

Trimesters

Shape a New Face to Learning

An inside look at this novel
course scheduling from
a district administrator who's
been doing it for 15 years

BY MARK T. WESTERBURG

Educating students in a safe, nurturing and challenging environment that empowers them to become lifelong learners and productive citizens is a common mission of schools across the nation. The way school districts fulfill that mission, however, can vary widely.

For the New Buffalo Area Schools in Michigan, realizing that goal meant taking a hard look at how we could best use time to our advantage. The issue for us is when and how we deliver instruction.

In our 700-student district on the south shores of Lake Michigan, our middle school and high school use a trimester schedule consisting of three 12-week academic terms. At the

high school, students take five 75-minute classes per day; teachers instruct for four periods and use the fifth for planning. At the middle school, students take seven classes daily; teachers instruct for five and have common planning. In middle school, core classes are 62 minutes and electives are 45 minutes.

A high school student's schedule consists of core classes (traditionally yearlong courses) during two of the three trimesters. Advanced Placement courses, band and choir run for the full school year. Electives generally meet for one 12-week trimester, and although some do run two terms, they are designed so they do not need to be sequenced, allowing scheduling flexibility.

This kind of schedule is nothing new. I've worked in trimester schools for 15 years. In fact, 60 or more school districts in Michigan and many others throughout the United States currently use trimester schedules. However, the schedule's commitment to the school improvement process often is overlooked.

Student-Driven Plans

Schedules alone do not improve student test scores. Schedules do not make poor instructors suddenly effective or harm the qualities of good teachers. Teaching, learning and time on task remain the key components of school improvement.

At New Buffalo High School, which serves 250 students in grades 9-12, students typically take three core classes and two electives each term, earning 7.5 credits per year. This schedule enables students to take three more classes each year than they would under a traditional six-period schedule.

Grade levels do not dictate the coursework in New Buffalo. Students are placed in appropriate classes based on their ability and academic performance as indicated by assessment data.

Eighth-graders must score at least a 15 in all areas of the Explore assessment to enter high school. (Explore is part of the ACT's Educational Planning and Assessment system.)

In essence, New Buffalo has established a high-school readiness standard. Eighth-grade students who score 21 or better on the English portion of the Explore assessment are moved to 10th-

grade English as freshmen. This allows them to take AP language and AP literature when they are seniors. By the same token, students who receive lower than a B in any 8th-grade core class must take that subject in the fall of their freshman year to build in the gift of time.

As part of the trimester schedule, all students have the opportunity to repeat courses if necessary for remediation or for doubling up on content to accelerate their learning. Time on content can be adjusted based on the ability to offer 12-, 24- or 36-week courses. The trimester allows for more creativity and flexibility in the scope and sequence of all the content areas.

Daily Bonus Time

Overall, the scope and sequence of classes is based on the state testing program. In Michigan, all students take the ACT in March of their junior year, coinciding with the end of the second trimester.

With that in mind, junior-level English is offered in the fall and winter trimesters so students have an entire year of language arts instruction leading up to the test. New Buffalo also offers a required ACT preparation course in the winter to prepare them for the testing.

We also created a 35-minute session at the end of the day called a bonus period, which can be used for response to intervention.

Students use the time to make up missed work, start homework or receive extra instruction from teachers.

Our goal is simple: We do not want any student to graduate with less than an 18 ACT composite (the test's maximum score is 36). Eighteen creates a window of opportunity for the student that includes a four-year college. We want to open that window as wide as possible. Then it's the students' and their families' job to take advantage of the opportunities.

Pros and Cons

Every school schedule has its upsides and downsides, and so it is with trimesters. Some educators consider the following to be drawbacks:

- The schedule is difficult to create because the administration must address various param-

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Superintendent Mark Westerburg sees greater flexibility in meeting student needs through trimester schedules.

eters during development, including state test scheduling. Any schedule change has multiple ramifications.

► The students transition twice a year instead of once, which concerns guidance counselors, who must reschedule students three times during the school year instead of twice. The value for students should far outweigh any concern about mechanics of managing another set of changes. Some simple policies and practices can ease this challenge.

► Breaking the paradigm of full-year classes is difficult. Some will balk at the semester gap between junior-level English (taught in fall and winter) and senior-level English.

However, I see no validity in the issue of students dealing with a gap in their instruction. Most schools teach Algebra 1 to freshmen and Algebra 2 to juniors, creating a long break. Students are asked to take standardized tests that require more content than they receive in one year. The key is to teach for retention no matter what schedule is used. It does matter how far a teacher gets, and it matters how much the stu-

dent can recall and apply.

These are the major advantages of a trimester schedule:

- Students can accelerate their learning, taking three years of a world language in two academic years, for instance.
- Students can enroll in a support class without compromising their ability to earn sufficient graduation credits. A 10th-grade student can enroll in a Fundamentals of Chemistry class as an elective.
- Students can retake a class and remain on course to meet high school graduation requirements.
- The schedule does not require additional teachers.
- The focus is on student learning, and we've seen positive results. New Buffalo High School is ranked in the top 2 percent in the state and, despite an economically disadvantaged population of close to 50 percent, was named one of *Newsweek's* top 2,000 high schools in 2013 and 2014.

Adopting the Mindset

The trimester schedule is a vehicle for school improvement, allowing creativity and flexibility in adjusting to student needs. Districts should adapt the schedule to the schools' improvement goals, which means maintaining a mindset focused on continuous improvement.

Schedules are not a substitute for quality teaching and learning. However, ensuring more time on task and teaching the right content at the right time always will produce good results. ■

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Additional Resources

More information about trimester scheduling can be found at www.trimesters.org, a website maintained by Mark Westerburg.

The site, "School Improvement Using a 3 x 5 Trimester Schedule," details the trimester schedule in New Buffalo, Mich., Area Schools, provides additional alternative schedules for consideration, offers research related to trimester schedules and student achievement, and shares the assessment results of New Buffalo's students under the trimester schedule.

