



Alternative Scheduling

PSEA Promising Practices Series

As the pressure to reform schools to focus on improving student achievement grows, more and more schools are experimenting with new kinds of scheduling. Generally, schools are examining several different kinds of course schedules that assign students fewer classes a day for a longer period of time. This new scheduling system is most common in secondary schools, but some elementary schools have also experimented with innovative scheduling.

There are several different kinds of prolonged schedules, but most can be characterized in one of five ways:

- **4 x 4 schedule.** This schedule splits the 180-day school year into two terms of 90 days. Within a 90-day term, students attend four 90-minute classes a day rather than seven to ten shorter classes (as in a traditional schedule).
- **8 Class schedule.** Students register for eight classes that meet every other day. Class periods are twice as long as traditional periods.
- **Intensive Scheduling.** Students take two 85- or 90-minute classes in the morning, followed by a one-hour lunch/activity/study hall period. The day ends with another two class periods of 85- or 90-minutes.
- **75-75-30 Schedule.** The school year is divided into three terms. Two of 75 days and one of 30. During the 75-day terms, students take three classes of almost two hours and one class that is less than one hour. During the 30-day term, students can study one subject intensely during a period of 2 ½ to 3 hours and another subject for about two hours.
- **Hybrid Schedule.** Schools with hybrid schedules run some courses in longer periods of time and others in traditional class periods of 40 to 55 minutes. Student can select the course type they prefer. Some classes may only be offered in specific formats.

Reasons to Consider Innovative Scheduling. Advocates of changes to school scheduling suggest that longer class periods can have many positive effects. They assert that students can take a broader array of courses in areas that interest them. Advocates also point to research that suggests fewer discipline referrals, better attendance, and higher course grades for students scheduled in longer classes. They also suggest that students can focus on their subjects more when they study fewer subjects at a time, and students who fail a course during the first semester have an opportunity to repeat the course during the second semester rather than expending a complete new year to earn the credit toward graduation; consequently, some people believe that non-traditional scheduling helps students at risk of school failure and reduces dropout rates.

For teachers, variations in the traditional school schedule can mean teachers are assigned half as many students per semester (which may improve student-teacher relationships) and are responsible for planning fewer lessons each day (which may improve lesson quality). This reduces the administrative burden for teachers and gives teachers the time they need to engage students in a variety of interactive learning tasks. Schedules with longer periods also usually result in slightly fewer minutes of instruction per day and more planning time for teachers.

Challenges to Non-Traditional Scheduling. Although advocates paint a rose-colored picture of innovative class scheduling, opponents make equally compelling points. They point to the fact that there is no clear research to suggest that scheduling changes improve student achievement; considerable research has examined non-traditional scheduling options, but the results are contradictory at best, and many studies conclude a slight advantage for

traditional schedules. Critics also point out that student absenteeism is problematic in some non-traditional class schedules because students miss the equivalent of two days' work (in a traditional schedule) for each day they are absent from a double course period. Researchers have found that content retention may decrease in classes where students study a core content area for only one-half of the year. Problems have also surfaced concerning AP courses taken in the fall semester, since AP exams are only offered in the spring.

For teachers, new scheduling requires re-thinking instructional strategies and curricular pacing. Few districts provide the comprehensive professional development that teachers need to develop teaching strategies to suit a longer instructional period. Many teachers, particularly those in mathematics and world languages, believe that certain content is best taught daily, in smaller allotments of time. Some research seems to support their assertion.

Issues to Consider.

It takes time to plan for the implementation of any new scheduling system. Schools and districts that move to innovative scheduling need to plan in advance. Some experts suggest that teachers should have up to two years of professional development before moving to a new kind of schedule. Teachers also need comprehensive pacing guides to help them plan monthly, weekly, and daily instructional goals within an altered schedule.

Teachers need ongoing professional development and extended planning time. Some experts suggest that teachers in extended periods should employ up to seven or eight different instructional strategies to engage students. Planning for this variety of instruction, managing multiple transitions in class, and engaging students in extended on-task learning is extremely complex work. Research points out that when teachers move to extended class schedules, they commonly continue to implement instruction much like they did under the traditional schedule. This approach to instruction is inappropriate, but then teachers need to receive support to make needed changes in their work.

The decision to move to non-traditional scheduling should be a shared one. There is not a clear consensus among researchers that any one kind of scheduling is uniformly better (or worse). Consequently, a one-sided administrative decision to adopt a new scheduling model, without the buy-in of staff, is even less likely to improve student achievement because it can lead to tension that distracts educators from teaching and learning issues and disrupts the instructional day. Ideally, the decision to experiment with different scheduling models should be a shared one, which increases the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Different models of scheduling may suit some classes and content areas more than others. There is some evidence to suggest that some courses—namely mathematics, world languages, and many Advanced Placement courses—are more effective if taught in a traditional schedule. Schools and districts that are considering alternative scheduling models may want to consider ways to combine new and traditional scheduling to provide the most appropriate instructional environment for each course and content area in the curriculum.

Scheduling in itself will neither solve nor create problems. Nationwide, there are many examples of schools that have implemented new scheduling models successfully, schools where teachers and students are satisfied with the schedule and where student achievement has improved. Another set of schools has found that innovative scheduling leads to teacher dissatisfaction and lowers student achievement. Where innovative scheduling leads to higher levels of teacher and student satisfaction, these alone may be sufficient reasons to switch. In the final analysis, however, student achievement and teacher satisfaction depend less on how the classes are scheduled and more on the extent to which teachers and students receive the support they need to accomplish their teaching and learning goals.