

MEMORANDUM

TO: Greg Baker, Superintendent

FROM: Michael Copland, Deputy Superintendent, on behalf of the High School Schedule Ad hoc Committee

RE: Recommendation on High School Schedule 2026-27

DATE: January 19, 2026

The following document describes the process of the High School Schedule Ad hoc Committee, summarizes the group's deliberations and outlines a set of recommendations.

The committee reached consensus to recommend changing from an 8-period schedule to a 7-period schedule. The committee took seriously the failure of our state to fund basic education in making this recommendation as one step toward solving the impending district budget shortfall for the 2026-27 school year. Unlike other cost saving decisions that can happen later in the school year, the high school schedule must be decided in time to meet the constraints of master scheduling and student registration.

There is no perfect high school schedule, a truism reaffirmed in this process. Committee feedback for each possible alternative schedule was mixed, with support and concerns for each possibility. General feedback from committee members raised questions and concerns about planning time, reduced elective course options for students and the complexity of implementing new schedules with limited time available. The recommendation to implement a 7-period schedule was the committee's consensus compromise that best addressed these and a host of other issues.

I. Introduction

During discussions of potential budget reductions during district-BEA bargaining in the spring of the 2024-25 school year, a direction to review the high school schedule arose. BEA and district representatives agreed to examine and compare the schedule with alternatives, with an eye toward ways to reduce costs.

The current 8-period schedule, informally known as the 4x8 schedule, was initially implemented in 2017-18 school year following a lengthy committee process. Feedback on the 4x8 schedule is varied. It receives praise because of expanded elective opportunities for students, particularly in the areas of fine and performing arts and career and technical (CTE) programming, and because it allows students ample opportunity to earn the 30 credits currently needed to graduate, with 32 opportunities to earn credit over students' four years of high school. The current schedule arrangement includes two preparation periods for teachers out of the eight total periods, which is appreciated and viewed positively by high school staff.

By contrast, the schedule receives criticism for possibly creating stress, anxiety or overload for students who may carry too many courses at one time or otherwise struggle with executive functioning.

The Ad hoc committee's membership included teacher and administrator representatives from all four high schools and district office personnel. The group met for seven 90-minute meetings: September 23 and 30, October 21 and 28, November 4 and 25, 2025, and January 8, 2026. The committee's charge was to produce a recommendation to the superintendent, supported by a written rationale, to either stay with the current schedule or to identify and reach consensus on a new schedule. They considered alternatives that: 1) address the issues with the current 4x8 schedule noted above; and 2) given the current financial context, could save the district money.

The group was established as a recommending body to the superintendent. If the group could not reach consensus on a satisfactory alternative, the district's default position would be to continue with the 4x8 schedule, recognizing this would force budget reductions to be considered through other means.

High School Schedule Ad hoc Group Members

Mike Copland, Deputy Superintendent (co-chair)
 Kate Manthey, BEA President (co-chair)
 Angelica Garcia, Multilingual Learner Specialist, Squalicum High School
 Aramis Johnson, Counselor, Squalicum High School
 Ben Goodwin, Principal, Bellingham High School
 Bennet Vis, Teacher, Sehome High School
 Bethany Barrett, Principal Options High School
 Dana Smith, Assistant Director, Communication & Community Relations
 Gwen Nyman, Teacher, Sehome High School
 Heather Steele, Director, Career & Technical Education
 Kathryn Weilage, Chief Financial Officer, Ex Officio
 Katie Jones, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning
 Kay Reilly, Teacher, Squalicum High School
 Kristin O'Malley, Teacher, Bellingham High School
 Laurel Peak, Principal, Squalicum High School
 Linda Foster, Registrar, Squalicum High School
 Marty Atkins, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning
 Mary Marshall, Teacher, Squalicum High School
 Matt Whitten, Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources
 Meghan Dunham, Assistant Principal, Squalicum High School
 Ronni Weston, Teacher, Bellingham High School
 Samatha Haley, Teacher, Options High School
 Scott Smartt, Teacher, Bellingham High School
 Sonia Cole, Principal, Sehome High School
 Sonya Morrison, Teacher, Sehome High School
 Stephenie Burgess, Teacher, Options High School
 Polly Johnson, Executive Administrative Assistant

