

# Research Brief

## Trimester Schedule

- Questions:**
- What is a trimester schedule?
  - What are the advantages and disadvantages of trimester schedules?
  - How may a trimester schedule be used to support improved student learning?
  - What are some of the implementation considerations?

### In a Nutshell

Many schools have implemented a trimester schedule as a way to provide additional flexibility in their schedule. Trimester schedules divide the school year into three parts with students taking fewer classes each trimester than in a traditional semester schedule. Trimester schedules reduce the number of courses an individual student has at any time. They often provide an opportunity for students to take additional classes thus enriching their educational experience. They allow for earlier intervention and credit recovery for students needing additional support. In a trimester model individual classes are usually longer providing greater opportunity for teachers to use engaging instructional practices. While each class may meet for fewer weeks, each class period is generally longer, and instructional minutes in individual classes are not reduced.

**Summary of Findings:** Recently many high schools have looked at ways to provide teachers with longer instructional blocks and at the same time provide more course options for students. One response is creation of a trimester schedule, a schedule that divides the school year into three trimesters rather than two semesters. Adoption of a trimester model is most often driven by four issues: the desire to provide long blocks of instructional time, interest in improving school climate by reducing the number of classes any student or teacher has on a given day, a desire to improve instructional quality, and a way to provide earlier intervention for students who are less successful in school.

Adoption of a trimester system is supported by several of the recommendations in *Breaking Ranks*: that curriculum offer essential knowledge that makes connections to real life; that instructional strategies actively engage students in their learning; that caring relationships between students and adults characterize the school; and that the use of time and organization be utilized to best meet the student needs.

**Example of a Trimester Schedule:**

<i>Hr.</i>	<i>Fall</i>	<i>Winter</i>	<i>Spring</i>
1	English 9A	Art	US History B
2	Band A	Band B	Band C
3	Algebra 1A	Algebra 1B	English 9B
4	Phys Ed.	Spanish 1A	Spanish 1B
5	Biology A	US History A	Biology B

A trimester schedule generally consists of three 12-week trimesters. A student generally takes 5 classes each trimester. Such a schedule is sometimes referred to as a 3X5 schedule. Most schools schedule two official grading periods each trimester, at 6 and 12 weeks. Teachers most often teach 4 classes each trimester and instructional periods are often 70-75 minutes in length. Most yearlong courses in a traditional schedule meet for two trimesters. Because each individual class period is longer, the number of instructional minutes remains the same. Some classes might meet all three trimesters.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

As with any scheduling model there are both advantages and disadvantages. Some of the recognized advantages are:

1. Students may take more courses in a year than in other scheduling models.
2. Students can take a greater variety of classes than they might have ordinarily taken.
3. There are fewer courses per term for both students and teachers.
4. Students are able to devote more time to each individual subject allowing for more in-depth study and higher quality work.
5. Students may be more willing to take a challenging 12-week course than they are in a semester schedule.
6. If a student fails a class, it is possible to provide credit recovery options more quickly thus reducing the likelihood of not graduating on time.
7. Because students may take more courses it provides an opportunity to increase graduation requirements.
8. Students change class less often, which makes for fewer potential disruptions and discipline problems that often arise when students move around the school.
9. Teachers may have fewer preparations each trimester.
10. Teachers may have fewer additional assigned duties.
11. With longer class periods, teachers gain additional planning time.
12. May provide an opportunity to create new courses.
13. Longer class periods provide an opportunity for use of a greater variety of instructional strategies.
14. Generally the first trimester ends prior to winter break assuring that no finals will be given following a major break.

There are also identified disadvantages. Among them are:

1. The challenge of changing from the current system---resistance to change.
2. Addressing teacher concern about the retention of knowledge when a student may not have a course in a content area for more than one trimester.
3. Teachers may have more preparations each academic year.
4. Teaching strategies may not change to fit the longer instructional period.
5. There may be challenges in deciding which courses are offered which trimester.

### **Trimester Schedules and Student Learning**

As noted earlier the trimester schedule provides some instructional advantages because of its design.

- Because individual classes are longer (more minutes) it provides time for teachers to use a greater variety of strategies to promote student engagement.
- Teachers have fewer classes each day and therefore have fewer papers to grade.
- Students have fewer classes and have noted that it allows greater focus on completion of

assignments.

