Written by Mark Jaeger
Wednesday, 03 February 2010 19:28

Students, teachers see advantages to fewer classes, longer periods

Northern Ozaukee School District officials took a chance on upsetting the status quo four years ago when they converted the high school calendar from semesters to trimesters.

Even today, the local high school is one of only two schools in the state following a trimester schedule.

Recently, students, parents and staff members were surveyed about their reactions to the change, and they generally in favored keeping the current system.

The district began studying the switch to the “block schedule” after favorable research was released in 2003. It wasn’t until the 2005-06 school year that the calendar was put into place by the district.

Under the current schedule, the academic calendar at the high school is divided into three 12-week sections. Students have five class sessions each day, compared to seven class sessions with the old semester plan.

High School Principal Kevin Parker told the School Board that many of the assumptions that led to the switch have held true.

The five 67-minute classes give teachers extended time with students. The semester schedule offered seven class periods.

The transition was not always easy, with the need to adjust course material and the credits needed for graduation.

Under the semester schedule, students had to earn 24 credits to get a diploma. That threshold was gradually increased to 27 credits following the trimester schedule.

“In talking with students and (guidance counselor) Andy Gremminger, it is clear that year after year it has gotten better,” Parker said.

The longer periods have proven beneficial to classes that require significant set-up time, like science labs.

Students also find the trimester approach causes less stress and less homework,

because they only have to prepare for five classes a day.

Other positive comments about the schedule: the longer class periods allow for more varied activities; they make it is easier to build relationships between teachers and students; there are fewer behavioral problems, especially in hallways between classes, because there aren't as many changeovers.

Because the trimester calendar is seldom seen in Wisconsin high schools, Gremminger said, the schedule poses particular problems in dealing with students tranferring from outside the district.

"We struggle when dealing with students coming into our high school, or leaving our district to go to another school," Gremminger said. "It is very difficult to make them fit, credit-wise."

He said another fluke of the trimester approach is that students occasionally encounter gaps in courses. They may take a class during the first trimester but can't fit the second unit of that course into their schedule until the third trimester.

"The 12-week gap is especially a problem for courses like foreign language," Gremminger said.

The trimester calendar also poses scheduling difficulties for educators who teach in the middle school and high school, since Ozaukee Middle School follows academic quarters.

Similarly, trimesters make it difficult to coordinate with virtual offerings, conduct "course share" with other districts or place students into advance programs at local universities.

An administrative summary of the survey responses was prepared, noting the mixed reviews.

"Block scheduling has had its drawbacks, as Ozaukee High School strives to properly utilize the block schedule concept in a small high school environment," the staff report said.

Still, Parker said, the overwhelming reaction to the trimester schedule remains positive.

“You have to remember we are at the point where for all of our current students, the trimester schedule is the only thing they’ve known,” he said.

“The decision to switch to the trimester schedule was made before Andy and I were here, but we feel it is working very well,” Parker said.

The review is not a precursor to reverting to the semester schedule, he said.

“This was presented more as an update to the board. There has been an emphasis on continual improvement, especially since Dr. Harbron came on board,” Parker said.

“The board has committed to revisiting decisions, to make sure the rationale is still the best approach we can have.”