Promising Practices Series

Center for School Success

Block Scheduling

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Each publication in this series includes a brief overview of research relating to the practice featured, descriptions of one or more schools using the practice, and resources for finding more information. For access to a library of materials that schools have created in relation to the practices, visit our Center for School Success website at www.newvisions.org/schoolsuccess.

To get the most information about these practices, we encourage you to visit the schools. You will find school contact information listed within each publication. We have also developed a Guide to School Visits (see Appendix) to assist you in arranging and planning a school visit.

For more information about New Visions for Public Schools and our programs, please visit our main Web site at www.newvisions.org.

BLOCK SCHEDULING

Center for School Success Promising Practices Series

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Center for School Success Promising Practices Series: Block Scheduling
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Promising Practices Series! This series will introduce you to some innovative New York City public schools and the instructional practices they use to help students learn and achieve. The series is intended for anyone who is or wants to be involved in improving schools, from administrators and teachers to parents and community partners. Our goal is to support people doing the challenging work of school development, and our message to you is: "You are not alone!"

There are many New York City public school teachers and administrators who have worked hard to develop instructional practices that help their students succeed. We want to provide opportunities for you to learn from them. Our goal is not to offer "models" to replicate. Rather, we want to provide information on the experiences of a wide range of schools in order to stimulate thinking and innovation. Some of the schools featured in this series have existed for less than five years, while others first opened more than 15 years ago. Regardless of their age, they are all works-in-progress, a distinguishing characteristic of effective learning communities. They have all had to face the many demands of an urban educational system -- from changes in policy and funding to staff shortages -- and these are reflected in the how they have modified their practices throughout the years.

This publication focuses on block scheduling. Alternative scheduling models—usually called "block scheduling" because they involve blocks of time for student learning—restructure the school day. Schools may adopt block scheduling to create more productive and personal relationships among teachers and students, to design challenging curricula that helps students to learn concepts in depth, or to develop a more intimate and student-centered learning atmosphere. This publication describes several different alternative scheduling models and how they are implemented in three New York City schools.

New Visions for Public Schools is the largest education reform organization dedicated to improving the quality of education children receive in New York City's public schools. Working with the public and private sectors, New Visions develops programs and policies to energize teaching and learning and raise the level of student achievement. New Visions started the Center for School Success (CSS) in 1999 to document and disseminate innovative educational practices demonstrated by New Visions' schools that hold promise for increasing student achievement throughout New York City. The success of these schools should serve as examples that New York City public schools, serving the full range of students in New York City, can work.

Schools may adopt block scheduling for a wide variety of reasons: to create more productive and personal relationships among teachers and students, to design challenging curricula that helps students to learn concepts in depth, or to develop a more intimate and student-centered learning atmosphere. However, as with all restructuring efforts, successful implementation requires productive planning, time, resources, and coalition building within a school.

WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE OR BLOCK SCHEDULING?

The traditional school schedule is made up of subject-specific classes, each 40-55 minutes long. Students attend between eight and twelve classes each day and receive instruction from many different teachers. Teachers teach five classes each day, with one planning period, and see approximately 150 students. Classes are either a semester or year long.

Alternative scheduling models—usually called "block scheduling" because they involve blocks of time for student learning—restructure the school day. Block schedules are made up of fewer, longer classes, from 60 to 120 minutes each. The classes either meet fewer days each week or for less than a semester or year. As a result, students have fewer classes, and teachers teach fewer students.

Because they allow for extended class time over fewer days, block classes require innovative approaches to instruction, which makes them more likely to be implemented in schools with more progressive faculty and administrators. In schools that have made the transition from traditional to alternate scheduling models, the change has resulted from a concerted reform effort involving administrators, faculty, and often parents and students. In fact, the desire to implement an alternative schedule has often been the catalyst for a larger effort to redesign a school.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BLOCK SCHEDULING?

Students learn at different rates in different subjects. Reallocating instructional time can help teachers accommodate these differences and this, ultimately, can lead to higher student achievement. Advocates of block scheduling suggest that increased learning time leads to more in-depth learning and higher student and teacher morale. Block scheduling also encourages the use of innovative teaching methods and a greater variety of instructional strategies that address multiple learning styles.

Because block scheduling is a relatively recent phenomenon—it has only become common in the last decade or so—research about its benefits is not complete. Numerous studies have shown that in block scheduling programs, students tend to establish closer relationships with teachers, make greater academic strides and have fewer discipline problems than students in schools using traditional schedules.