- A trimester schedule can provide flexibility in scheduling credit recovery options for students and/or providing double instructional periods for students needing additional instruction in a content area.

**Credit Recovery in the Trimester Schedule**

A trimester schedule makes it easier to provide credit recovery opportunities for students. In traditional schedules if a student needs to repeat a course they often must wait an entire year. In the trimester model a course may be repeated the following trimester.

**Example of a Trimester Schedule with Credit Recovery Opportunity:**

<i>Hr.</i>	<i>Fall</i>	<i>Winter</i>	<i>Spring</i>
1	English 9A	Art	World History A
2	US History A	US History B	Band
3	Algebra 1A	Algebra 1A (repeat)	English 9B
4	Phys Ed.	Spanish 1A	Spanish 1B
5	Biology A	Biology B	Phys Ed.

Another credit recovery option is to provide additional support during the day. Options include scheduling a class for more than one class period, or building in a seminar or support class where students can work on assignments or get additional support.

<i>Hr.</i>	<i>Fall</i>	<i>Winter</i>	<i>Spring</i>
1	English 9A	Art	US History B
2	Phys Ed.	Band B	Seminar/Support
3	Algebra 1A	Algebra 1A (repeat)	English 9B
4	Seminar/Support	US History A	Spanish 1B
5	Biology A	Seminar/Support	Biology B

**Implementation Issues**

Principals have identified a number of implementation issues.

1. It is important to involve teachers and other stakeholders in the planning and implementation of a trimester schedule. Because a trimester schedule is quite different than a traditional schedule it is important to work collaboratively to make decisions about the specific scheduling of courses.
2. All courses may not be the same length. Some courses may need to meet for more than one trimester. Decisions about which courses meet for two or three trimesters need to be made collaboratively and with explicit rationale. Most often performing music and advanced placement classes meet for more than one trimester.
3. Important decisions need to be made about whether a student can take a course in a content area all three trimesters. For example, might a student take Spanish 1 for two trimesters and then begin Spanish 2 the third? Or might a student take three trimesters of art courses?
4. School counselors need to be very involved in planning a trimester schedule and work closely with students and their families to develop a four-year Program of Study that assures successful completion of all graduation requirements.
5. Consideration must also be given to how students who move into the school from a



- school on a traditional schedule transition into the trimester model.
6. Finally, schools should not rush into making the change. They should utilize a comprehensive planning approach and implement a public relations initiative that assures that every student and their family is familiar with the change and its impact on the student's program.

### **Online Resources:**

#### **Comprehensive Trimester Schedule Resource**

This is a comprehensive site providing description of the trimester scheduling model. It includes a set of frequently asked questions, summary of research, sample trimester schedule and links to 27 schools using a trimester schedule. [www.trimesters.org](http://www.trimesters.org)

#### **Frequently Asked Questions**

These sites provide a response to some of the most frequently asked questions about trimester schedules.

[http://www.baycitycentral.com/main/attachments/028\\_TRIMESTER\\_Q-A.pdf](http://www.baycitycentral.com/main/attachments/028_TRIMESTER_Q-A.pdf)

<http://www.trimesters.org/trimesterFAQ.pdf>

#### **Trimester Schedule at Madison High School in South Dakota**

This article provides an overview of a 72 minute 5 period schedule implemented at a South Dakota high school.

[http://www.madison.k12.sd.us/superintendent/trimester\\_schedule\\_at\\_madison\\_hi.htm](http://www.madison.k12.sd.us/superintendent/trimester_schedule_at_madison_hi.htm)

#### **Example of Trimester Schedule and State Graduation Requirements**

This report provides an example of a detailed trimester schedule for 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade aligned with one state's graduation requirements. It can serve as a model for your own school.

[www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/faq10\\_178602\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/faq10_178602_7.pdf)

#### **Trimester Schedule at Skyline High School**

This site provides lots of information about the new trimester schedule being implemented at Skyline High School in the fall of 2008. <http://www.a2skyline.org/skyline.home/trimesters>

#### **Southridge High School Trimester Schedule**

This site provides data about the effects of implementing a trimester schedule.

<http://www.trimesters.org/TrimesterResearch.pdf>

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