

# BUILDING BLOCKS

**Making  
Music  
Fit  
Into  
Block  
Schedules**

High school music educators across the United States are tuning up to save their programs in the face of a powerful educational trend that cuts the number of courses students can choose each semester.

Block scheduling, touted by some academics as America's response to more intense schooling in Europe and Asia, divides the school day into fewer, longer periods.

Under the traditional schedule of six to eight class periods per day, students typically take core English, history, math and science courses. With the class hours left over, they choose elective courses such as band, chorus, art, and foreign language.

With a block schedule, however, the class day is usually divided into four longer class periods. That may mean, overall, students have fewer choices and less flexible schedules.

The trend is not without its critics. Still, many educators tout the model as providing the sort of "back-to-basics" education essential in our competitive economy.

The implications for high school music programs are significant. In some small schools, scheduling conflicts are threatening to wipe out music programs entirely. In large schools that offer many courses, music students tend to thrive in environments which offer longer rehearsal time and more credit.

## A Tale of Two Schools

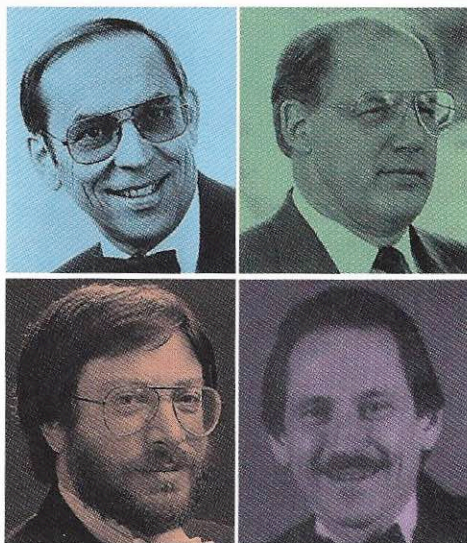
At Montezuma Cortez High School, in a small town in Southwestern Colorado, veteran band director Gary Hall has seen his music program flounder since block scheduling was implemented three years ago.

"Four years ago, we had a vibrant band program of 125 students," says Hall. "We had a concert band, a marching band, two full jazz bands and we offered a variety of music courses, including music theory and three sections of guitar and piano." Today, according to Hall, the Montezuma Cortez school band has only 104 members in the first semester and fewer than 60 participants in the second. Moreover, the school now offers only two music courses, a combined marching band/concert band period and a course in music theory. Says Hall: "We've had to cancel our jazz band entirely."

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■ **Dr. Edward L. Lisk** is a well-known seminar leader and author on rehearsal technique. Former director of bands for highly acclaimed Oswego High School, Oswego, New York. He is past president of National Band Association.

■ **Dr. John L. Benham** is a national consultant, speaker and author and the president of Music in World Cultures, a program to advance music literacy in Third World countries. Dr. Benham has helped music teachers and parent groups throughout the United States and Canada save and restore school music programs in the face of budget reductions.

■ **Dr. William A. Gora** is the director of bands at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. Dr. Gora writes extensively, and conducts seminars on school reform issues.

■ **R. Dean Christopher, B.M.**, Western Michigan University. Graduate work, Western Michigan and Wayne State. Adjudicator, every Michigan Competing Bands State Final since 1978 (except 1992); every Michigan Color Guard Circuit Final since 1983; he is also band director at West Ottawa High School, Holland, Michigan and plays trumpet professionally.

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In addition, he has had a difficult time convincing talented junior and senior musicians to stick with the program because of the seemingly insurmountable scheduling conflicts. Hall has also found that the erratic enrollment in the second semester has caused a drop in the quality of music his band can play, and that the layoff hurts re-enrollment for the next fall. "My top trumpet player dropped out of the band second semester of last year," says Hall. "He promised he'd be back, but he's not." In addition, Hall has found that younger students are having trouble concentrating in the long 90-minute teaching blocks.

In marked contrast to Hall's experience, Andy Nelson, associate band director of Minneapolis' Blaine High School, has seen his band program swell from 160 members to 260 out of an enrollment of 2,800, since his school corporation instituted block scheduling three years ago.

"We have not lost any kids because of the four-period day," Nelson says. "The administration sat down with us to create a schedule which works well for everybody."

"In effect," continues Nelson, "the students are getting eight choices for classes per year, and two of these choices are going to be band." Nelson believes he has found a solution to the problem of attrition. He simply does not allow students who have dropped out after a semester to return to the band.

Nelson explains further that their program was designed to offer a modified block schedule, whereby freshmen and sophomores can take music plus another course in the same block on alternate days. Nelson has found that this schedule makes music courses more accessible to younger students. The top-level concert band at Blaine enjoys 85-minute rehearsals every day. The student performers receive honors credit. Nelson conducts early morning practices for a thriving jazz ensemble.

