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Running head: BLOCK SCHEDULING VS. TRADITIONAL SCHEDULING

Effects of Block Scheduling vs Traditional Period Scheduling on the Academic Achievement  
of Middle School Students

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Spring 2020  
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### **Abstract**

The way school is structured plays a major role in the academic achievement of middle school students. Scheduling systems like block scheduling and traditional period scheduling have played major roles on how students throughout the world are making the transition from elementary school to high school. While the academic achievement of middle school students is based on a collection of things, this senior capstone research project will explore how block scheduling vs traditional period scheduling affect the academic achievement of middle school students. The purpose of this project is to see the answer to the best scheduling system for middle schools based on the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators along with some recommendations as on how to best accommodate middle school students to maximize their learning.

**Keywords:** Block scheduling, traditional period scheduling, academic achievement.

### **Introduction and Background**

Middle school is meant to be a transition period between the scheduling of elementary classrooms to the scheduling of high school classrooms, but what is this transition doing to the academic achievement of these middle school students? “As we attempt to understand scheduling and its impact on the achievement of the middle school child, it is important to first understand what it is to be a middle school child. The middle school child is unique. Changes in physical growth, social skills, language, and cognitive development impact both the classroom and the playground” (Falk, et al, 2009, p.7). Middle school students are not only transitioning in higher education, but are also learning about the type of people they want to be and present as in this society. With this in mind, it is important to look at the transition they are making academically and socially, and how educators can best create a scheduling system to facilitate a continuance of academic achievement as their students grow.

Block scheduling, an alternative form of scheduling based on the idea of creating longer class periods alongside either an alternating day system or alternating semester system, has been in existence since the late 1960’s, but it became a viable scheduling model in the late 1980’s in response to the literature on cognition supporting deeper learning by students who have uninterrupted interactions with their subject matter (Cobb, 1999). Because of this literature, the development of the argument between block scheduling and traditional period scheduling at a secondary education level was sparked for another possible option for scheduling. Both current and past research shows that scheduling systems among middle school students’ academic achievement is determined by subject and the flexibility that subject holds.

The primary question I pose to answer in my research is: *How does block scheduling vs. traditional period scheduling systems affect the academic achievement of middle school students?* Related questions are: *What does the literature say about the effects of block scheduling vs. traditional period scheduling systems on the academic achievement of middle school students? Are there school policies and procedures on the scheduling systems for students in schools? How do districts implement their scheduling systems to maximize their students learning? What do in-service teachers think about the effects of both scheduling systems on the academic achievement of their students? Which is the better scheduling system? What could be done for school districts to adopt the best scheduling systems for their students that eventually would result in their students' academic achievement?*

My interest in this topic stems from personal curiosity in how to better educational scheduling systems at a middle school level to better cater to student's needs after experiencing over 50 hours of service in various schools in the Monterey area through California State University, Monterey Bay's service-learning institute. As an educator it is incredibly important that you are able to provide all the tools for your students to succeed, at a traditional period scheduling, it is virtually impossible due to lack of teaching time and support. This senior capstone should be of interest to students, teachers, and the school districts that serve our community help improve the academics of middle school students.

## **Literature Review**

There are many benefits to evaluating the scheduling systems within schools, most important being the success of students. While block scheduling and traditional period scheduling both serve this purpose, it is important for educators to look at these systems and decide which would best serve the overall academic and social success of students in a school. The following literature review will explore the historical background of each scheduling system, their effects on the academic achievement of students, and which system is best suitable for the academic achievement of middle school students.

### ***Traditional Period Scheduling***

The traditional period scheduling system supports a six to eight class schedule, each class consisting of 45 minutes. For students, this is the point in their educational careers where they transition from one classroom all day long to six or eight classrooms with little time to get to where they need to go. This schedule also creates a problem for teachers because it creates a learning environment that only supports teaching to the text.

