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7 Metro high schools to try longer class schedules

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Most Metro high school students will see longer classes next year but take them in a different sequence.

It's called the block format, and it allows students to earn 32 course credits instead of the 24 offered in a traditional six-period day. Supporters say it also encourages students to take more classes in subjects that interest them.

Many schools, including some in Metro, tried and abandoned the block-scheduling format because it had little impact on test scores. Now officials say other benefits, such as increasing the graduation rate by allowing students to take more classes they're interested in, make block scheduling worth a second try.

Education experts say the length and frequency of a class don't matter so much as what goes on inside the classroom before the bell rings.

"It's not just scheduling and the block," said Mark Berends, associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University. "It's what goes on in the time the people have together."

Several schools in Middle Tennessee offer the block schedule, including Sumner County, which adopted the format in 1996. Seven Metro high schools confirmed they'll offer some form of block scheduling next year, and several are already using the format. Metro schools spokeswoman Noelle Mashburn said high schools spent this week with a private consultant planning schedules for next year.

Under one version of the block schedule, called four-by-four, students take four classes the first semester and four different classes the second. The other version, called an A-B schedule, has them taking four classes one day and four different ones the next for the whole year. Under both, they spend 90 minutes in each class.

Freshman Trey Stinson and Clara Marsden left Overton High School on Thursday hand in hand, but they're split about block scheduling.

Stinson likes the idea, but Marsden can't imagine sitting in class for that long.

"Half the students in class don't pay attention anyway," said Marsden.

A-B format criticized

Teachers nationwide have complained about the A-B format because it adds to their workload by increasing the number of different classes they teach from a possible six to a possible eight. Metro teachers on this schedule could end up teaching at least 180 students, said Erick Huth, president of the Metro Nashville Education Association.

No matter the recipe, teachers, principals and state officials agree the key is teacher preparation and professional development.

Since teachers are used to teaching 60-minute periods, they have to learn new techniques for filling 90 minutes.

"If teachers aren't taught how to teach differently, you're going to have teachers — and there's evidence of this — teaching about the same 45 to 50 minutes and then won't know what to do the rest of the time," Huth said. "It does take a different approach to planning."

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Block schedules

Seven Metro Nashville public high schools have confirmed they will use block schedules next year:

Confirmed:

Antioch High

Glenduff High*

Hunters Lane*

Maplewood High

Overton High

Stratford High*

Whites Creek

*Currently offering some form of block scheduling.

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