

District drops block schedule after intensive study

By Ron Girard

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After almost two full years of study, discussion, debate, and research, the Mundelein CHSD 120 Board of Education voted to drop the 4x4 block schedule it was on for 20 years and return to a traditional eight-period schedule. The change will take place at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year.

In the fall of 2014, the district held a community engagement event involving students, staff, administration, parents, and professionals from the community and

looking at issues facing the district. Groups discussed and prioritized the issues and then presented them to Superintendent Kevin Myers for further study. The number one item — of the 38 on the original list — was the bell schedule. Many participants had strong opinions about the pros and cons of the high school operating on a block schedule.

From that point, a faculty/staff committee was formed to look into all issues related to block schedules used in Illinois and across the country. Once the committee had done its research, it came back with some unexpected results: Block scheduling was having a negative impact in a number of ways.

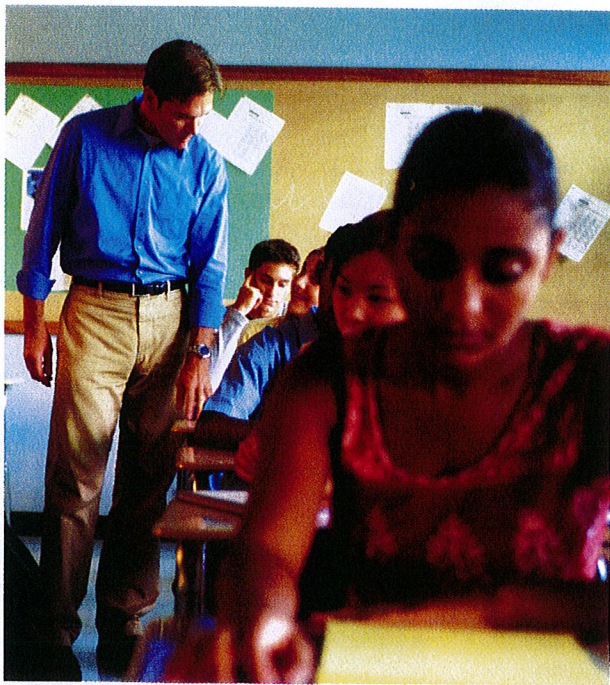
Because Mundelein's block schedule offered 90 minutes of instruction in four periods during the school day, courses that are a semester long in a traditional schedule were completed in only nine weeks; and traditional schedule year-long courses conclude in a semester. This created situations where courses that are sequential, like math or foreign language courses, are not necessarily taken in succession. A student could have Algebra I first semester of freshman year and then possibly not have

geometry (the next in the standard course sequence) until the second semester of sophomore year. This created a gap in the learning cycle and forced teachers to review the previous course when instruction on the new course should ideally begin immediately.

"What often happens is that a new class begins where some of the students need to review, while other students came straight from the previous course and are ready to get started with the new material," said Director of Guidance Tom Buenik.

Other issues became more evident as the study evolved. As more and more students took on Advanced Placement courses, a problem arose concerning the national exam that takes place in May. Many students took AP courses the first semester, which ends in December. When faced with a four-month gap between when they finish the course and take the exam, a number of students decided to not take the exam at all.

"Unfortunately, these students miss out on possible college credit and savings in tuition which they would have if they earned a 3, 4 or 5 on the AP exam," Buenik explained. On a traditional semester-based



schedule, AP courses would run the full year and students would still be in the course at the time the AP exam is administered.

Once the committee came up with data like this, it moved toward recommending that the district drop the block schedule in favor of returning to a more traditional schedule. At this point, open meetings were held to inform the public about the pending decision. People had strong opinions on both sides. District representatives presented their findings and allowed ample time for comments and questions at each of the three public meetings. A subcommittee of the original did a second round of research at the board's request and came up with additional findings. Meetings with the community continued as well as staff meetings, surveys, and student input. The original committee then concluded that the best decision would be to return to a traditional schedule.

"I commend the board of education, administration, staff, students, and the community for almost two years of extensive study which has led to this decision [to return to a traditional eight-period day]," said Myers. "This has truly been an open, collaborative process and we are looking forward to moving to the new schedule. It is absolutely the right thing to do for all of our students."

The process didn't conclude with the board decision, however. Once the decision was made, the district immediately created an online "Frequently Asked Questions" page on its website so anyone could get answers to their questions. The site is continually updated as more questions

come in. In addition, most in-service days for the remainder of the academic year were dealing with the change and how staff will transition from one type of schedule to the other. Stacey Gorman, director of curriculum and instruction, has arranged for workshops and speakers to help faculty make the change and to address the idea of homework on the new schedule.

"As students move from three or four academic classes to five or six per day, we want to make sure we are cautious of homework balance," Gorman said.

Registration for next year's courses recently concluded and took place with very little anxiety. The students, staff, and community have all been a part of the process and are on board looking forward to the future.

"This was an eye-opening experience," Myers said. "The fact that our students only experience 18 months each of English, math, science, and social studies during their four years at MHS is alarming. We must be focused on providing the best possible education for all our students and, after looking at our research, we were painfully aware that we [were] not currently doing that. We must prepare all our students for a successful future." ✍️

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