A bimonthly report on efforts to save music education programs

Revisiting block scheduling

For several years now, school districts have been examining—and in some cases, implementing—various forms of block scheduling. And while block scheduling generally means restructuring the typical school day from six or seven shorter classes to fewer, longer classes, it has many variations. In any case, just hearing the words 'block scheduling' is enough to make many school music dealers cringe. But as John Benham, founder of Music in World Cultures, points out, two recent articles on this very subject may make educators and administrators think twice before implementing such a system.

One article, published in a West Virginia newspaper last August, noted that the 10 highest ACT scores in the United States were from Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Minnesota, Iowa, Vermont, New York, and Maine. As it turns out, of the 30 states that administer ACT tests, those with the highest scores were the ones that used the *least* amount of block scheduling.

(Minnesota is the only exception; it has a high percentage of schools with block scheduling. However, as Benham notes, the University of Minnesota conducted a study and found that the move to block scheduling had no identifiable effect on improving test scores.) Conversely, the five states with the lowest ACT scores were the ones that had the *most* students on block schedules.

"What's important about this is it really suggests that we revisit the whole issue of block scheduling—not just because of its impact on music programs, but because of its impact on the overall educational outcomes of the students," explains Benham. After all, these results seem to indicate that students who attend block-schedule schools do not score as well on ACT tests as those who attend high schools with traditional schedules.

Further information can be gleaned from a February 1998 article by the College Board, which runs the ACT test and the Advanced Placement (AP) program for high school students who want to get credit for college courses. While the College Board clearly states that it "makes no recommendation on block scheduling itself," it also admits that there "is a need for controlled, longitudinal studies of the impact of block scheduling upon learning." Why? Because, as Benham points out, "they're also finding that those students who complete the AP testing programs on the year-long basis rather than the block basis are significantly outperforming those other students." But without further studies, the exact reasons for these differences in student performances cannot be known.

Even so, one thing is for certain: block scheduling has *not* been the

solution to all sorts of problems. "This re-emphasizes the fact that a lot of schools implement reform for reasons other than the legitimate outcome on the students," explains Benham. "There's a tendency for adults to be agencies of change simply because that's one of the ways we build resumes. So I caution people that—if their district is looking at block scheduling or already has it—they really need to examine closely whether or not it is being implemented for legitimate, student-centered reasons or whether it's being done for something or someone else. I have not yet found a district in which I've worked on the block scheduling issue over the last five or six years in which I could not specifically identify one administrator who was going for some type of a promotion who was really pushing for [block scheduling]."

While many in the educational community may find such a statement disturbing, Benham says it's the unfortunate truth. As a result, dealers need to stay informed and up-to-date on the effects of block scheduling on students and stay involved with their local schools and districts. Because at the end of the day, there's a lot more at stake than what may meet the eye.

If you have any questions about the information in this article or need help saving or restoring a music program, contact John Benham at (612) 446-4246.