

Proposal for an Improved School Schedule

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Introduction

A school's schedule is the structure within which all teaching and learning is done in the school, and greatly impacts the nature and quality of such learning. The schedule can facilitate or discourage important pedagogical choices such as cross-curricular links and project-based learning. Ultimately, the schedule is an important follow-through on a school's vision.

Along with much educational research, we believe that the standard, 7-period schedule used by our school no longer meets our students' educational needs. For example, the current schedule restricts classes to one hour, changing students' focus from Math to English to Spanish each hour with little time in between. It also does not allow for time in school in which students can prioritize their most important work. These factors can discourage deep engagement with material and make it difficult for teachers to implement project-based learning.

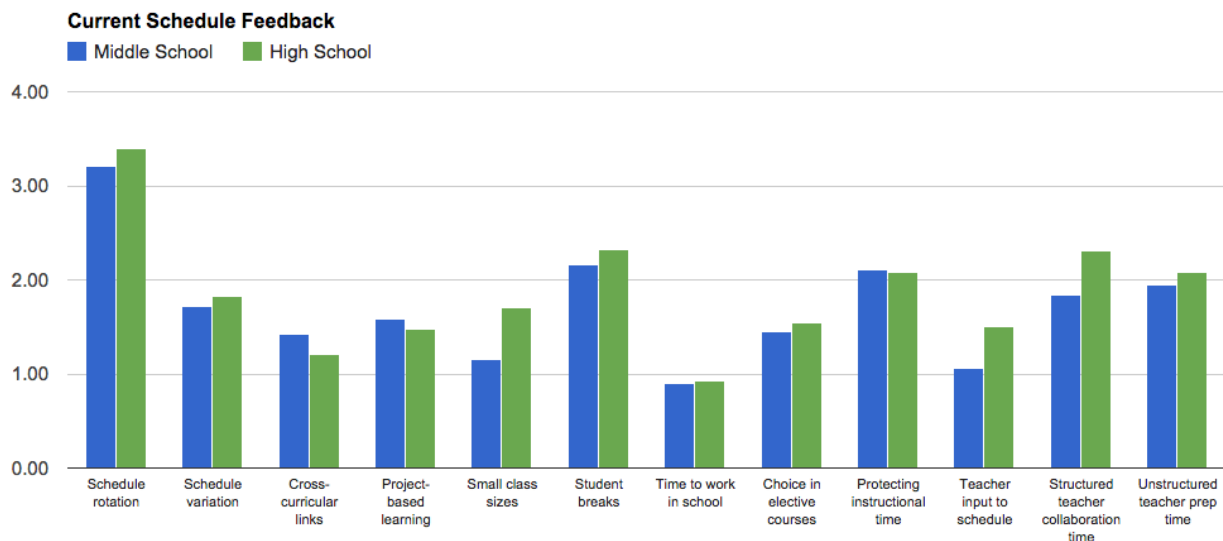
Finding the best possible schedule for ASFM will have ramifications for staffing, space use and curriculum. It should be integrated with the school's new vision and will take a significant time to plan for. While our research has revealed some promising alternative models, it hasn't been deep enough to support a broader change at this point. We are thus proposing this step forward with a schedule that can be put into place in 2015-16.

Meeting the needs of ASFM

Our work began by identifying the needs of our school's schedule through teacher surveys and discussion. We have visualized the responses to our survey in an interactive chart, which you can see at <http://mrmccarthy.ca/plc-data-visualization/>. We then used this data to determine the top 12 needs for a schedule at ASFM, which we are using as a benchmark for our current schedule and new proposals. These needs are:

- **Schedule rotation** to ensure the same class isn't always at the same time.
- **Schedule variation** to allocate instructional time and class size by class.
- Facilitating **cross-curricular links**.
- Facilitating **project-based learning**.
- **Small class sizes**, especially for project work.
- **Student breaks**, especially before lunch.
- Self-directed **time to work** in school but outside of class.
- Maximal **choice in elective courses**.
- **Protecting instructional time** by minimizing interruptions to the schedule.
- **Teacher input to schedule**.
- Structured **teacher collaboration time** with grade-level teams and departments.
- Unstructured **teacher prep time**.

We did a survey of ASFM teachers regarding how well the current schedule meets these needs. 42 teachers responded, and here are the results:



The scale for comments was from 0 (meets our needs "not at all") to 4 (meets our needs "very well"). Our current schedule receives an average score of 1.8 (a failing grade!) on all areas except schedule rotation. It scores especially low on giving students self-directed time to work in school.