II. Meeting Discussions and Key Themes

Throughout seven scheduled meetings, committee members engaged in robust discussions about the pros and cons of the current schedule and various alternatives. Key considerations included instructional time, teacher planning periods, graduation requirements, equity across schools, student opportunity and access to courses and programs, aligning schedules among the high schools and financial sustainability.

A. Schedule Models Considered

The committee reviewed multiple high school scheduling models including the current 4x8 schedule, 3x5 trimester, 6 period and various 7 period configurations that included two different versions of a modified block schedule.¹ Each model was analyzed for its impact on student course access, teaching loads, planning time and financial implications.

i) Impact of Alternative Schedules on Teaching-Student Load and Planning Time.

The group assessed each alternative schedule for its impact on student access to courses, teacher course loads and teacher planning time. Table A (below) summarizes each schedule showing a sample week structure, the student workload, the teacher workload, the estimated financial savings and other notes associated with each option.

Table A. Summary of Schedules Considered

Schedule	Possible / Sample week Class length (approx.) & weekly frequency * Sample week included to help understand a possible structure for a school week.					Student workload Classes/day, Classes/term, credits earned/year	Teacher course- load	Financial implications / savings <u>All savings are estimates</u>	Other notes
SEMESTER 4x8	M	T	W	Th	F	4 classes per day 8 classes per semester 8 credits per year	Teach 6 of 8 periods (75%)	Baseline used to calculate savings for alternatives	Options High School uses a modified version where students take 4 classes for a quarter, then switch, rather than alternating days.
1	5	1	5	1					
2	6	2	6	2					
3	7	3	7	3					
4	8	4	8	4					
≈ 80-minute classes, 2-3x week.									
SEMESTER 7 period with 2 block periods	M	T	W	Th	F	3, 4 or 7 classes per day 7 classes per semester 7 credits per year	Teach 6 of 7 periods (86%)	17.48 FTE \$2.62 million	Could provide a floating "*" time for use as advisory, intervention time, planning time and/or early dismissal for students.
1	1	1	2	1					
2	2	3	4	2					
3	3	5	6	3					
4	4	7	*	4					
5	5			5					
6	6			6					
7	7			7					
≈ 45- or 90-minute classes, 4x week									

¹ The group also initially considered a 3.5 period configuration that operated on an A/B day schedule, a straight 7 period day and a cascading 7 period day in which six classes were attended each day. These models were eliminated from consideration after the first two meetings.

SEMESTER 7 period with 4 block periods	M	T	W	Th	F	3, 4 or 7 classes per day 7 classes per semester 7 credits per year	Teach 6 of 7 periods (86%)	17.48 FTE \$2.62 million	Could provide a floating “*” time for use as advisory, intervention time, planning time and/or early dismissal for students.
	1	1	2	1	2				
	2	3	4	3	4				
	3	5	6	5	6				
	4	7	*	7	*				
	5								
	6								
7									
≈ 45- or 90-minute classes, 3x week.									
TRIMESTER 5 period trimesters (3x5)	M	T	W	Th	F	5 classes per day 5 classes per trimester 7.5 credits per year	Teach 4 of 5 (80%)	8.74 FTE \$1.31 million	Changes grading period structure significantly from current.
	1	1	1	1	1				
	2	2	2	2	2				
	3	3	3	3	3				
	4	4	4	4	4				
	5	5	5	5	5				
≈ 70-minute classes, 5x week									
SEMESTER 6 periods	M	T	W	Th	F	6 classes per day 6 classes per semester 6 credits per year	Teach 5 of 6 (83%)	13.98 FTE \$2.1 million	
	1	1	1	1	1				
	2	2	2	2	2				
	3	3	3	3	3				
	4	4	4	4	4				
	5	5	5	5	5				
	6	6	6	6	6				
≈ 55 minute classes, 5x week.									

ii; Financial Implications

All estimated financial savings are based on current class sizes. For each schedule, financial savings result from reduction in staffing, either because fewer classes are offered in total, staff time is used differently, or both.