The eight-period day also brings with it scheduled transitions, which create a breeding ground for trouble between classes. And within classes, any time taken out for discipline purposes takes away valuable time from instruction (Which often doesn't exceed forty-five minutes) (Derouen, 1998, p.2). This transition is not impossible, as the traditional period scheduling system is the standard in most schools, but this adjustment has major effects on how students are learning how to navigate their new schedules in schools they are new to alongside the requirement to be able to transition to a new part of their campus every 45 to 50 minutes.

### ***Block Scheduling***

The block scheduling system became popularized in school systems in the late 1980s as a means to provide an alternative schedule to the traditional period system. The

block system can be defined as the arrangement of a school's schedule into longer and more flexible time frames than the traditional 40-55-minute period (Brown, 2001). This scheduling system can come in three forms: the 4X4 semester block, alternating-day (A/B) block, and flexible interdisciplinary block.

The most common of block schedules would be the 4X4 semester block. This block varies by semester, this means that students would have the same four classes each day for a semester and then switch to a new set of four classes for the second semester (Falk, et al, 2009). These classes would consist of two core classes and two elective classes at 80 to 100-minute intervals. This time for classes allows for teachers to explore hands on assignments and to make personal connections with their class. While this seems like an effective way to run classes, Hackmann (2002) explains that this system is not compatible with middle school students based on a potentially fatal flaw to the scheduling system,

... this model renders it virtually impossible to deliver an interdisciplinary curriculum that promotes the integration of the core disciplines of language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science...teachers would have an exceedingly difficult time demonstrating connections between the four core disciplines when students are only enrolled in two each semester... (p.25)

And so, this system is considered for a high school curriculum rather than middle school since a middle school curriculum is supposed to articulate the mastery of basic skills and the time between classes due to the semester switch over would become void as the semesters continued on.

Alternating-day or A/B scheduling consists of a similar schedule to the 4X4 scheduling system, but rather than adjusting this schedule by semester students have the standard six to eight classes shown in the traditional period schedule. These classes are then split into alternating days so students are only attending four classes per day

(Hackmann, 2002). Both Hackmann (2002) and Falk (2009) have discussed this type of scheduling and its impact on middle school students looking at both positive and negative. Hackmann (2002) states the advantages of alternating day blocks as a means for teachers to design lessons that will actively involve students in their continued learning. This also promotes an environment where students can concentrate on few subjects per day creating an atmosphere where students are more likely to engage in the subject matter. Falk and authors (2009) argue that the alternating block schedule is often criticized because teachers are more likely to spend more time reviewing at the beginning of class rather than attempting new information right away because of the full day break in between class sessions.

Lastly, the flexible interdisciplinary block; this block scheduling system has been inserted into schools since the 1980s. what this block scheduling system does, is combine two class periods into one; i.e. language arts and social studies or mathematics and science. Brown (2001) defends this block scheduling for middle school students:

The flexible interdisciplinary block schedule is suggested as the most appropriate model for middle school level schools...teams of teachers are provided with large blocks of time that they may arrange into any configuration each day based on the type of interdisciplinary planning and learning in which students are engaged (Brown, 2001, p. 5).

A flexible interdisciplinary block allows students to create connections with their peers and teachers through thoughtfully planed out lessons and hands on interactions in a class period that would typically only allow for lecture. Meaning, this scheduling system allows for middle school students to appropriately transition from a single classroom setting to a multiple period classroom setting by allowing students the opportunity to have the combination of stability and transition.

### ***Compared Schedules and Teacher Perspective***

Teachers take on all the struggles middle school students face in the transition from elementary school to their new middle school classrooms, so they must learn how to best facilitate that transition to continue the academic achievement of their students as they navigate their educational careers. On the subject of the traditional period scheduling system, Derouen (1998) argues, “...the traditional eight-period schedule in itself promotes a negative school culture. Seeing up to 180 children, teachers have difficulty bonding with each child individually, a situation that depersonalizes the teacher/student relationship” (Derouen, 1998, p.2). A traditional period schedule allows for very little models of teaching, and thus the most common way to produce the subject matter is through lecture. While lecture is an important part of the learning process and taking in information, teachers know that keeping their students engaged in this type of environment is nearly impossible.

