



## Education

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# Julia Steiny: Traditional high school schedule a step back to the future

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Educators have always been messing around with how they schedule schools. Strategies usually swing between using 53-minute “Carnegie units,” the classes familiar to most of us, and “block” scheduling, 90-minute classes that encourage hands-on learning by giving more time for projects and reduce downtime passing from class to class. The most common block schedule, called a “4 x 4,” spreads 8 courses over two days. And any schedule block, period, or combinations of the two can rotate, so that Algebra, for example, doesn’t always come at the end of a kid’s tired day.

The variations are infinite. Many school schedules are very confusing. But the point is to make the best use of its scarcest resource: time.

Hope High now has a block schedule. But next year the entire Providence school district will be on the same simple schedule. All secondary schools, including Hope, will have six traditional, non-rotating class periods.

Really? Personally, I like the block, so why choose that one? I asked Paula Shannon, Providence’s executive director of Curriculum Development and Implementation, and Nkoli Onye, the executive director of High School Level Education.

First, Shannon explained that when they researched how other urban districts had managed to climb off the state and federal watch lists, they found that successful districts had one thing in common: They started with an aligned, uniform instructional system. All students learning skills in a careful sequence that builds a solid foundation. Everybody on the same page.

Providence isn’t committed to lockstep uniformity per se. But first it needs to make sure every child is acquiring specific skills, so next year’s teachers can build on what the kids reliably know. That’s what “aligning” a curriculum means. It allows the system to create tests that identify holes in a kid’s educational foundation, and

remediate them right away. Very important.

Okay, but aligned curricula could work in any schedule. Onye says, “There are no bad schedules. As a principal, I loved the block. If students can use it well, it’s a beautiful thing.”

But if it’s not done creatively, the block can be expensive to implement. More teachers are needed because each teaches fewer, more intensive, courses. Hope will lose 10 teachers. Surely the district could have been more flexible about saving what’s best about Hope. But in truth, the school consumed more resources per student than other schools, many of which had no advisory periods or common planning time at all. Now all will.

And Shannon and Onye gave four other reasons to support the traditional schedule again, if only until the system gets on its feet academically:

- Some teachers insist their subjects need daily reinforcement. Onye says, “When we worked on curriculum development with our consultants, the science teachers were emphatic that they needed to see their students every day. Math also. The city has high absenteeism, so if a student was absent twice, the teacher might not see him for a week.” If the science or math block was on Tuesday and Thursday, and the kid got sick one day and bunked the other, that’s a week gone by without any instructional time.

Providence should improve attendance, but Shannon says, “There’s only so much schools can take on at once. We wanted more rigorous classes, so we started with a uniform curriculum.”

- Shannon adds, “A common schedule allows students to take classes at other nearby high schools.” The Health/Science and the International Studies high schools are housed in two wings of a building with a shared cafeteria and library. But when Onye started an Advanced Placement program at Health/Science, the mismatch of schedules prevented International students from taking those classes.

- The irregularity of block scheduling complicates “dual enrollment,” that is, high school students taking college courses to complete their high school requirements. This tucks college credits under the belts of high school graduates, saving the students money and significantly improving the chances they will complete a college degree without dropping out — an area where Rhode Island’s colleges are weak.

- Recent changes in Rhode Island’s more rigorous graduation requirements mean that all kids need four years of math and two years of a foreign language. With classes cut into smaller slices of the day, it’s easier to make sure students get all their requirements and still have time for electives. In the past, if a struggling student needed a second block of math, English, or reading, often the foreign language class was sacrificed.

Hope High would argue that its kids have been getting all the necessary classes. They (and most educators) believe that arts, tech and most vocational offerings are best taught in the block. With the smaller faculty, will Hope be able to sustain the gains it’s been making in recent years? Only time will tell.

But the district may be right that fairness across all Providence schools, along with implementing the aligned curriculum, is what’s needed to jumpstart a seriously struggling system.

Onye adds, “Hopefully, we won’t be here in 10 years. The schools are all going to start with managed, uniform instruction. And then they can go to their own management.”

I look forward to that time. It’s bad that Hope’s community, autonomy and unique structure is getting chewed up

in the process.

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