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## New Bell and Block Schedule receives passing grade, so far

By John T. Miller



By all accounts, most stakeholders in the Acalanes Union High School District are finding the new bell and block schedule is accomplishing its purpose of more efficient use of academic time, reduction of stress and anxiety, and more time for collaboration between teachers and students. While the interviews for this article consisted of only a handful of teachers and a few administrators, the mood at the four high schools indicate that the new academic year is running smoothly.

In fact, at the Back-to-School dance held earlier this month at Acalanes, students were asked what they liked about school. Their three top answers were: seeing their friends; they loved their teachers; and they're really liking the block schedule.

Students make use of the new Academy period Sept. 29 at Acalanes High School to learn about the various clubs on campus. Photo John T. Miller

Julie Parks, in her fourth year as principal of Miramonte High School, stated that the preliminary feedback from students is that they are less stressed and have less homework. "While we are planning a more in-depth

survey at the end of the quarter, we are excited that we seem to be making progress in these areas."

One of the biggest changes is the Academy period. The program is being implemented at all four high schools in the district during the second block on Wednesdays and Fridays. The students have a 55-minute session for test review sessions, quiet study time, make-up test time, skill building and one-on-one or small group sessions with their teachers. In addition, a student can choose from many other academic activities on any given day.

"There are a lot of students making good use of the Academy period," says Ryan Boyd, a social studies teacher in his 17th year at Campolindo High School. "Of course, some aren't as conscientious and don't have a great attitude about it."

On the day this reporter observed Academy at Miramonte, the library was filled with students, most of them on their computers. Many were busy with schoolwork, but it was impossible to tell if everyone had academic tasks going on.

The consensus of some of the teachers interviewed was that "vegging out" could be an appropriate choice, considering the stress these students are under, while others may view it as a waste of time.

Steve Poling, a veteran of 30 years - 17 of them teaching English at Miramonte - says that the Academy period gives students the chance to make intelligent choices, which they can then learn from.

Accountability for the Academy period has taken some adjustments. Some schools rely on rosters for sign-in, while others use student IDs to take roll.

Natalie Moore, an English and social development teacher at Acalanes High School, is pleased with the new block schedule, and especially with the Academy period. "I can meet with students to go over a paper, make up a test, or give them tutoring help. We used to have to do this at lunch or after school. Now we can both eat our lunches without stress."

Poling agrees: "The 90-minute blocks grant teachers and students the opportunity to delve deeper into curriculum with essential questions and discussions, application of curricular concepts, and personal reflection on what and how students are learning. Though I've taught for a long time, I feel energized by the new schedule and I sense the students do too."

One science teacher said about teaching the new science curriculum Living Earth, "There's no way I could do these labs without the block schedule."

Speaking on behalf of what he's heard from his colleagues at Campolindo, Boyd feels that the overall consensus has been positive. "There are definitely challenges in reshaping courses, pacing of curriculum, and student absences." He points out that when a student misses a block day, it is roughly equivalent to two instructional days.

Most of the teachers agree that the block schedule allows them to go deeper into their subject with more efficient use of time. Moore commented, "It's like my students can fully arrive and be here in my classroom." Another teacher said, "The longer periods shut out a lot of noise. It's like I can finish a thought before a bell rings."

One other benefit is the additional hour for teacher collaboration two mornings a week.

Some drawbacks were also mentioned, though. Most teachers are finding that going more into depth on their subject is causing them to get behind in the curriculum. Many also complain that lunch does not begin until almost 1 p.m. on all five days, causing some dizziness and the need for snack time. Another scheduling problem for some families is the late start three days a week.

Parks credits the teachers as having worked hard to adapt to the timing of the block schedule. "This change is really hard and the biggest complaint may be that it is tiring," she said. "The benefits have been huge, but that is a result of the tremendous work the teachers and staff have put in."

Reach the reporter at: [john@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:john@lamorindaweekly.com)

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