Falk and authors (2009) support this fact:

...teachers struggle to meet daily objectives in forty to fifty-minute intervals...because lecture is the most efficient way in which to provide large quantities of information to students in a short time, teachers teaching in a traditional forty to fifty-minute period don't often have the opportunity to engage learners” (p.12).

While, it is not impossible for teachers to make connections with students to the curriculum through lecture, students are less likely to retain lecture heavy course work for all eight of their lecture heavy classes.

When looking at how teachers are presenting block scheduling in their classrooms, it is important to think about what exactly they have been trained to do to facilitate this type of learning environment, thus looking at team planning among teachers is an important step in presenting a block to their students. In Bruckner's (1997) article “Eavesdropping on Change: Listening to Teachers During the First Year of an Extended Block Schedule,” they noticed that once a type of rubric for student outcomes was

developed among teachers in the areas of intent to learn, safe learning environment, willing to participate, and independent worker, teachers were able to evaluate and support a multitude of student's abilities for academic achievement:

Discussion about block scheduling per se lessened throughout the year, while discussion about improving student learning increased. On the journey, teachers began to talk openly about what worked and what didn't work in their classrooms...they were renewed by the focus on rubrics not only for their students, but for themselves (Bruckner, 1997, p.51).

Teachers care deeply about the academic achievement of their students. Teachers, who have experience with block scheduling in any form, have had the ability to adapt their lesson plans for all types of students learning styles because they had the ability to plan for longer periods and hands on learning. Bohinc (1996) discusses the flexibility of teachers and the importance of timeliness in how different types of curriculum are presented in a four-by-four block based on the idea that there are different expectations for learning in a longer class period. Students have the unique ability to learn how to use facts to solve problems and evaluate research in assessment activities.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This senior capstone was proposed to answer a number of questions about the way middle schools decide to set their class scheduling systems. Primarily, I was able to gather information from peer reviewed articles written by experts in the field from around the United States that examined the major styles of block scheduling and the effectiveness of these scheduling systems on students and teachers lives. On top of the literature review, I had planned on creating an anonymous poll (Appendix 1: Online Poll to Middle Schools in Monterey County) to be sent out to middle schools within Monterey county that follow both traditional and block scheduling systems to gain data from teachers on their personal

insight as to which system is better and how they run their classrooms within these systems to produce effective student academic achievement.

I then evaluated the bell schedules of each middle school within the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District: Dual Language Academy, Los Arboles Middle School, Seaside Middle School, and Walter Colton Middle School (Appendix 2,3,4, &5) to see what types of schedules are in place within the district. Three of the four middle schools participated in the traditional period scheduling system and one participated in the block scheduling system.

### **Results, Findings, and Discussion**

*What does the literature say about the effects of block scheduling vs. traditional period scheduling systems on the academic achievement of middle school students?* While doing research on the effects of block scheduling vs. traditional period scheduling systems within middle schools it became clear that there are limitations to both systems due to the inconclusiveness of whether or not either system has the ability to support the best academic achievement results from students. Peterson and authors (2000) discuss that while a block schedule has not necessarily improved the ability for students to perform on standardized tests, “The previous model of teaching, namely the teacher providing information and students remembering it for the quiz or test, is gradually being replaced. The block schedule is moving us toward learning that is authentic and skill-based and thus less subject to measurement by the remembering of facts” (Peterson, et al, 2000, p. 9). This meaning, that there are a multitude of ways to measure academic achievement among middle school students other than standardized testing.

The literature also showed that, while both current and past research supports the involvement of block scheduling at a secondary education level in education today, block scheduling is not being used to its full potential to support academic achievement. This is due, in part, to lack of proper teacher training, school organization skills, and curriculum. Hackmann (2004) examines the ability of schools to perform in their article, "Constructivism and Block Scheduling: Making the Connection" that this is a common issue for both block scheduling and the traditional period scheduling system in schools:

...many blocked schools may fall victim to the same problem that has besieged schools using the traditional model: the schedule's rigid format does not provide the flexibility to promote varied teaching/learning activities. Uniform blocks force all disciplines into larger time frames, even though some subjects actually may benefit from shorter instructional times (Hackmann, 2004, p.3).

