

Vianney finds success with its 4 by 4 block schedule

Submitted on August 11, 2010

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Vianney students Brian Bach and Paul Desamero worked on a chemistry experiment under the watchful eye of teacher Bill Redman, center. The 4 by 4 block schedule used by the private boys' high school provides fewer, longer classes, which work better for such subjects as science, administrators say.

The 4 by 4 block schedule at St. John Vianney High School is a big hit with students, teachers, administrators and parents. Incoming senior Matt Hitzemann calls it, "the greatest thing to ever happen."

The focused 4 by 4 block academic schedule consists of four, 85-minute classes, with four courses each semester. That means eight credit hours earned per year and 32 credits earned for graduation, providing students with more courses and credit hours than most schools. And, said Vianney principal Lawrence Keller, there's less stress for students, more time together for teachers and students and higher test scores.

Vianney started the schedule in 1997 as a two-year experiment to address struggling enrollment and to find new ways to meet student needs. School administrators learned about the 4 by 4 block from St. John the Baptist High School in South St. Louis and a Catholic high school in New Orleans. Today, Vianney is the only high school in the archdiocese to use the 4 by 4 block schedule, Keller said.

For students like Matt, the schedule helps to curb distractions.

"It really gives me a chance to zone in and focus on the four classes," Matt said. "Coming from grade school, where we had nine or 10 classes every day, with the topic switching and switching and your mind had to keep moving. I think this is better for students."

Since going to the 4 by 4 block, ACT scores have increased, more students are on the honor roll "and there are fewer failures," said assistant principal Dennis Matreci. "And we are accepting the same type of students, the same ability and test scores. We've watched the students as they go through the block and their test scores have gone up through the years."

The classes are segmented into three shifts of instruction that can include lecture, student presentations, discussions, projects and small group work. Because the teachers have fewer classes each semester, they have fewer students.

The principal explained that students do better when teachers know students' learning styles and know their students well. "The 4 by 4 block allows that. And it gives teachers more time."

The block schedule mimics a real college schedule, with fewer classes and more time on each, said incoming senior Ryan Snyder. "And it mimics a real work experience. We don't do seven tasks at the same time (at work)," which is what happens when students take a seven-course load in a traditional high school setting.

"This also helps the transition into high school," said Matreci, the assistant principal. "By taking a full year's course in one semester, there is less stress. Plus, should a student 'crash and burn,' he can take the same course in the second semester. And it allows creative scheduling if a student wants, say, to take two math courses and delay electives."

Less time is spent changing classes and on the start-up and shut-down times. That saved time has been converted into an additional "Encore" period, about 30 minutes long, that can be used for such things as extracurricular activities, teacher meetings, extended classes or prayer services.

Another benefit is the elimination of study hall according to Keller, the principal, who has been in education for 41 years.

"I've never seen the need for a study hall," he said, noting that few students utilize the time well and it is not the best use of parents' tuition money.

Vianney recently went through a re-accreditation process through AdvancEd (formerly known as the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement), which cited the success of the 4 by 4 block schedule.

Spanish teacher Barb Fullenkamp came to Vianney in the first year of the 4 by 4 block. She said the system works particularly well for language classes, which already have a lot of cooperative learning. "For boys this is especially good; 14-year-old boys do not have great organizational skills."

Fullenkamp echoed the idea that it was beneficial for students with learning issues because there were fewer classes to organize and more time for teachers to devote to each student.

Vianney parents Sue Dombeck and Jeanette Pence are happy with the block system.

"It worked out very well for both our sons," said Dombeck. "It helped our older son get ready for college. And our younger son was able to get more classes in and graduate from Vianney with 26 hours of college credit."

Pence said "The 4 by 4 allows the students to learn and grow. By having the block schedule they can adapt and grow academically and also cultivate who they are in those four years."

Incoming senior Nick Dondzila said, "Out of all the boys' schools, I thought Vianney pretty much handled the schedule the way I wanted. ... The 4 by 4 block definitely helped me."