

School Board Work Session Summary High School Schedule

November 16, 2010

In February 2010, the School Board voted for high school students to have the opportunity to take eight courses each year, while teachers at the high schools would begin teaching six periods out of eight. This decision was the result of budget cutting measures and caused a shortened timeline for adopting this budget measure that was projected for the 2011-12 school year.

During the remainder of the spring and into the summer, while the high schools worked to both implement a new student information system and develop high school schedules, central office staff worked with school staff as a design team and developed briefs to update stakeholders on the planning and implementation of an "8-period" hybrid schedule: a combination of semester (4x4) classes and year-long (A/B) classes. Meetings were held with students, staff, and parents at each high school. A research brief completed by DART staff summarized the practice of using "4 x 4" scheduling, reporting achievement neutral results and a paucity of empirical studies for school schedules.

Despite communication efforts at the central office and school level, many high school teachers, and a group of parents became increasingly dissatisfied with the adoption of the new schedule. These parents, a group entitled Citizens of Albemarle Supporting Education (CASE) wrote a summary of selected studies related to "semesterization" of school schedules and requested a meeting / work session with the Board to share this report. The meeting was set for November 16, 2010 in the Albemarle High School Media Center.

Attendees included the School Board, some school staff, and a parent from parent council. In addition, members of CASE, Paul Halliday and Fred Smyth addressed the panel along with Robert Tai. Central office staff also attended. In the general gathering, approximately 70 parents, students, and school staff were in attendance. The meeting began with a brief overview from Matt Haas to give a background on the purpose for changing school schedules and initial survey results from stakeholders. Based on the surveys, students across the high schools were generally split close to 60% in favor of the schedule change and the remainder against it, while parents and teachers responding to the survey were primarily against it. The School Board and central office leadership had given staff the flexibility to offer courses in the format that works at their schools. Further, across the County, 40% of courses were year-long and 60% were semester courses this year. It is expected that schools will continue to adjust their percentages to find a balance that works for students and staff.

Robert Tai, Paul Halliday, and Fred Smyth, all from UVA, took turns presenting information they had gathered in regard to school schedules and longitudinal student achievement on international assessments. Based on their reports, they concluded that block scheduling, especially that which leads to "semesterization" of courses, has a long term negative impact on student achievement.

After these presentations, School Board members questioned both the presenters from CASE and central office staff about school schedules. To summarize, the key issue with implementing a school schedule so that it results in improved teaching and learning is the amount of buy-in and staff development afforded teachers. Matt Haas presented a review of the CASE bibliography to the Board. A brief discussion of research ensued, and the Board moved on to listen to parents, staff, and students, who volunteered to address them and the group gathered with their opinions regarding the schedule change.

The meeting rounded out with a Board discussion about the schedule change and implications for future decisions about school schedules with the impending budget decisions.