- The 3x5 schedule with teachers teaching four out of five classes offered the least savings offset (smallest staff reduction) of the alternatives of approximately 8.74 FTE, which equates to approximately \$1.31 million less than the 4x8 schedule.
- The 6 period option with teachers teaching five out of six classes would result in savings of 13.98 FTE or approximately \$2.1 million.
- Staff reductions with the 7 period option(s) considered are estimated to be 17.48 FTE resulting in savings of \$2.62 million.
- Maintaining the current 8 period schedule at current staffing levels would not produce savings unless class sizes were raised or planning time was reduced.

It is important to note that the FTE savings above are best estimates only, used to enable comparisons with the current schedule. With the implementation of any of the alternative schedules, staff credentialing, seniority and class size adjustments all could and likely would alter the actual savings by some unknown amount.

The 3x5 trimester and modified 7 period schedules emerged as leading alternatives due to their potential to balance instructional needs and cost savings, although the 7-period schedules were noted as challenging to implement at Options High School. The 6-period schedule received some support and was included in the final analysis prior to creating a recommendation.

B. Staff Feedback

Committee members gathered feedback from staff across all high schools over a period of weeks. Positives, challenges and questions gathered through staff feedback are summarized below.

ij Initial Feedback Summary

Positives

- Manageable Load: Students take five classes at a time; teachers teach four, reducing the number of courses each teacher must prepare compared to the 4x8.
- Daily Contact: Teachers see students every day.
- Class Size and Length: Potential for smaller classes; 70-minute periods are similar to current course length.
- Instructional Time: More overall instructional minutes; possibly easier to restart a failed class within the same school year.
- Electives and Flexibility: Keeps most electives (15 classes/year vs. 16); good for academic sequences such as math without doubling up classes.
- Alignment: Potentially matches athletic seasons, seasonal calendar breaks and local higher education institution schedules.
- Implementation: Easier alignment between all high schools compared to 7 period options; supports part-time staff scheduling and maintains the ability for students to take classes at other schools.
- Credit Opportunities: Students still have room to earn more elective credits; least impact on course options among alternative schedules.

Challenges

- Scheduling Complexity: Difficult to accommodate year-long programs such as fine arts/music, Advanced Placement (AP) or world languages.
- Fifteen classes/year may be a fictional number depending on how many year-long exceptions are granted. These exceptions could reduce elective opportunities.
- Depth and Continuity: Limits specialization in music/language; causes potential gaps between sequential courses.
- Curriculum Alignment: Teacher planning and departmental coordination required; reduced planning time.
- Equity Concerns: students receiving special education services (SPED) and multilingual learners (ML) need consistent support; language acquisition suffers with long breaks.
- Teacher Workload: More frequent prep cycles; students switching teachers mid-year could be a challenge to instructional consistency.
- Operational Load: Would require the most operational and technical work for schools, including updates to Skyward, individual education plans (IEPs) adjustments, curriculum and scope and sequence changes and so forth.
- Performance Impact: Music programs and AP pacing disrupted; possible unintentional tracking issues.
- Minimal Savings: Financial benefit is smaller; not currently aligned with most other districts in the region, although Mount Baker has moved to a trimester, and we understand that other districts are considering it.

ii. 7 Period Modified Block Initial Feedback Summary

Positives

- Consistency: More predictable weekly schedule; see students three or four times per week.
- Cost Efficiency: More cost-effective requiring less FTE than a 6 period day.
- Class Size: Potential for smaller classes.
- Electives and Graduation: Retains more access to elective options and flexibility for graduation requirements.
- Teacher and Student Benefits: Better for class learning experiences like science labs and field trips because of weekly block day(s).
- Planning: If included, a weekly early dismissal could provide some prep or collaboration time.
- Less Disruptive: Easier transition than trimester system for counselors and planning.