With this in mind, the literature shows that the implementation of a scheduling system in schools must be well thought out in order to make significant impact on the academic achievement of middle school students because even the best students, teachers, and administrations could crumble due to a poorly thought out scheduling system.

*Are there school policies and procedures on the scheduling systems for students in schools?* According to the literature, there are no current school policies or procedures on the scheduling systems for students in schools though the subject has been a common discussion among teachers and administrators alike on how to get students to actively respond the curriculum in classrooms. Falk and authors (2009) discuss the importance of allowing for social interaction and peer relationships within the classroom as a means to make assignments more impactful on the student brain (p. 8). These types of motivations for change within the school system allow for teachers and administrators to make decisions for their

students based on the notion of combining the importance of transition and academic achievement.

*How do districts implement their scheduling systems to maximize their students learning?* With respect to MPUSD and the literature, it is clear that many districts continue to implement the traditional period schedule into their schools. Hackmann (2004) states another one of the realities of implementing a block scheduling system into schools “...many educators do not seem to have fully interconnected the dimensions of teaching, the process of learning, and the organization of the school day...without adequate professional development, even supportive and well-intentioned teachers may incorporate ineffective methods” (Hackmann, 2004, p. 2-3). While this implication of the reality of our current secondary education system has opened up the possibility of failure to evaluate how to best accommodate student success, it is important to look at what motives districts have for implementing a certain type of scheduling system. Falk and authors (2009) make a point from a financial standpoint as to the positives of implementing block scheduling stating that, administrators would likely not have to hire additional staff with the implementation of a block schedule because this scheduling system allows for smaller class sizes and less classroom spaces to occupy.

*What do in-service teachers think about the effects of both scheduling systems on the academic achievement of their students? What is the better scheduling system?* In-service teachers have advantages and disadvantages for both scheduling systems, and while the data shows that the scheduling system does not have significant impact on academic achievement from a statistical standpoint, teachers can recognize that block scheduling allows for a smooth transition into a multiple class schedule. In the article “Block

Scheduling: The Effects on Curriculum and Student Productivity,” Gullatt (2006) suggests: “Research has indicated that block scheduling may have important nonacademic advantages, including a calmer school atmosphere, better discipline, and improved student attitudes” (p. 253). When looking into a scheduling system for the sake of creating the best possible transition period for middle school student to allow for academic achievement, far more goes into this idea than simply how these students do on standardized tests and teachers recognize this for the purpose of creating students who know how to do more than learn to a test.

*What could be done for school districts to adopt the best scheduling systems for their students that eventually would result in their students’ academic achievement?* For districts to make the decision to adopt the best scheduling systems for their students that would eventually result in academic achievement, they must first look at how their current system is affecting students. Brown (2001) argues for block scheduling in the following statement: “Most of the respondents believe that because students have more time for learning, it allows for the more opportunities to manipulate ideas, to practice specific content-area skills, and provides additional reflection time. These activities are likely to engage students, creating more meaningful learning experiences” (Brown, 2001, p. 8). Districts should take into account the importance of social interaction, teacher-student connections, and project-based learning when considering how to best facilitate their students’ levels of academic achievement because these types of connections to education are what is most important to student learning and development.

### ***Problems and Limitations***

In light of schools closing down due to Covid-19, conducting this senior capstone research project was not easy. I had planned to interview teachers, and survey both teachers and students on their recommendations for which scheduling system fits their school best and what they think would fit them best personally. Unfortunately, I never received the chance to do so. This leads to reconfiguring my senior capstone research paper into a literature review on the recommendations of those surrounding this issue.

While this senior capstone research project could have been much more sound supported by actual data collection from teachers and students, I feel that the literature speaks for itself as an attempt salvage my topic. My hope for this senior capstone is that, I will get the chance to further my research on this topic at the graduate education level.

