

OHS switching to four-period schedule

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Principal says 90-minute classes will give students, staff opportunity to delve more deeply into subjects

When Jeff Sauer took over as principal of Ozaukee High School, one of the first tasks he was assigned was to take a critical look at the trimester schedule used at the school.

After extensive research and detailed surveying of students, parents and staff, Sauer recommended Monday that the high school switch to a block schedule.

Swayed by his findings and community input, the Northern Ozaukee School Board unanimously voted to adopt the new schedule starting next school year.

The district adopted trimester scheduling six years ago, contending it would expose students to more class options.

Sauer said the block schedule, which has students attend four 90-minute class sessions each day will better serve students.

The schedule would double the length of most high-school classes.

“My No. 1 reason for recommending the block schedule is the need to change our culture. We need to increase the rigor and the depth of content, and the 90-minute classes allow us to accomplish that,” he said.

Sauer said 93 other high schools in the state use some version of the block schedule, while only Ozaukee High uses a trimester calendar.

Students traveled to Howards Grove High School to see a block schedule system in action, and teachers also visited Howards Grove and Waupun.

“In every case, they said they liked the relaxed feeling in the buildings,” Sauer said.

He attributed that to the less disruptive atmosphere to having fewer classes.

“There is not as much interruption of learning caused by having to take attendance and deal with tardy students so often,” Sauer said.

“There are no bells, and there is not the mad crush of students trying to get out the door and to their lockers between classes. The students can actually saunter through the hallways.”

He said research shows longer class periods allow teachers to tackle topics in greater depth, and permits students to spend more face-to-face time with their teachers.

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“This allows students to get more excited about learning,” Sauer said.

From a practical standpoint, he said the block schedule will make it easier to share staff between the high school and middle school.

Students will need to learn to adjust to not having study halls, and absences will be even more disruptive because classes are twice as long.

Sauer said the switch to longer class periods will pose special challenges to teachers, too.

“The first year will be the biggest challenge. Everyone will be, in essence, a first-year teacher,” Sauer said.

“I recommend giving the four-by-four block schedule a shot for three or four years. Let’s see where it takes us. I think it will work well.”

Acting Supt. Joe Gassert said research supports the effectiveness of the block schedule.

“It is a proven structure that works. The compelling argument is the schedule’s ability to build the skills Jeff is talking about — critical thinking, analytical skills and problem solving,” Gassert said.

Sauer nudged the board into acting on his recommendation, rather than taking time to study the option further.

“If you postpone a vote until next month, it would be too late to implement next year. There are a lot of things we need to get working on,” he said.

Sauer said the schedule switch should not cost the district any more than the current system.