Challenges

- Alignment Issues: Difficult to coordinate with Options High School, shared staff and student travel to districtwide programs like Cosmetology and Aerospace manufacturing.
- Teaching Load: Teachers still teach six classes with less planning time.
- Prep Time: Teachers have significantly less planning time than in the current schedule.
- Block Day Concerns: Some teachers may have no planning time on block days; long classes remain.
- Logistics: Short periods on 7 period days complicate classes with lab or hands-on experiences; students experience high number of transitions per day.
- Impact on Programs: District-wide shared programs like Aerospace may face scheduling conflicts.
- Early dismissal possibilities: Would need a clear agreement about use of possible early dismissal time.
- Implementation: Particularly challenging for Options High School; adds more preps and workload for OHS.

iii. 6 period Schedule Initial Feedback Summary

Positives

- Aligns exactly with the state requirement of 24 credits.
- Provides more instructional minutes and daily consistency in core subjects than 4x8 or 7 periods.
- Reduces cognitive load for students compared to seven or eight class periods.
- Possibly an easier curriculum adaptation because many teachers have prior experience teaching on 6 period schedules.
- Significant cost savings.
- Fewer preps for teachers than 4x8 (five classes instead of six).
- Potential for a credit-bearing advisory period (0.5 per year).
- Possible lower student load for teachers.

Challenges

- Undoubtedly a significant reduction in available courses (from 16 options to 12 per year) with impacts on elective programs
- Cuts to staff and programs (FTE reductions).
- Little flexibility for students to retake courses or recover credits. May result in greater need for summer school at additional cost to district.
- Risk of unintentional tracking of students.
- Would likely result in cuts to programs.
- District graduation requirements would change most dramatically and require the most complex transition for graduating classes over time.
- Limited alternative learning opportunities for struggling students or extension opportunities for students seeking additional coursework in any subject.

III. Consensus Process Outcomes

In meeting 5, the group engaged in a process to assess the level of consensus on two questions. Question #1 assessed the level of consensus on whether to keep the current 4x8 schedule or move to one of the alternatives under consideration; Question #2 assessed the level of consensus among alternative schedules. Neither question yielded clear consensus at meeting 5. Consensus required additional work at meeting 6 and then again in meeting 7 in January.

A. Committee Member Reflections

Following the consensus exercise, committee members shared their perspectives.

ij Consensus.exercise.–7.Reflections.

- Those who spoke regarding their feedback to keep the current schedule shared reasons including:
 - Time to make a complex change and wish not to rush the process, if happening for the 2026-27 school year.
 - Staff concerns and student input regarding planning time and elective options.
- Those who spoke regarding their feedback to change to an alternative schedule shared reasons including:
 - Concerns over potential increase in class sizes.
 - Long-term financial implications and need to plan ahead.
 - Reduce executive function/cognitive load on students by having fewer classes per term.

ii Consensus.exercise.–8.Reflections

3x5 Trimester

- Positives:
 - Maintains daily planning time.
 - Length of class period is similar to the current schedule and works generally well for students.
 - Potentially cuts the least number of class choices for students (from 16 to 15 in a year)

- Works best for Options High School and keeps all high schools on the same schedule most efficiently.
- Concerns:
 - Given the work entailed in changing to trimesters, can we maintain funding for this schedule? It has the least amount of savings.

7 period; 2 block

7 period; 4 block

Feedback regarding the 7 period options included:

- For some, support for 7 period schedule is a vote against the 3x5 trimester.
- Concerns about getting the 3x5 trimester schedule to work with all the factors.
- 6 period schedule cuts too many staff.
- The 7 period schedule provides options that make more sense to most people; left with 7 period options to make work. It feels like a compromise schedule.