Research has shown block scheduling to have some benefits in terms of higher GPAs, lower failure rates, lower dropout rates, higher college enrollment rates and slightly higher SAT scores. In surveys, students, teachers, and administrators have expressed satisfaction with block scheduling, and all believed that the interpersonal relationships between students and teachers had improved and that students were learning more. Other studies, however, have not always confirmed these results.

WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES OF BLOCK SCHEDULING?

Block scheduling is only effective as part of a larger effort to reform pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. In fact, if a block scheduling program is implemented poorly, or without re-thinking other aspects of instruction, it can have no effect or even a negative effect on student performance.

Block scheduling does not just mean changing the structure of the school day—it means fundamentally redesigning the instructional program. Because block schedules devote fewer days to a subject, the teacher has to develop curriculum that centers on the most important content areas. Admittedly, teachers are able to cover less information under block scheduling, but in exchange the students are able to learn about a subject and process what they learn on a more sophisticated level. This structure requires teachers to embrace the idea that "less is more." Teachers are often concerned about how to adjust their curriculum to focus on the most important material while still adhering to state or district standards. To be effective, block scheduling requires ongoing professional development and more collaborative planning time for teachers.

Block scheduling also requires teachers to change their classroom techniques. While some students can remain focused for a 50-minute lecture, few can do so for a full 90 minutes. Much of the literature on block scheduling stresses the importance of cooperative learning, project-based instruction, and thematic units that provide students with a variety of engaging activities. Schools will need to adjust their assessment tools to match the curriculum and pedagogy that will be used in the block scheduling format. Since year-end exams make less sense when courses are more hands-on and do not run the entire year, some schools have adopted performance-based assessments with their block schedules. All of these changes in curriculum, teaching practice and assessment require large amounts of planning time and, most likely, professional training.

Other issues to consider:

- You may need to negotiate block scheduling demands with the teachers' contracts, since teachers may be asked to teach more hours on some days and less on others. You will also need to create a plan for working with substitute teachers, who are likely to have little experience handling a longer class period.
- You may need to institute different policies on student attendance. If a student misses a few days within a block schedule, it is as if he or she has missed over a week of instruction under the traditional system.
- Similarly, student transfers to and from schools with block schedules can be highly problematic, especially if the student transfers during the middle of a semester. In some subjects, an entire year's curriculum is lost through a mid-year transfer.
- Consider how you will address the issue of Advanced Placement and other standardized tests. For example, since AP tests are offered only in the spring, students who take AP courses in the fall may not retain sufficient information to do well on the exam.

WHERE DO YOU START WHEN CONSIDERING BLOCK SCHEDULING?

Block scheduling starts where many reform programs start—with a common educational vision. A school's scheduling model should promote its instructional philosophy.

Members of the school community need to create a plan for implementing block scheduling. A good plan will include a trial

run of the program and a chance to reflect on how it is working. As part of the planning process, those involved should gather information about how different configurations work in other schools. Visiting schools that use alternative schedules is an excellent way to learn. Planning team members may want to compare curricula and note how subjects are being covered over a period of time. They should talk to students, teachers, and administrators to determine specific benefits and challenges of the schedule.

The school will have to assess the professional development needs of its teaching staff, including those who are not based in the school (e.g., artists). The school should assess what experience if any teachers have with block scheduling, collaborative teaching, and varied instructional approaches (for example, cooperative learning).

The strong support of all members of the school community is also essential. Ideally, the superintendent, principals, teachers, students, and parents should all be provided with opportunities to learn about the new schedule to discuss the effects it will have on the school.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF BLOCK SCHEDULING MODELS?

Block scheduling configurations vary by the number of class periods per day, the number of courses needed each semester, the addition of full year courses for specialty subjects, and other accommodations needed in individual schools. On the following pages you will find some typical models for reconfiguring the school day and a common model for alternative programming of the school year. You will also find examples of how several New York City schools implement block scheduling.

The 4 X 4

The 4 X 4 is the most popular model of block scheduling. It essentially creates a school day with only four classes. Classes meet daily, and students take the equivalent of four year-long classes in the space of a semester. Teachers teach for three of the day's periods and have ninety minutes each day for planning. The 4 X 4 reduces the number of children for whom each teacher is responsible by 25%.

This model has particular advantages for students with education deficits. For example, a student who failed freshman English can repeat it in the fall and rejoin his/her classmates in their sophomore class that spring. For students who complete their classes on track, the 4 X 4 offers more opportunities to integrate advanced classes or other activities (work-study, internships) in the upper grades because the courses are only one semester long.

