superintendent of instruction for Farmington Public Schools, it may be two or three more years before any definitive trend about block scheduling can be determined.

and that determines your grade," White said. "Now we're saying, come to class, memorize these facts, apply them to a problem, do a project to demonstrate that they've learned it."

Be objective

White explained that Greentree was hired by the district to "bring a very pure and objective

look" at the subject, and to help as the district continues collecting hard data about where block is succeeding and where it might need some improvement. She emphasized that it might be another two or three years before enough of a trend can be identified.

Any comparisons between

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it's working very well at Farmington High - even though making definitive judgments about success or failure is premature until more school years come and go and more data is collected and analyzed.

"We have been pursuing the whole idea of changing the way we use time for the past nine years," said Judy White, the district's assistant superintendent of instruction. "It's stemming, in general, from demands that society is now placing on the learner."

"That means the amount of information that students are expected to (learn), the type of skills they're expected to have in the workforce, the way they're expected to use technology or work in teams."

Proponents for block say it gives teachers and students more time to go in-depth on subjects; apply knowledge through hands-on activities; do projects; have the chance to take more courses; experience school in a more-relaxed atmosphere; and finish lessons in one chunk - instead of shutting down and starting up lessons that carry over from one day to the next.

"It's being able to have biology classes walk down to the city park and be able to do water samples, come back, analyze it all and get the results, all within the confines of an 85-minute period," Barrett said.

Some have questions

Flip-side issues have included whether students and teachers can adjust to longer class periods; valuable instruction time is lost because of classes meeting three times a week instead of five; music students or those on a higher-track (Advanced Placement) are hindered; or if ramifications due to the loss of daily class time in subjects such as math and foreign language would arise.

Various plans have been under the microscope since spring 1998, when Harrison parents almost rebelled against a proposal to go to the controversial four-by-four block. (In four-by-four block, students would take four classes in one semester and switch over to four other courses in the next.)

That resistance did force Harrison administrators to redo the school's plan into one with seven courses (taught in an alternating format) and an optional "X-block" an extra period in which students decide how to use it.

But at least North and Harrison have Farmington High's block experience to use as a guide; this is the third year of the block at FHS.

"They're going to school on us, as are districts all across the state," Barrett said. "We've hosted dozens of sessions where we've had teachers from other schools."

Barrett emphasized that there is a simple reason why some parents, and teachers, have balked at the notion of restructuring - how instruction is delivered.

"Change doesn't come easy," Barrett said. "Parents grew up through a system (from) 20-30 years ago... and they think that's the way the system should be now. Even though times have changed, kids have changed, the job world... And yet people still want it the way it was."

Making the adjustment

Farmington district officials strongly believe in block, despite any skepticism of a plan that, due to increased staff, will cost about \$500,000 more per school each year to implement. In fact, White said criticism of public education now is "a national sport."

So far, at Farmington High, teachers and students generally like block scheduling, which features SMART, Student Managed Academic Resource Time. In SMART, students sign up for activities, get tutorial help, get a jump on homework or attend more fun activities.

"I do like it (block scheduling), because a lot of the teachers prepare us for college," said FHS junior Justin Frechette. "Having (built-in time) for homework helps."

Justin said he and friends at first weren't sure about going to longer classes, because they didn't know if teachers could be effective for that long or whether students might get bored. "But

teachers do a really good job of breaking it up."

He also thinks it is more beneficial to learn in a stimulating, interactive way, which the block allows.

"It's more hands-on, applying things more," Justin explained. "It helps you learn more, rather than taking notes or seeing things on the board."

"I love it," said senior Heather Bruce, who began her FHS career under the former system. "We take another class and we have more time to complete classes... It (block) sounded scary at first, but it's good, not boring."

More ways to teach

Music teachers Norm Logan and John Parkinson said block scheduling gives them the chance to instruct kids in a variety of ways.

Logan, who teaches instrumental music, said faculty in that department initially were "very concerned" about going to a system that did away with daily teacher-student instruction. Two years later, however, more positives than negatives are emerging.

"We can have large-group instruction, with 75 kids, or we can have a sectional, take all the brass players and work with them, and then put everything back together all in that time," Logan said.

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According to band-orchestra teacher Parkinson, there's "always hesitancy to change. But we're getting more evaluations in, students are developing more strategies for success. They couldn't do that in the former system, because there wasn't enough time."

Meanwhile, both Barrett and White said there is no evidence to suggest that teachers are burning out faster, despite being

called upon to be more innovative, adaptable and durable. They now lead classes for about 30 minutes longer than under the old set-up.

"That's teaching," White said. "And that's good teaching. Good teachers do that (adjust). The difference is, now when you give good teachers more time to tune in to individual learners, and you run less kids in front of (your) eyes every day, you're

upping their odds that they can apply good teaching."

Barrett cited an independent evaluator's two-year study of FHS and block scheduling.

"Evidence comes from the (Greentree Research and Development Services) report that students and teachers are feeling more relaxed under this system," Barrett said.

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