We also asked teachers to comment on the current schedule. Here's a selection of comments:

- 58 minutes 4x a week is not enough time to truly get into the curriculum as much as possible.
- The rotation in periods so students are seeing different teachers at different times each day is great.
- We really do need a double block in our schedule somehow.
- The current schedule is comfortable for everyone, students and teachers are used to it.

Proposed Schedule

The schedule we are proposing is a modified-block schedule with two major changes: a double period and student access time. To implement these improvements without making unnecessary ripples, we have retained the rotating nature of the current schedule and kept school start and end times roughly equivalent.

The Middle School Bell Schedule

The middle school bell schedule retains two weekly periods of advisory time, and has consistent break and lunch times throughout the week.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:15 - 9:10	1	7	3	6	3
9:15 - 10:10	2	Access			4
15 min	Break				
10:25 - 11:20	3	1	4	7	5
11:25 - 12:20	4				6
30 min	Lunch				
12:50 - 1:15	Advisory	2 (12:50-2:45)	Advisory	Access	7 (12:50 - 1:45)
1:20 - 2:15	5		5	1	
2:20 - 3:15	6		2		

The High School Bell Schedule

The high school bell schedule has two basic patterns: Monday-Wednesday-Thursday and Tuesday-Friday. It replaces conference time with access time, described below.

<i>Mon/Wed/Thu</i>	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	<i>Tue/Fri</i>
8:15 - 9:10	1	7	3	6	3	8:15 - 9:10
9:15 - 10:10	2	Break			Break	15 min
10:15 - 10:40	Access	1	Access	Access	4	9:25 - 10:20
15 min	Break		Break	Break		
10:55 - 11:50	3	Lunch	4	7	5	10:25 - 11:20
11:55 - 12:50	4	2			Lunch	Lunch
30 min	Lunch		5	1		
1:20 - 2:15	5	Access as req'd (1:50 - 2:45)			5	2
2:20 - 3:15	6					

Double periods

The first major change we are proposing is a double period for each class. Both proposed middle and high school schedules include two 55-minute periods sandwiching a 115-minute period. This double period will help teachers plan varied activities that may take longer than an hour-long class and help students more deeply engage with class content; indeed a main purpose of the longer period is to facilitate the use of **project-based learning**. A few other potential uses of the double period across different disciplines include:

- science labs,
- full drama, choir and band rehearsals,
- longer PE activities (without changing time cutting a large portion of the class),
- AP practice tests, and
- more time for art projects.

Some teachers may have concerns about double periods, especially in languages and mathematics where teachers may be taking a more traditional instructional approach. We should rightly be leery of teachers lecturing for two hours in a row or students wasting an hour trying to

avoid doing class work; however, we feel that longer periods will be effective with good teachers implementing carefully-planned and engaging activities, and we are confident that with proper professional development, ASFM teachers will live up to the potential of a longer teaching period.

Access periods

The other major addition we are proposing is the creation of a student “access” period. The exact implementation of this should be defined in consultation with the full staff; however, the main idea is to provide students with *self-directed time to work in school* and access to their teachers and resources. The support services department would also use this time to access students.

One potential way the access period could work is similar to the conference model from high school. Students would be assigned to a supervising teacher and would report to his or her classroom for attendance. They would then stay there to work or, with the teacher’s permission, go elsewhere within the school to find another teacher, use the library or tech room, or work with a student group. If desired, these groups could be tracked so a resource teacher has access time with their resource students.

Access periods would also be a way to incorporate other activities into the school year without taking up instructional time. Such activities could include:

- assemblies and full-school activities,
- seminars on interesting topics such as technology,
- cross-curricular project meetings (student groups can meet with two or more teachers),
- club meetings,
- grade-level events currently covered in conference,
- pull-out sessions with resource teachers or counsellors, and
- make-up tests or extended time on tests.

It would be important to ensure that these do not proliferate such that the original intent of access time is overtaken by planned events. The emphasis should be on planning activities that are pedagogically beneficial rather than needing to fill a specified time. This will of course vary by grade and may vary by individual student, so we suggest that the detailed implementation of access time should be determined by grade level teams and the Support Services department.