New York City Museum School

The New York City Museum School takes advantage of resources housed in the City's museums. Subject specialists and professionally trained museum educators work with students at participating museums and at the school. A rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum encompasses required content and promotes independent research.

The Museum School's modified block schedule includes four 90-minute periods a day. A fifth after-school block involves parents and the community. The following page contains a sample schedule from the Museum School. Features to note include:

- The first period each day is devoted to one particular discipline at a time. On a rotating schedule, students examine arts, math, literature, science, social studies and humanities.
- The second period varies. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are devoted to individual projects and cross-disciplinary research, in keeping with the school's theme.
- During the third period, which includes lunch activities, students travel to a museum or cultural institution, either on line or in person.
- The fourth period is used to conduct in-depth interdisciplinary exploration of cultural objects identified during the trip to a cultural institution.

Sample Schedule

1st Period, 8-9:30am	2nd Period, 9:30-11am	Travel/Lunch	3rd Period, 1:30-3:30p	After school
MONDAY Disciplinary work in arts, math, literature, science, social studies and languages. Rotating schedule	Cross disciplinary research and individual work on projects arising from Period 1 and afternoon study in museums	Lunch Travel to museum or cultural institution On site or on line	Focused interdisciplinary inquiry based on experiences with cultural objects, including on-site group work-visiting artists and lecturers	After school activities: portfolio preparation, tutoring physical education, & computers, involving parents and community
TUESDAY Disciplinary work in arts, math, literature, science, social studies and languages. Rotating schedule	Communication Arts and Whole Language	Lunch Travel to museum or cultural institution On site or on line	Focused interdisciplinary inquiry based on experiences with cultural objects, including on-site group work-visiting artists and lecturers	After school activities: portfolio preparation, tutoring physical education, & computers, involving parents and community
WEDNESDAY Disciplinary work in: arts, math, literature, science, social studies and languages. Rotating schedule	Cross disciplinary research and individual work on projects arising from Period 1 and afternoon study in museums	Lunch Travel to museum or cultural institution On site or on line	Focused interdisciplinary inquiry based on experiences with cultural objects, including on-site group work-visiting artists and lecturers	After school activities: portfolio preparation, tutoring physical education, & computers, involving parents and community
THURSDAY Disciplinary work in: arts, math, literature, science, social studies and languages. Rotating schedule	Noncompetitive Theater Arts exercises and activities	Lunch Travel to museum or cultural institution On site or on line	Focused interdisciplinary inquiry based on experiences with cultural objects, including on-site group work-visiting artists and lecturers	After school activities: portfolio preparation, tutoring physical education, & computers, involving parents and community
FRIDAY Disciplinary work in: arts, math, literature, science, social studies and languages. Rotating schedule	Cross disciplinary research and individual work on projects arising from Period 1 and afternoon study in museums	Lunch Travel to museum or cultural institution On site or on line	Focused interdisciplinary inquiry based on experiences with cultural objects, including on-site group work-visiting artists and lecturers	After school activities: portfolio preparation, tutoring physical education, & computers, involving parents and community

Alternate Day

The Alternate Day model is often called the A/B or 8-block plan. Students take eight ninety-minute classes every day over a six-day cycle, with four classes meeting on Day A and four classes meeting on the alternating Day B. Over the span of the entire year, all courses meet an equal number of days. Teachers may not have a planning period each day but may instead

have an extended planning day on Day A and none on Day B. Teachers continue to teach the same number of students, and students have the same number of classes as they would under the traditional schedule, but each gains the benefits of extended class periods.

East Side Community High School

East Side Community High School in Manhattan's East Village serves students from seventh to twelfth grade. Its academic programs include an integrated humanities curriculum, a service learning program, and studio arts.

East Side uses a modified A/B schedule in grades 7-11 and a modified four-block of 60 minutes each in grade twelve. Each day begins with a ten minute advisory meeting, and approximately one hour is set aside three times a week for longer advisory sessions. The lunch period, which varies daily, is usually twenty minutes long, but it is usually combined with physical education or an elective.

A sample seventh/eighth grade schedule from East Side is attached. Features to note include:

- Math (block 1A) and Science (block 1B) are offered in their own separate blocks. Teachers at East Side separated these subjects in order to give them particular focus and address their students' particular needs in these areas.
- Humanities, on the other hand, is taught in a longer, interdisciplinary block (2A/B).
- The schedule also allows East Side to devote extended time to studio arts and internships, which could not be adequately covered in a traditional 45-50 minute period.

