

Semestering

The Ontario debate that never happened

By Dennis Raphael

Last Spring, I received a number of phone calls from the parents of high school students in the United States concerned about “Block Scheduling”. “What *is* block scheduling?” I asked. “Why was I being called? Why was I suddenly being contacted *now*?” The answers to these questions reminded me of how a very questionable educational innovation had been imposed on Ontario a few years back without any debate. An innovation which, even now, is probably still adversely affecting the achievement of Ontario students.

What is block scheduling? Dubbed “semestering” in Canada, it is used in high schools which condense formerly year-long courses into five months. Thus, courses like grade 11 mathematics, instead of being offered from September through June once a day for 50 minutes, would be offered as a five-month course involving 90-minute periods. Until 1980, all Ontario secondary schools were using the traditional timetable. By 1990, however, virtually all schools were operating on a semestered timetable.

In the US, the issue is a lively one these days. Many school administrators have been giving parents a hard sell as to the benefits of block scheduling and have begun a whole-sale conversion of high schools. Why is semestering so attractive to administrators? They find that semestered courses are easier to timetable, and some students are able to graduate more quickly. Students also can repeat courses to attain the higher grades needed for successful university application. More recently in the US, semestering has come to be seen as a panacea for all the problems with the American education system.

Why call me? In 1982, I was the manager of Ontario’s involvement in the Second International Mathematics Study. This was an extensive investigation into student achievement and, in Ontario; it involved students in 85 secondary schools. The students were given an extensive battery of achievement tests; teachers were asked about teaching practices; and principals provided information about their schools. During the course of the study, I was approached by a number of mathematics educators who were concerned that student achievement in semestered schools would be lower than that of students enrolled in

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traditional schools. These educators spoke of the difficulty of assimilating complex mathematical knowledge in too short a period of time, of lapses in learning between courses, and of difficulties in maintaining student attention over the longer periods associated with semestered classes.

Our analyses indicated that Ontario students in semestered schools had indeed learned less mathematics than students in traditional schools – and these differences were not trivial! The results were published in the *Canadian Journal of Education* but, as is often the case with research findings in Ontario, they were ignored by officials. Semestering proceeded non-stop. Over the past 10 years, I have occasionally received calls from Ontario parents fighting rear-guard actions to maintain the non-semestered status of their local school.

Why was I now receiving a spate of calls? It turned out that an irate parent in Appleton, Wisconsin had set up a “Case against Block Scheduling” homepage on the Internet. Jeff Lindsay and his wife had compiled all of the research related to semestering in order to assist parents in resisting block scheduling in the United States. (His www site is: www.athenet.net/~jlindsay/Block.shtml.)

My study was one of the few that had actual data related to achievement under different scheduling schemes. The other data-based study had been done by David J. Bateson of the University of British Columbia who compared tenth-grade students in BC taking science courses in year-long blocks with those who took them in semester-long blocks. He found that the students in the year-long science courses significantly outperformed those taking science in both the first and the second semesters.

A number of Internet sites are now debating the block scheduling issue in the United States. I leave the last word to Jeff Lindsay.

“In both British Columbia and Ontario, serious peer-reviewed scientific studies involving many thousands of students across many schools demonstrate that academic performance suffers on the Block. If administrators or board members don’t even care about these findings or refuse to at least consider them carefully before making a decision to adopt Block Scheduling, then what are we to assume about their competence, integrity or agenda? To be fair, though, most are never made aware of the research results. On the other hand, I know of multiple cases where committees and administrators claimed to have

been researching Block Scheduling in detail for several years, only to be completely surprised when a parent or teacher asked about the Canadian studies. ‘What Canadian studies?’ ‘What negative effects?’”

In Ontario, the debate over semestering never occurred. Is it too late now?

(Dr. Raphael is a professor of community health at the University of Toronto.)