State College Area High School
January 6, 2015

A/B Block Proposed Bell Schedule:
The Why's and How's of Our Transition to a New Schedule

Schedule History at State High

The daily schedule used at State College Area High School (State High) has not changed significantly over the last 30 years. Currently, the school day begins at 8:10 a.m. and concludes at 3:16 p.m. While students typically schedule courses in up to seven classes at a time, approximately one-third of State High students choose to have a class scheduled each class period. Class periods are 47 minutes in length. Lunch is one of the class periods and is also 47 minutes. Core area courses meet every day for the entire year and count 1.0 credit. Most elective courses meet every day for a semester and count 0.5 credit.

As part of the State High building project referendum process which concluded in May 2014, the State High community examined the district's strategic plan and developed "guiding principles" with the assistance of Brainspaces, Inc. This work led State High to adopt an educational model that emphasizes learning communities and a more collaborative environment for teaching, learning and student experiences. The first phase of this educational model, the 9th Grade Learning Community (9LC), was implemented at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. Theme based learning communities for students in grades ten to twelve continue to be developed.

While a variety of variables were examined during the development of the educational model, the topic of how time is used during the school day needed further consideration. In other words, does the current bell schedule at State High meet the teaching and learning needs of the high school or would a different bell schedule better meet those needs?

Given the questions raised during the 2013-2014 school year and the questions that continue to be asked through further development of the educational model, the administration engaged in a process in 2014-2015 aimed at accomplishing the following tasks:

- *Clarification of the values and priorities that should be reflected in the bell schedule at State High.*
- *Investigation of schedule alternatives and identification of a schedule option that would best meet the needs of the student body, given the priorities identified during the values clarification process.*

A committee of 16 students, parents, teachers and administrators was formed to facilitate this process. In order to clarify the values and priorities of the State High community, the committee initiated the following activities:

1. Solicit feedback from parents through an electronic feedback form developed by the committee and emailed to families by High School Principal Scott DeShong.
2. Solicit feedback from faculty members through an electronic feedback form developed by the committee.
3. Convene a focus group consisting of almost 50 students representing the State High student body in order to determine *the most important facets of life at State High from their perspective.*

Each group (parents, faculty and students) was asked to provide feedback on the importance of study halls, choice of classes and programs, a dedicated lunch period, enrichment/remediation time during the school day, the opportunity for student clubs/activities to meet during the school day, and the level of concern about individual student academic workload. Faculty members were also asked to provide feedback on the importance of common planning time for teachers during the school day and how the current length of class periods impacts their use of a variety of learning activities.

The top items identified by student representatives are:

1. Choices in classes and academic programs – need to maintain access to wide curricular offerings (broad "menu" of core and elective course options).
2. Concern with quantity of class/homework – students shared that the amount and type of work that they needed to do outside of the school impacted their ability to take advantage of other extracurricular, community and social experiences.
3. Having access to enrichment/remediation opportunities during the school day – the ability for students to meet with teachers for "extra study" opportunities.

The top items identified by faculty members are:

1. Choices in classes and academic programs – need to maintain access to wide curricular offerings (broad "menu" of core and elective course options).
2. Common planning time during the school day within content areas (English, Math, etc.) – time for teachers to meet during the day to review student learning data, assessment information, etc.
3. The inclusion of a lunch period for each student that can not be replaced by a class.

The top items identified by parents are:

1. Choice in classes and academic programs – need to maintain access to wide curricular offerings (broad "menu" of core and elective course options).
2. The inclusion of a lunch period for each student that can not be replaced by a class.
3. Students having access to study halls and enrichment/remediation during the school day – the ability for students to meet with teachers for "extra study" opportunities.

The committee compared the input provided by parents, faculty members and students in order to firmly identify and values and priorities that should be reflected in the State High bell schedule. This comparison revealed the following five values and priorities:

1. Lunch for all students.
2. Choice of/access to classes and academic programs.
3. Collaboration within content area - common planning time for teachers.
4. Enrichment/remediation for all students – the ability for students to meet with teachers for "extra study" opportunities.
5. Reduction of student stress – the committee felt it was important to include this priority as recent student data indicated State High students report higher levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation than other high school students in Pennsylvania. This will also address the concern with the quantity of class/homework reported by the student focus group.

These values and priorities were used by the committee to evaluate bell schedule options. As the year progressed, the committee investigated several bell schedules. In addition to State High's current bell schedule, the bell schedule committee reviewed a 7-period schedule including a 30-minute lunch and an 8-period schedule including a 30-minute lunch.