Indeed, the experience of these two schools is very different under block scheduling. But, according to the find-

ings of two recent studies, these two schools seem to accurately reflect some common trends throughout the country. Researchers in Kentucky and Colorado found that band directors from small schools, offering fewer courses, reported having more scheduling difficulties than directors at large schools where many sections of a course are offered at different times of the day.

In addition, researchers have found that music programs have fared worse under a strict four block system than under a modified block schedule which allows students to take two courses in one block, either in split classes or on alternate days.

### Coping with Change

As block scheduling continues to gain adherents, many band directors are entering the debate with mixed feelings and some uncertainty.

"The English teachers tell me block scheduling will work out fine," says Rich Hahn, music instructor at Forest Lake High School in Forest Lake, Minnesota. "But our school offers 30 courses during only one time slot. I'm afraid our program is going to take a hit if kids start having to make hard choices." According to Hahn, his school is slated to vote this year on whether to implement block scheduling.

Gary Stith isn't too concerned about block scheduling. Stith is a music instructor for a suburban Buffalo, New York school district which is currently phasing in block scheduling. "Our music program has quite a reputation," he says. "There are so many ways these schedules can be adapted."

At J.P. Taravalla High School, in Coral Springs, Florida, band director Mark Humphreys reports that his faculty has voted down block scheduling four times in the past couple of years, despite pressure from the superintendent to implement it. "Our strong sentiment is that block scheduling will decimate our music program," says Humphreys. "We don't want to change our school, and people are worried. But too many music teachers tend to just keep their heads in the band room."





Helping band directors and school administrators cope with the looming changes is Edward Lisk, a music education consultant from Oswego, New York. Lisk leads seminars to instruct music educators on how to present the benefits of their programs in the current atmosphere of educational reform. He believes it is only a matter of time before all schools move to block scheduling. "I've spoken in 35 states," says Lisk. "Everywhere, educators are dealing with the same issues, using the same terms. Music educators need to move forward and be proactive if they are to keep their music programs as part of the school day."

### Promote Real Value

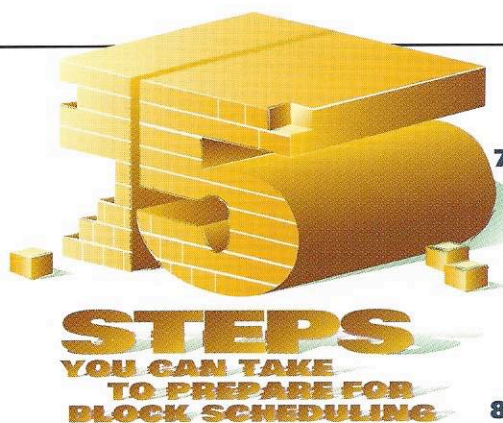
To maintain strong music programs under block scheduling, Lisk tells band directors to actively promote the academic value of music programs. "Too often," he says, "the administrators and others outside of our discipline look at us as entertainers. They don't perceive music as a language or an academic discipline."

With cost-conscious administrators, Lisk believes band directors must also tout the practical values of their programs. One aim of Lisk's seminars is to enable music educators to fight with the kind of facts a school board can understand, such as dollars invested and students enrolled.

According to John Benham, president of Music in World Cultures, Inc., effective economic arguments can be made to support band programs. Benham has worked for 14 years with parents' groups to save school music programs.

"It costs more to hire teachers for several small classes, than to hire one band director to teach a large group of students," says Benham. "I'll sit down with administrators and show them, dollar for dollar, that keeping

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### William Gora

1. Know the money side of your band program. Find out how much of your school's budget is being spent on your music program. Also, ask band parents how much money they invest annually in music lessons and instruments. When administrators realize the private investment parents are making in music, they may value your program more highly.
2. Know your program. Find out the enrollment figures for your music program. Also, track the academic performance of your band students (SAT scores, class ranking, GPA's). This can be helpful information to bring to faculty discussions.
3. Tout the academic value, not the trophies. Band programs successfully teach key educational skills such as decision making and logical thinking. Do not let the total focus of your program revolve around performance opportunities or else people will perceive your purpose as strictly entertainment. (See no. 9)

### John Benham

4. Take a close look at the block scheduling proposal for your school. Don't immediately assume it will hurt your program. Although strict block schedules could have a negative impact on music programs, a modified block schedule may offer some advantages, such as longer rehearsals and more choices. (See no. 12)
5. Have your wish list ready. With change comes the opportunity to enhance your program and, possibly, to get your wishes. Go for it. Maybe you can work a new class that you've always wanted into the program.
6. Be actively involved from the beginning. Thinking that everything will take care of itself means you'll have to take what's given to you. (See no. 11)

7. Keep focused on the kids. This is a student issue, not an adult issue. As best you can, ask others to articulate the benefits for students from suggested changes, not the benefits for adults, teachers and administrators. Keep asking, "Will this change help the kids?"