### **Recommendations**

While examining the middle schools in the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD), all but one of the four schools conducted their scheduling under the traditional period scheduling system (Appendix 2,3,4, & 5). After a complete literature review on the positive and negative effects both scheduling systems have on the academic success of middle school students, it is my recommendation that MPUSD implement block scheduling into their schools. With this in mind, it is important to look at the transition they are making academically and socially, and so, allowing educators to create the best scheduling system to facilitate the continuance of their students' academic achievement and self-growth is key.

### **Conclusion**

The effects of block scheduling vs traditional period scheduling on the academic achievement of middle school students is still a subject with much to be explored. While the

literature on the effects of these scheduling systems on the academic achievement of middle school students turned up inconclusive as to which scheduling system is better, block scheduling overall allows for a smoother academic transition for both teachers and students alike. Middle school students are not only transitioning in higher education, but are also learning about the type of people they want to be and present as in this society. And so, through this senior capstone project I discovered, it is important for educators to look at these systems and decide which would best serve the overall academic and social success of students in a school.

In completing the literature review and going over the findings, I was able to expose both negative and positive viewpoints to whether the block schedule or the traditional period schedule would be the best fit for middle school students. The secondary research questions served the purpose of explaining why the effects of block scheduling vs. traditional period scheduling on the academic achievement of middle school students from the perspective of teachers and administrators would lean towards block scheduling. This is based on the ideals of project-based learning, and the positive effects it holds on students and teachers alike.

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## Appendix

**Appendix 1: anonymous poll to middle schools in Monterey County**

1. How long have you been teaching?
  - a. 0-2 years
  - b. 2-4 years
  - c. 4-6 years
  - d. 6 plus
2. How many students are in your class?
3. How much of your class period is dedicated to instruction?
4. What scheduling system does your school implement?
5. Do you have experience with one or more scheduling systems?
6. Do you think that your school's scheduling system has positive effects on your students' academic achievement? If so, what kind?
7. What do you think is the best scheduling system to facilitate students' academic achievement?
8. Are there school policies and procedures on the scheduling systems for students in your schools?

**Appendix 2: Dual Language Academy Bell Schedule**



**Middle School  
Bell Schedule 2019 - 2020**

**Monday, Tuesday, Thursday & Friday**

**Wednesday**

Block 1 (90)	7:50 - 9:20
5min break	9:20 - 9:25
2min passing	9:25 - 9:27
Block 2 (90)	9:27 - 10:57
5min break	10:57 - 11:02
2min passing	11:02 - 11:04
Block 3 (90)	11:04 - 12:34
Lunch (30)	12:34 - 1:04
2min passing	1:04 - 1:06
Block 4 (84)	1:06 - 2:30

Block 1 (67)	7:50 - 8:57
5min break	8:57 - 9:02
2min passing	9:02 - 9:04
Block 2 (67)	9:04 - 10:11
5min break	10:11 - 10:16
2min passing	10:16 - 10:18
Block 3 (67)	10:18 - 11:25
Lunch (30)	11:25 - 11:55
2min passing	11:55 - 11:57
Block 4 (63)	11:57 - 1:00

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## Appendix 3: Los Arboles Middle School Bell Schedule

**Los Arboles Middle School — Bell Schedules** Print schedules on separate pages**Regular Day Bell Schedule**

	<b>Start Time</b>	<b>End Time</b>	<b>Length</b>
Period 1	8:30 AM	9:22 AM	52 min
Period 2	9:27 AM	10:19 AM	52 min
Break	10:19 AM	10:30 AM	11 min
Period 3	10:35 AM	11:27 AM	52 min
Period 4	11:32 AM	12:24 PM	52 min
Lunch	12:24 PM	12:54 PM	30 min
Period 5	12:59 PM	1:51 PM	52 min
Period 6	1:56 PM	2:48 PM	52 min
Period 7	2:53 PM	3:45 PM	52 min

**Collaboration Day Schedule**

	<b>Start Time</b>	<b>End Time</b>	<b>Length</b>
Period 1	8:30 AM	9:11 AM	41 min
Period 2	9:16 AM	9:57 AM	41 min
Break	9:57 AM	10:09 AM	12 min
Period 3	10:14 AM	10:55 AM	41 min
Period 4	11:00 AM	11:41 AM	41 min
Lunch	11:41 AM	12:11 PM	30 min
Period 5	12:16 PM	12:57 PM	41 min
Period 6	1:02 PM	1:43 PM	41 min