Further affecting the process was the information revealed about the State High building project beginning in July 2015. The most immediate impact will occur in the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year as the main entrance to the South building will be relocated to the rear of the building near

the track. The entrances closest to Westerly Parkway will not be available for use due to the construction. This will increase the amount of time students need to transition between buildings during class changes. Realistically, the "passing time" between classes will be increased to 8 to 10 minutes at a minimum starting with the 2015-2016 school year.

During the evaluation process, the 7-period schedule with a 30-minute lunch was ruled out because it would limit student access to curricular offerings. The 8-period schedule with a 30-minute lunch is an option that would improve student access to curricular offerings, but it would also add another transition time to the school day. Additionally, the overall minutes students spend in a specific class would decrease as class periods would only be 41-minutes long with an 8-minute passing time. Consequently, this option was ruled out as well.

Along with the five values and priorities identified above, taking into consideration the impact of the construction project led the committee to review an extended learning period format commonly referred to as a block schedule. A common format for a block schedule involves 1.0 credit classes meeting every other day for an entire year and .5 credit classes meeting every other day for a semester (commonly referred to as an "A/B" format). The committee considered two versions of an "A/B" schedule:

1. A 4-period day with a 30-minute lunch – four periods would be offered on day "A" and another four periods offered on day "B."
2. A 5-period day with a 30-minute lunch – similar to the 4-period day with a shorter, additional period available for "directed study" time and related "extra study" purposes.

On December 16, 2014, the committee shared their recommendation of an A/B format consisting of a 4-period day with a 30-minute lunch to the high school faculty. Communication of this recommendation was provided electronically to high school students in grades 9, 10 and 11 as well as parents of students in grades 8, 9, 10 and 11. Six information sessions for parents and students will be held from January 6, 2015 to January 9, 2015. A report will be provided to the Board of School Directors on Monday, January 12, 2015.

In addition to answering questions and considering the feedback of students, parents and faculty members, there are two topics needing further consideration by the committee:

1. The possible inclusion of the 5-period day with a 30-minute lunch at specific times to allow students and teachers additional time for extra study (enrichment, remediation, etc.).
2. Scheduling certain science classes in a way that capitalizes on lab time and allows classes to meet for a similar amount of time as in the current bell schedule.

Block Scheduling Research

The use of block scheduling formats currently in place in many schools across the nation became prevalent in the early 1990s, with most research available concerning block schedules and their effectiveness having been conducted in the past 20 years.

In *An Analysis of Research on Block Scheduling*[1], Sally J. Zepeda from University of Georgia and R. Stewart Mayers from Southeastern Oklahoma State University share findings from their meta-analysis of 58 empirical studies of high school block scheduling. The authors noted that their analysis of the block scheduling research reported revealed "a rather shallow literature" base, meaning the quantity and quality of the research available was less than might be expected for a scheduling practice used

[1]Zepeda, S.J. & Mayers, R.S. (2006). An Analysis of Research on Block Scheduling. *Review of Educational Research,* vol. 76*,* 1137-1170*.*

widely for the past 20 years. This study of the empirical research concerning high school block scheduling provided what the State High administration believes to be the best synthesis of what the research currently available says about block scheduling.

Much of the research concerning block scheduling yields contradictory findings. In fact, Zepeda and Mayers found that they could only identify two generalizations that were supported in the research literature. First, research revealed that many teachers and students liked block scheduling. Although the answer to why this is the case is not yet clear, one reason for this finding that is clearly supported by the block scheduling research is that both teachers and students reported increased opportunities for teacher-student interaction as an advantage of block scheduling. The second generalization consistently supported by the literature is that student grades and grade point averages tended to increase with the move to block scheduling.

In terms of the impact of block scheduling on other measures of student achievement, such as performance on standardized tests, the research findings varied widely. Zepeda and Mayers scrutinized 11 studies that examined the effects of block scheduling on student achievement, including results on AP tests and college entrance examinations. The impact of moving "to the block" on college entrance and AP exams was inconclusive. For instance, a 2002 study[2] reported an increase in AP scores following the implementation of block scheduling. On the other hand, in its study of more than 100,000 students, The College Board in 1998 found that students who experienced semester-based block scheduling generally scored lower on AP exams than students who experienced instruction in core subjects for the entire year. Yet, a 1999 study[3] reported that based on the results of a study conducted with nearly 50,000 students, block scheduling had no significant effect on AP exam scores relative to students who experienced traditional schedules.

With respect to student discipline, the studies analyzed tended to reflect positive rather than negative results with regard to student discipline following a move to block scheduling. With regard to student attendance, the results fluctuated from study to study, much in the same manner observed with the impact of block scheduling on student achievement.