### Edward Lisk

8. Stay on top of recent developments in education. Read educational journals to find out what's happening around the country with block scheduling. Recommended sources are *Educational Leadership* and *Phi Delta Kappan Journal*.

(Ask your administrator if your school subscribes to these publications, because most do. If not, these journals are often readily available in university libraries.)

9. Learn to communicate the academic benefits of your band program. A great resource for getting up to speed is the publication *Spin Offs: The Extra Musical Advantage of a Band Education* from your local UMI dealer. (See no. 3)
10. Speak out. Make it a long term goal to take advantage of opportunities to present the academic value of bands to adult audiences — be it parent groups, community leaders or civic associations.

### Dean Christopher

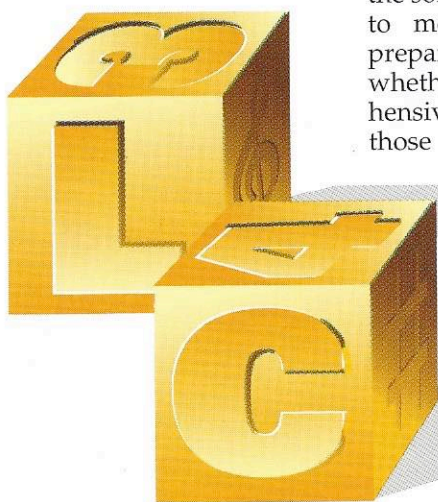
11. Make sure you are on the Block Scheduling Implementation Committee. (See no. 6)
12. Accept the challenge as an opportunity to expand in ways that will allow you to address and correct problems that the regimentation of the past wouldn't allow. (See no. 4)
13. Give enough time to planning so that when school ends in the spring everyone knows what they're getting into the next fall.
14. To alleviate course conflicts, schedule single offering classes first: not only music, but physics, expository work, etc., whatever the subject that may meet at the same time as other courses offered at more than one time period.
15. Pace rehearsals with an 85-minute rehearsal in mind. Each rehearsal plan will be different, depending on the individual.





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-Edward Lisk



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their music program makes smart fiscal sense."

### Shaping New Programs

Edward Lisk believes that universities, the music industry and professional associations are going to need to work cooperatively to develop innovative new music courses which can be recognized as core subjects.

Dr. Andrew Dabczynski, supervisor of fine arts for the Waterford School District in Waterford, Michigan, agrees. "We have to consider whether the sole purpose of a music program is to meet with students daily and prepare them to perform a concert, or whether we should strive for comprehensive musicianship. That way, on those occasions when not everyone can meet together, children can learn composition, basic instrument skills, music history or maybe even music criticism."

Dabczynski also believes teachers will need to be much more flexible. "I think we've been trained to be myopic," he says. "But we are moving into the age of the generalist."

Teachers are going to need to be open to teaching new courses and implementing new educational initiatives."

Bill Gora, of the Appalachian State University School of Music in Boone, North Carolina, cautions directors not to rest on their laurels. "Initially," he says, "parents may be supportive because you have established a great program. But in four years, you'll have new kids and new parents who will be wondering, 'What right do you have to take 25 percent of my child's education?' You have to keep proving yourself."

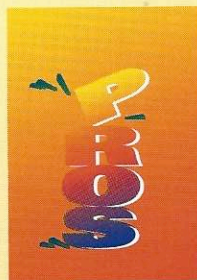
So it appears that, as block scheduling becomes a reality in school districts across the country, the major challenge for music educators will lie in their ability to continually promote the genuine value of music education to students, parents, and administrators.

"Playing a musical instrument is a form of communication and a language of expression and of emotion," Edward Lisk reminds us. "It is a vital part of a child's education. When they talk about Shakespeare, we must remind them of Beethoven." 🎵



## BLOCK SCHEDULING

- + With a four period day, band students enjoy more rehearsal time in longer class periods.



- + Students receive more academic credit for band and music courses.
- + Band has full academic standing. It is not just an "elective."
- + With a modified block schedule, students may benefit from longer rehearsals on alternate days, rather than shorter daily rehearsals.



- Band students who have scheduling conflicts with a four period day may drop out of band.
- Schools may have to group music and band courses together and cut back the number of music offerings because of scheduling difficulties.
- Students may take band for only one semester out of the year which can lead to erratic instrument representation in a school's band.
- With modified block schedules, when students are absent, they miss a lot of instruction time, which can be a problem when a band is preparing for a concert.