**Appendix 4: Seaside Middle School Bell Schedule**

**Seaside Middle School**  
2019 – 2020 Bell Schedule

M T Th F

6 <sup>th</sup> Grade			7 <sup>th</sup> /8 <sup>th</sup> grade		
Period	Time	Minutes	Period	Time	Minutes
Warning Bell	8:25-8:30	5	Warning Bell	8:25-8:30	5
1	8:30 – 9:22	52	1	8:30 – 9:22	52
2	9:27 – 10:19	52	2	9:27 – 10:19	52
Break	10:19 – 10:30	11	3	10:24 – 11:16	52
3	10:35 – 11:27	52	Break	11:16 – 11:27	11
4	11:32 – 12:24	52	4	11:32 – 12:24	52
Lunch	12:24 – 12:54	30	5	12:29 – 1:21	52
5	12:59 – 1:51	52	Lunch	1:21 – 1:51	30
6	1:56 – 2:48	52	6	1:56 – 2:48	52
7	2:53 – 3:45	52	7	2:53 – 3:45	52

Wednesday Collaboration Schedule

6 <sup>th</sup> Grade			7 <sup>th</sup> /8 <sup>th</sup> grade		
Period	Time	Minutes	Period	Time	Minutes
Warning Bell	8:25-8:30	5	Warning Bell	8:25-8:30	5
Advisory	8:30 – 8:56	26	Advisory	8:30 – 8:56	26
1	9:01 – 9:38	37	1	9:01 – 9:38	37
Break	9:38 – 9:48	10	2	9:43 – 10:20	37
2	9:53 – 10:30	37	Break	10:20 – 10:30	10
3	10:35 – 11:12	37	3	10:35 – 11:12	37
4	11:17 – 11:54	37	4	11:17 – 11:54	37
Lunch	11:54 – 12:24	30	5	11:59 – 12:36	37
5	12:29 – 1:06	37	Lunch	12:36 – 1:06	30
6	1:11 – 1:48	37	6	1:11 – 1:48	37
7	1:53 – 2:30	37	7	1:53 – 2:30	37

**Appendix 5: Walter Colton Middle School Bell Schedule**



**Regular Day- 6th Grade**

Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri

Period 1	8:30 - 9:25
Period 2	9:30 - 10:20
Break	10:20 - 10:35
Period 3	10:40 - 11:30
Period 4	11:35 - 12:25
Lunch	12:25 - 12:55
Period 5	1:00 - 1:55
Period 6	2:00 - 2:50
Period 7	2:55 - 3:45

**Regular Day - 7th & 8th Grades**

Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri

Period 1	8:30 - 9:25
Period 2	9:30 - 10:20
Period 3	10:25 - 11:15
Break	11:15 - 11:30
Period 4	11:35 - 12:25
Period 5	12:30 - 1:25
Lunch	1:25 - 1:55
Period 6	2:00 - 2:50
Period 7	2:55 - 3:45

**Collaboration Day - 6th Grade**

Wednesday

Advisory	8:30 - 9:05
Period 1	9:10 - 9:45
Period 2	9:50 - 10:25
Break	10:25 - 10:40
Period 3	10:45 - 11:20
Period 4	11:25 - 12:00
Lunch	12:00 - 12:30
Period 5	12:35 - 1:10
Period 6	1:15 - 1:50
Period 7	1:55 - 2:30

**Collaboration Day - 7th & 8th Grades**

Wednesday

Advisory	8:30 - 9:05
Period 1	9:10 - 9:45
Period 2	9:50 - 10:25
Period 3	10:30 - 11:05
Break	11:05 - 11:20
Period 4	11:25 - 12:00
Period 5	12:05 - 12:40
Lunch	12:40 - 1:10
Period 6	1:15 - 1:50
Period 7	1:55 - 2:30