The high school bell schedule also contains an “access as required” period. The intent of this period is to be able to dismiss some students early while keeping those who need remediation to work and access teachers. Students who have seen the proposal say an early dismissal would be an extra motivator to finish homework and keep marks up. To implement this, the school should create a consistent policy for which students receive early dismissal and help teachers enforce it.

Other Details

MS Advisory periods

In our staff survey, middle school teachers expressed a significant need to have an advisory group for peer mentorship and social development. Our proposed schedule includes two advisory periods of 25 minutes in duration, whereas the current schedule includes two 30 minute advisory periods. The reduced time for advisory in the proposed schedule is more than offset by the fact that a large amount of advisory time is used for school assemblies and events that can be scheduled for access time in the current model. Scheduling assemblies during the Tuesday access period instead of during advisory will result in both an increase to the total amount of hours in the advisory program as well as greater cohesiveness in the program itself. The program will be strengthened by a greater degree of focus in the advisory curriculum as well as more consistent meeting times with advisory groups.

MSHS overlap

The proposed schedule allows teachers to teach both middle school and high school; however options are limited and the master schedule will need to be designed starting with these teachers.

Teacher lunch and break supervision

We are also proposing a new model for supervision duty which makes more sense for the proposed schedule. In such a model, each teacher would be assigned to a weekly duty shift. In order to maintain the same size duty teams, teachers would be assigned one lunch duty and one break duty per week, for a total of 45 min. The assignment of duties would be done when the master schedule is made so duties are scheduled around free periods as much as possible. A consistent weekly duty schedule will make it easier for teachers to schedule lunch events such as club meetings and may increase teacher attendance during duty periods.

Teacher professional development

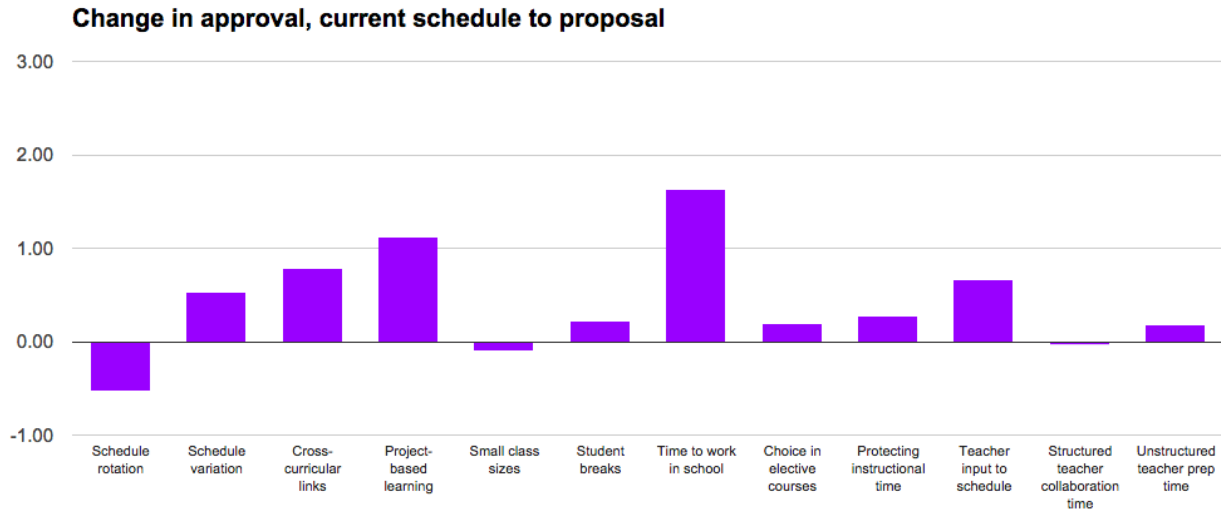
It was structurally necessary to move the current Wednesday professional development and early student dismissal to Tuesdays in the proposed schedule. This may have implications for after-school activities and SENDA bus schedules for middle school students.

Evaluation of schedule for our needs

As described above, we believe this schedule will create a positive impact on student time to work in school and facilitating project-based learning. Although the current schedule is not working for us in a few other areas, these other areas are much harder to improve within the

constraints of the 2015-16 schedule (staffing, facilities, etc.) and could be the focus of a more transformational change in our educational model.

To test whether ASFM teachers recognized these improvements, we also surveyed teachers in January on our proposal, and compared the feedback on the proposal and current schedules. Our proposal scored higher in general, as demonstrated by the following chart of difference in approval across the categories.