7th/8th Grade Schedule 2001-2002

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:59-0:57	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory
9:00 9:15 9:30 9:45 10:00 10:15 10:30 10:45	Math (Block 1A) 9:00-9:55 Science (Block 1B) 10:00-10:55	Humanities (Block 2A/B) 9:00-10:55	Studio 9:00-9:45 Physical Education 9:50-10:45 Lunch 10:50-11:00	Math (Block 1A) 9:00-9:55 Science (Block 1B) 10:00-10:55	Humanities (Block 2A/B) 9:00-10:55
11:00 11:15 11:30 11:45 12:00 12:15 12:30 12:45 1:00 1:15	Physical Education 11:00-11:40 Lunch 11:45-12:05 Studio Program 12:05-1:30	Math (Block 1A) 11:00-11:55 Science (Block 1B) 10:00-10:55 Lunch 1:00-1:25 Elective 1:35-2:05	Math (Block 1A) 11:05-11:45 Science (Block 1B) 11:45-12:30 Humanities (Block 2A/B) 12:35-2:00	Humanities (Block 2A/B) 11:00-12:55 Lunch 1:00-1:20 Physical Education 1:25-2:05	Elective 11:00-11:40 Lunch 11:45-12:00 Studio Program 12:05-1:30
1:36 1:45 2:00 2:15 2:30 2:45 3:00	Humanities (Block 2A/B) 1:35-2:00	Advisory 2:15-3:00	Advisory 2:05-3:00	Advisory 2:10-3:00	Math (Block 1A) 1:35-2:15 Science (Block 1B) 2:20-3:00

Hybrid Models

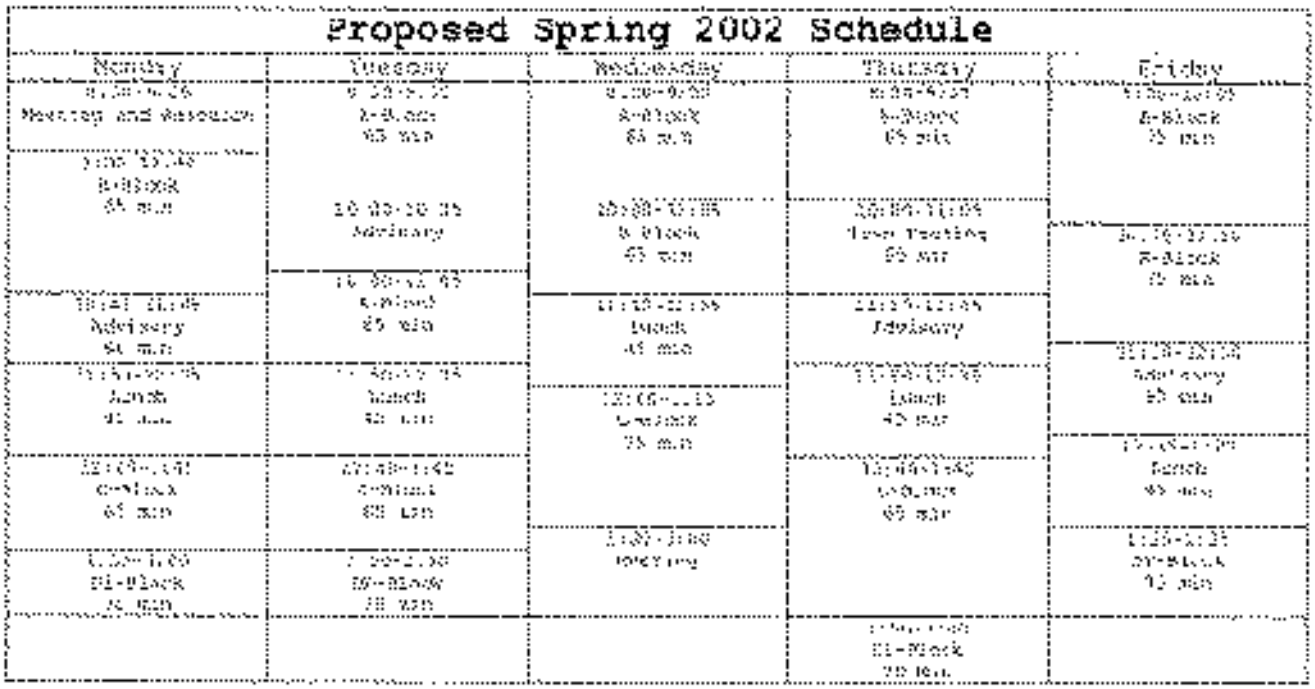
Schools are of course free to blend different models, breaking the school day into modules. Students may take classes of one, two, or three modules in length depending on the needs of the specific classes. This structure allows greater freedom in student scheduling and programs that are tailored to individual student needs, but it can be overwhelming to the school personnel who schedule students. A less dramatic hybrid option adopts a block scheduling model for only one day each week, when students pursues narrow topics intensively for a quarter or semester.