During the review of block scheduling research, it became clear to the State High administration that student success depends on more than the way time during the school day is *packaged*. Critical to a move to block scheduling is the provision of staff development prior to and throughout the implementation of a block schedule format that ensures teachers understand and use instructional techniques and strategies recognized as being *best practices* in the education field. Fortunately, staff development initiatives that have been ongoing at State High are providing staff with the opportunity to acquire and hone the instructional strategies and techniques which are recognized as best practices and which will be needed during extended learning periods.

For instance, the district's curriculum framework has required staff to look differently at the way course material is packaged and taught. Increased attention is now focused on enduring understandings that students should be able to apply across course areas and real world situations as well as the development of the critical thinking skills needed to make such applications.

Teachers are spending significant time learning about Differentiated Instruction, which focuses on how best to modify course material taught, learning activities, and student products to account for

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[2]Evans, W., Tokarczyk, J., Rice, S., & McCray, A. (2002). Block scheduling: An evaluation of outcomes and impact. *The Clearing House,* vol. 75, 319–323.

[3] Deuel, L. (1999). Block scheduling in large, urban high school: Effects on academic achievement, student behavior, and staff perceptions. *High School Journal,* 83(1), 14–25.

differences in student readiness levels, interests, and learning styles. Reading Apprenticeship training is aimed at increasing student abilities to read and think meaningfully about different types of text materials they encounter in the different courses. Approximately half of the State High faculty has already been trained in Reading Apprenticeship and this training will continue.

The implementation of one-to-one technology at the high school will provide each student with a laptop starting with the second semester of this school year. This will permit greater integration of technology use in all classrooms, which in turn will allow teachers to conduct learning experiences that students find to be more relevant and meaningful and which allow for the development and use of higher order application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills.

The New Recommended Schedule for 2015-2016

The recommended schedule for 2015-2016 will consist of a 4-period day – students will have four instructional periods each day. Day "A" will have four class periods and lunch and day "B" will have another four class periods. A 30-minute lunch will be included for all students each day. The schedule will be as follows:

DAY A

Period	**Time**		
1	8:10 – 9:45		
2	9:53 – 11:23		
3/A Lunch	11:31 – 12:01 A Lunch	12:09 – 1:39 Period 3A	
3/B Lunch	11:31 – 12:16 Period 3B	12:20 – 12:50 B Lunch	12:54 – 1:39 Period 3B
3/C Lunch	11:31 – 1:01 Period 3C	1:09 – 1:39 C Lunch	
4	1:47 – 3:16		

DAY B

Period	**Time**		
5	8:10 – 9:45		
6	9:53 – 11:23		
7/A Lunch	11:31 – 12:01 A Lunch	12:09 – 1:39 Period 3A	
7/B Lunch	11:31 – 12:16 Period 3B	12:20 – 12:50 B Lunch	12:54 – 1:39 Period 3B
7/C Lunch	11:31 – 1:01 Period 3C	1:09 – 1:39 C Lunch	
8	1:47 – 3:16		

How does this recommendation address the identified values and priorities?

- *Each student will have a 30-minute lunch on their individual schedule. (Lunch for all students)*
- *All students will have up to eight periods to schedule classes. (Choice of/access to classes and academic programs)*
- *One of the two days teachers will have a 90-minute planning period. On the opposite day, teachers will have a 45-minute planning period with a 45-minute collaboration period. (Collaboration within content area - common planning time for teachers)*
- *Students will have access to content area teachers for "extra study" opportunities. (Enrichment/remediation for all students)*
- *Students will have a maximum of four class periods per day. (Reduction of student stress)*

Additional Details for Recommended Schedule

- *The student day will still be 7 hours and 6 minutes in length.*
- *Passing time between classes will increase from 6 to 8 minutes.*
- *The total number of instructional minutes for students will increase from 329 per day currently to 360 per day.*
- *Time spent in transitions will reduce from 42 minutes currently (based on 6-minute passing time) to 32 minutes (based on 8 minute passing time).*
- *A 1.0 credit class will meet for an average of 225 minutes per week.*

Conclusion

The move to an "A/B" block schedule meets the values and priorities identified through the gathering of feedback from students, parents and faculty members at State High. Additionally, it reduces the number of transitions students will make during the school day. These transitions will be particularly challenging due to the logistics of the high school building project. Teachers will benefit from increased time to plan lessons and evaluate student work, which should result in higher quality interactions between students and teachers. Increased personalization of classroom interactions, more manageable student work loads, and a student day with fewer classes but longer learning periods should result in a less stressful student environment during which learning and thinking can occur at high levels.