6 period

- Positives:
 - Some teacher input supports 6 period schedule.
 - Some may prefer the 6 period schedule over 3x5 trimester schedule because of familiarity with 6 period and unfamiliarity with trimester.
 - Support for teaching five of six instead of six of seven. This schedule allows students to go deeper in content; teachers see students four days a week. Core content teachers may prefer.
- Concerns:
 - deep cuts for electives, possibly to whole programs, especially without the option of running a zero hour.

B. Meeting 7: Continued Consensus Process

With no clear preferred option at the end of meeting 6, the group reconvened one final time in meeting 7 to review the options again, and discuss whether consensus could be reached, given additional information from OSPI, Governor Ferguson's budget announcements and our district leadership. The group focused on reconsidering three options: the 6-period, 7-period and 7 of 8 period schedules². In small groups, members also discussed any new or key feedback about each option, and the ramifications of Options High School having a different schedule than the three comprehensive high schools.

No groups preferred the six-period option or the seven of eight period options; the 7-period schedule received a qualified yes from the majority of groups during group summaries and then through a show of hands from the whole committee.

² The seven of eight period schedule had not been considered in meetings 1-6; it would keep the current structure of eight classes for students and increase the number of sections a full time teacher teaches from six to seven.

Thus, the committee reached consensus to change to a seven-period schedule for the comprehensive high schools beginning fall 2026.

IV. Recommendation to the Superintendent

The committee's discussions were very clear on the budget reality facing our school district, and the group had a desire to seek a high school schedule that would help address the budget challenges. Although a longer process would have been preferred, it was unfeasible under the current budget forecast.

The Ad hoc committee recommends:

- Changing to a 7 period schedule for fall 2026 for the three comprehensive high schools.
- Convening additional work groups to consider bell schedule, planning time, class size, and role of advisory class.
- Options High School's schedule would remain to be "landed" in further discussion by district leadership and additional stakeholders.

V. Epilogue: Additional Necessary Process Steps

If the recommendation to implement a 7-period schedule is accepted, the committee advises the superintendent to consider and address the following aspects of the process:

- **Ensure Transparent Communication**

The committee process was intentionally developed as an internally focused group. With any schedule change in the future, it will be important to maintain transparency with all stakeholders regarding the implications, including impacts on the students' experience, breadth of program offerings, and effects on planning time and class sizes, as well.

- **Provide Adequate Attention to Master Schedule Challenges**

Ensure that any schedule adopted supports equity across all high schools and maintains student access to electives and specialized programs. The seven period schedule may reduce student access to district-wide programs and accommodating staff shared with the other high schools. The 7-period schedule is predicated on some level of reduction in staff positions; these reductions have implications for program offerings that would need to be considered. Staff attrition (retirements, leaves, etc.) may be able to accomplish part of the staff reductions needed, but it is unlikely that attrition would accomplish all the reductions needed.

- **Provide Adequate Attention to Instructional Implications**

The committee's feedback suggested the importance of attending to the instructional implications of any future schedule change, including consideration of various instructional shifts involved with new schedules and implementation supports to assist this shift.

- **Determine Student Support Structures**

It will be important to consider whether/how/where to embed advisory program structures (Anchor, THOR, Hawk Hour and Rally) to meet academic and social needs of students. The committee also recommends consideration of best practices and options

for academic support for students such as the Academic Workshop course, and what, if any, such courses/opportunities will play in a new schedule. Finally, educators would have to reexamine and consider adjustments to 504 plans and specialized instructional support for students with IEPs included in general education should a schedule change be made. While the committee process identified these issues, we did not have time to go deep into a decision process on them.

- **Make a Determination Regarding Graduation Requirements**

A new schedule would require the school district to build a recommendation for number of credits, course requirements and a phase-in plan for the graduating classes of 2027-2030. A new schedule would require a rethinking of the credits needed for graduation and what constitutes a full four-year experience for students. We further recommend a review of current course waivers available to students and analysis as to whether updates would be needed.