Humanities Preparatory Academy

Humanities Preparatory Academy uses an interdisciplinary approach that highlights student-centered strategies of teaching. The school's academic programs—which include the Interactive Math Program, internships, leadership training, legal studies, and writing workshops with published authors—stress college preparation. The school's social curriculum involves intensive student participation in the development of a democratic and just community.

Humanities uses a modified A/B/C/D block schedule, in which each class has short periods two or three days a week and extended periods on the other days.

- Longer periods allow the school to use a "college seminar" approach, in keeping with its college prep mission.
- Classes are all aligned with state standards but, like college seminars, focus on particular themes. For instance, in twelfth grade students may take a "Literature of Colonialism" course that covers all required areas of the standards for that grade.
- Longer blocks of time also allow for extended research, advisory periods, and "town meetings," where advisory classes meet together in order to discuss school-related issues in a democratic forum.



Copernican Plan

The Copernican Plan reconfigures the school year from two 18-week semesters to six 6-week semesters. Students take only two courses each semester, each for a minimum of two hours per day. At the end of each semester, students enroll in two new courses. The afternoons can be organized to provide "seminars," daily 70-minute periods of music, physical education, or remediation. Under this plan, teachers prepare for fewer courses and have fewer students. The six week semesters provide students with intensive opportunities to learn subjects in sustained and concentrated periods and to bond with teachers.

New York City Museum School

In addition to its 4x4 block programming previously described, the Museum School uses a modular schedule that appears similar to the Copernican Plan. Their design has four modules to cover the instructional needs for the period September to June. Module 1 has topic offerings as diverse as ancient Egyptian civilizations, genetics, the Civil War. These can loosely fit into categories like humanities, history, science and the social sciences.

- Each day, students report to the school and attend a series of classes, each either 45 or 90 minutes long. Classes include math, science, literature and writing, social studies, Spanish, physical education and music.
- Two days a week, students take two morning classes and then travel with a teacher and museum educator to one of the school's partner museums.
- Work at the museum complements course work done at the school. Students work with teachers to develop oral, mathematical, scientific, visual and technological schools. Over the course of the year, students develop 4 major projects and present them at the museums.

A year long schedule from the Museum School appears on the following page. The top half details modules for the school's middle school program, while the bottom details the high school modules by grade level.

APPENDIX

SOME HIGH SCHOOLS WITH BLOCK SCHEDULING YOU CAN CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION

- East Side Community High School
  420 E. 12th St.
  New York, NY 10009
  (212) 460-8467
  Principal: Mark Federman
- Humanities Preparatory Academy
  351 W. 18th St.
  New York, NY 10011
  (212) 929-4433
  Principal: Vincent Brevetti
- The NYC Museum School
  333 W. 17th St.
  New York, NY 10011
  (212) 675-6206
  Co-Directors: Sonnet Takahisa and Ron Chaluisan
- El Puente Academy
  211 S. 4th St.
  Brooklyn, NY 11211
  (718) 599-2895
  Principal: Alfa Anderson

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Internet Resources

Angola High School - a 4-Block Scheduled School:
http://www.msdsteuben.k12.in.us/ahs/stats/ahsdks.htm

Block Scheduling:
http://www.blockscheduling.com/index.htm

Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement:
http://education.umn.edu/CAREI/Blockscheduling/default.html

The Center for Education Reform:
http://edreform.com/pubs/block.htm

Educational Policy Analysis Archives:
http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n29.html
http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n3.html

LAB, A Program of The Education Alliance at Brown University:
http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/ic/block/block.shtml

Phi Delta Kappa International:
http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kque0011.htm

School Renewal Web Center:
http://www.schoolrenewal.org/strategies/i-4x4-ab.html

West Ed - a non-profit research, development and service agency:
http://web.wested.org/online_pubs/making_time_count.pdf

Print Resources

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