As you can see, the perspective of teachers matches our conclusions: there will be a significant improvement to self-directed time to work in school and facilitating project-based learning. These show an improvement of more than one point averaged across all teachers in our survey.

The only category which shows a significant decrease in teacher approval is *schedule rotation*, though this decrease is minimal compared to the increases in project-based learning and self-directed time. There was a slight but not significant difference in the feedback data between middle school and high school, which indicates that both middle school and high school teachers believe the schedule can work to fit the needs of their students.

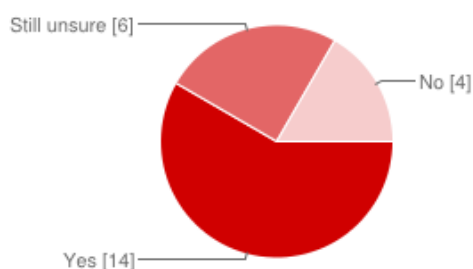
We can also learn from the school visits made by Stephen McCarthy and David Scott in Boulder, Colorado. They visited two schools: Boulder HS and Fairview HS, which offered different perspectives on similar modified block schedules. At Boulder High, the school had transitioned into a modified block schedule with little professional development and reported mixed satisfaction with the schedule. At Fairview, however, the school paid attention to helping teachers use the longer time effectively, and reported a higher level of teacher creativity in the longer periods and a reduction in student stress levels due to having fewer classes per day. While reducing student stress was not one of the core schedule needs identified by ASFM staff, it has come up many times in our discussions with faculty and would be a benefit to our community.

Teacher support for proposed schedule

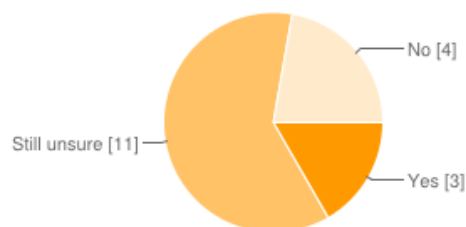
In addition to surveying how well the proposed modified-block schedule met the needs of our school, we asked teachers whether they would be willing to proceed with a pilot project this year. Responses to this question varied widely between middle school and high school, as represented below.

Question: Based on what you've seen, would you be in favour of adopting this schedule? (You can change your mind after the pilot.)

High School:



Middle School:



As you can see, most high school teachers are in favour of the proposal, whereas most middle school teachers need more information. We think this discrepancy is at least partially since the makeup of our PLC skews toward the high school and our one-on-one discussions with staff have been mainly at the high school level. We also think that the positive middle school feedback on how the proposal meets our needs means that those uncertain teachers can be brought around with first-hand experience. As one middle school teacher put it: *"I put down 'still unsure' because I'd want to see how it works before making a final decision."*

Teachers were also invited to comment on the proposed schedule. Here are some comments:

- *It's an ambitious change and would work well for some classes, such as science. However, there are still classes that end not having the greatest rotation schedule.*
- *I love the way that this looks. I do have a question though... How would this work for electives? All MS electives are currently on a day 1/day 2 schedule.*
- *I really liked it, we could do so many things with this!!*
- *I struggle thinking I would initially teach a student on Monday (period 6), but then not see them again until Thursday. That is a lot of time between class.*
- *It addresses several important issues: a balance between block scheduling and the traditional 55 minute class; gives longer time to work with partner teachers (much more can be accomplished in two hours of uninterrupted work time than halting momentum after 55 minutes); students have built-in time to seek out their teacher or work on assignments with school, helping to eliminate the hours of homework for many that stretch into the wee hours of the night.*

- *I like it. I think it will challenge teachers to effectively use a two-hour period. I like that everything starts and ends at 5 minute intervals. :-)*
- *I like that you have a single period to deliver the lesson and instructional time and then you have the double periods for students to practice what they learned.*
- *I really like it because it give more opportunities for project based learning to take place.*

On access time:

- *Access time would be a good time for students to choose what they would like to work on. In this case, teachers could "host" a variety of options like (free reading time, board/card games, arts-n-crafts, gaming, etc.) and students could sign up for what they would like on a 6-week basis. It could also be a wonderful time to create groups focused on areas of need for students.*
- *I love the idea. It can be a study hall, it can be a time for kids to be required to get help from resource teachers. Kids can make up labs and tests during the longer block when they've been absent. I think it definitely would need to be managed by teams in middle school.*
- *We lose 7 minutes of instructional time per week but if the access periods are guarded (ie: we limit the amount of activities that are currently being run in conference) this time will not be missed.*
- *It would need some structuring, such as designated days for assemblies, etc. But with some creative guidelines, it could be very helpful and a nice segue into university life that the vast majority of our students will face.*
- *I think access time will be more like waste of time. Glorified babysitting. Let them have more lunch time. The kids who want to work will work, the kids who want a break will get a break.*

On the double periods:

- *While I'm worried about seeing the kids only 3 times a week, I think the blocks could be beneficial. It would allow us to do a lab, reflect on it, and complete a brief lab report all in one class...and possibly one or two other things aside. It would be great on days we're working on projects.*
- *Double periods will allow for inquiry, exploration and problem-based learning in Math. Project-based learning may have a better chance at thriving. If Math and Science classes happen at the same double-block periods, interesting cross-curricular stuff may be possible.*
- *I think the double periods are a wonderful learning opportunity. I wish there were two per week instead of one.*
- *An hour and 50 minute block will not work for middle schoolers. They are too energetic--That is too long.*
- *As an AP teacher I am looking forward to having longer periods of time with my students.*
- *I think they're a solid option. It may not change a lot for teachers (teaching two lessons in one) but at the same time the flexibility is what is really appreciated.*
- *Amazing. I especially love the idea of being able to run some of my two-day activities in just one day!*

All responses can be read at the [summary of responses page](#).

Pilot Project

To determine if our revamped schedule really does work for the school, we would like to pilot it for a week before the end of the school year. Since the proposal maintains the current 7-period model, the pilot could be achieved with minimal fuss.

Pilot Week Options

March 23 - 27: The week before Semana Santa is largely free of school-wide events and would provide us a month to prepare for the pilot. AP teachers would have a longer block to run a review or practice test. Grade 6 Greek Fest on Friday March 27 would not be greatly affected by a schedule change; however, this week is usually a heavy test week which may be affected.

April 20 - 24: This week is nicely situated between Semana Santa at the start of April and AP exams at the start of May. Feedback from AP teachers ([view full AP Survey results](#)) suggests that they would be happy with a pilot this close to AP exams as long as it is decided on and announced well in advance. This week is the start of MAP testing in Grade 6 - 9 which may be affected by a schedule change.

Proposed Pilot Schedule

February

- Feb 23: SLC-Administration meeting
- Administration approval of the pilot project
- Announcement of pilot week to staff

March

- Team level and department discussions on schedule details
- Student introduction to new schedule
- Fine-tuning of definition of access period
- Full-staff meeting to get everyone on same page and answer outstanding questions

Pilot week: late March or mid-April

April

- Follow-up surveys of teachers and students
- Administration decision on new schedule

May

- Start of professional development around effective use of double period

Conclusion

Our proposed schedule, while not a transformational change, improves on our current schedule in two main ways: by giving students more time to work in school through access periods and by facilitating project-based learning through double periods. It may also help to change the atmosphere of the school and reduce student stress. It takes into account our school culture and present level of achievement, retaining the best of what we already have.

As we can see from the teacher comments, this change—like any change—will be controversial. We will need to better define and explain what access time is and prepare teachers for the double period. However, the overall response to our proposal has been positive and the data on teachers' perceptions on the schedule meeting our needs is convincing. As long as changes are clearly communicated well in advance, discussion is encouraged among faculty, and proper professional development is facilitated, it will be feasible to implement in 2015-16 with a pilot this year.

Since the January exploratory trip to Wisconsin and Colorado, there have been excellent debates about the feasibility, benefits and practical aspects of more transformational schedule change. In these discussions, some have suggested that we should focus on a more comprehensive plan and forgo an incremental change such as proposed in this document. This is a valid concern; however, at this point the Scheduling PLC does not have enough confidence in any of the more radical models to recommend them to the administration.

We also believe that any such transformational change should integrate with the soon-to-be-published ASFM strategic vision and tie into changes in curriculum, facilities and staffing. This means that it is a long-term process that must start with the school's leadership, so we encourage the administration to develop a comprehensive plan for the school. Until then, we recommend that ASFM adopt our modified block proposal to improve our MSHS schedule starting next year.