

Block: Staff and students say it works

BY TRACEY BIRKENHUAER
STAFF WRITER

Block scheduling works. That was the encouraging news relayed to the Farmington Board of Education at its Tuesday, March 14 meeting. "Probably the greatest benefit has been one that we hoped for from the beginning," said John Barrett, principal of Farmington High School, the first Farmington school to implement block scheduling. "That's been that we've had an increase in choices and opportunities for students to take classes. "We've created probably over 10 new classes in various parts since the start of block. Block scheduling differs from the traditional model. Block students have a standard schedule on Monday, going to all their classes for about 55 minutes. The other four days of the week, classes last 84 minutes. Stu-

dents attend half of their classes on Tuesday and Thursday and the other half on Wednesday and Friday. They also have the opportunity to take seven classes instead of six.

"They call it a double block so you can get into more in-depth topics," said Barbara Chorem, director of evaluation, assessment and testing for Farmington Public Schools. "Students don't have all the startings and stoppings. They're not wasting time out in the hall between classes." Students do get breaks, at their teachers' discretion.

The assessment team, including Chorem, tracked changes over the last three years using teacher, student and parent surveys, focus group interviews and analyses of documents such as course schedules and achievement data. They presented this data to the board Tuesday evening.

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Barbara Chorem
—Evaluation director

According to the research presented by Chorem, more than 70 percent of students report the current schedule allows them to take all the classes they want, while less than half report feeling they're required to take too many subjects.

Barrett told the board that FHS students have a lot more time for science labs and experiments. There is more time for in-depth discussions. And more stu-

dents are taking advanced-placement classes.

Farmington High School first implemented the scheduling changes in the 1996-97 school year. While feedback is positive, administrators admit there are still issues to resolve. They are most concerned about students not getting daily repetition in math, foreign language and music.

Students and teachers told the board they are adapting successfully.

"Overall, I really like it," said Abbey Cullen, a Farmington High School senior. "I really enjoy block scheduling, but it is harder on the days we don't meet."

To compensate, she said students take full advantage of study hall time and form study groups.

"If the whole district were on our schedule, it would be easier

for us to learn," Cullen said.

The district is moving in that direction. North Farmington High School implemented block this year and Harrison High School will begin the program next year.

In a prepared presentation, North Farmington High School Principal Rick Jones said the implementation process hasn't been easy, but it's been effective.

"There's more time for hands-on activity," Jones said. "Teachers can cover material with more depth. Students and staff report a more relaxed and humane, and yet productive, school day."

School board members and administrators praised everyone's efforts.

"A year from now, I'm sure we'll hear an equally enthusiastic review from Harrison," said school district Superintendent Bob Maxfield.

Third high school is ready

BY TIM SMITH
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Batting third, ready for the block scheduling pitch is Harrison High School. "It stands all systems go," said Harrison Assistant Principal Mary Brown last week. "We're planning an alternating eight block with one SMART and one X-block like North." Harrison is scheduled to begin block scheduling in the 2000-2001 school year. Variations of the block are already in place at Farmington and North Farmington high schools. FHS is in its fourth year of block scheduling; North just started block last fall.

The Farmington school board heard updates on the block from FHS and North officials at its March 14 meeting. Harrison will have an opportunity to update board members about its planned program at the Tuesday, March 28 meeting.

SMART, which stands for Student Managed Academic Resource Time, is in place at Farmington High School as an opportunity for students to attend various elective courses.

The 'X-block' at North, is an optional period for students that enables staff members additional planning time. Brown said it is not yet known whether the former will actually be known as 'SMART' or something else.

Brown said the school went through a successful trial run SMART-type schedule in February and that parent meetings are continuing. One parent, during the February meeting, asked if technology might be one way for students to sign up for next year's SMART sessions.

To gear up for next year, 23 elective courses are slated to be added to the program, she noted.

The high school's planning for block scheduling hasn't gone smoothly. In 1998, Harrison's original concept of four-by-four block scheduling was criticized by parents because they felt they were not properly involved in the process. That format ultimately was scrapped.

Earlier this year, the faculty voted to include two SMART sessions, to the dismay of some parents who wanted the schedule to feature two 'X-blocks.' The latter is not considered part of the actual instructional day, while SMART sessions are.

Brown said one parent considered leaving the Harrison parent committee in protest.

"I don't know if she did," Brown said.

Eventually, faculty members held a second vote and changed their decision, going with single sessions of both SMART and the X-block.

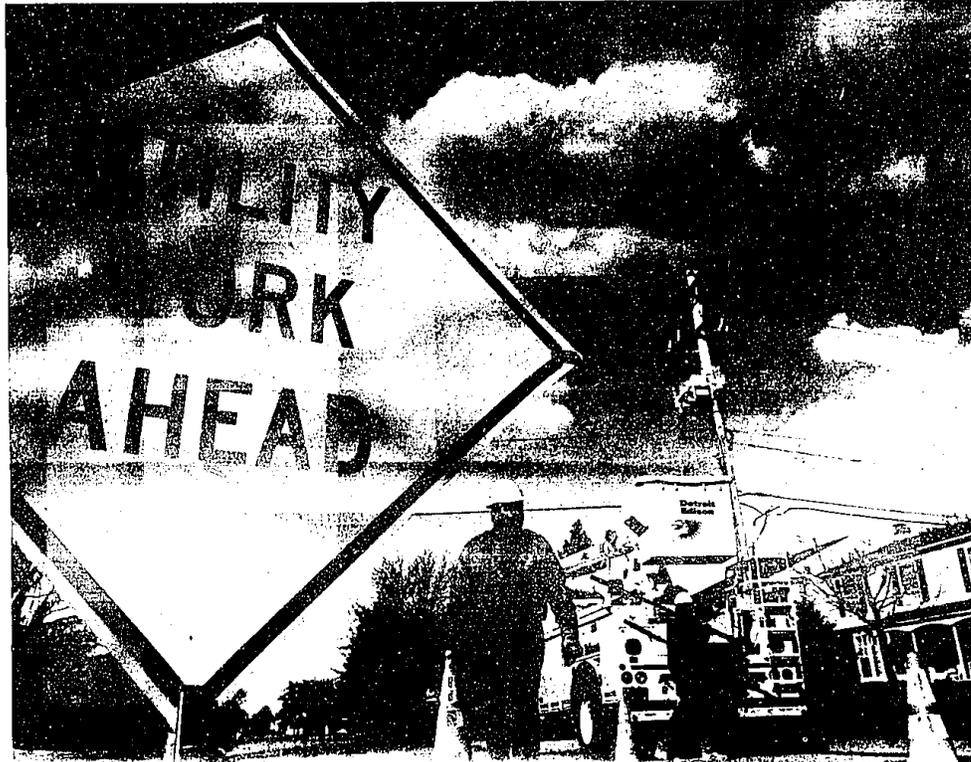
Office going up

The Windmill Group, Inc. of Farmington Hills, recently began construction of a general office building on Northwestern Highway, just north of 13 Mile Road.

Leases are now being accepted for occupancy in early fall. The 12,000 square foot office building is one story with outside entrances and parking adjacent to the building.

Stuart Michelson and Sami Harb are partners in the Windmill Group, Inc. which specializes in residential and commercial construction and development in southeast Michigan. They are currently building in Farmington Hills, Oakland Township, Van Buren Township and city of Wayne.

For lease information contact The Windmill Group, Inc. at 638-7000.



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