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## Looking Beyond the Bell

by Carole VanSickle

As a shrill vibrato tears through a high school, teenagers disperse for study halls and science class. Students and teachers barely hear the alarm anymore, but to Sally Zepeda, an associate professor in the College of Education and in the Program in Educational Administration and Policy, its implications ring loud and clear. “Looking at the way we use time in schools has been an issue for educators since the early 1900s,” she said. “Teachers and students alike are bound by periods of time allotted for learning, and the question is always simple: ‘How best to use it?’”

Zepeda and Stewart Mayers, a former UGA doctoral student, published “An Analysis of Research on Block Scheduling” in the Review of Educational Research in Spring 2006. Block scheduling—a scheduling trend intended to increase active teaching and student involvement—extends the amount of time spent in each subject during a school day, but limits classes to a portion of the school year.

“Originally, I was interested in how teachers were transitioning to block scheduling,” Zepeda said, but it soon became apparent that while nearly half of the schools in the United States are currently “on the block,” few to no studies on its effects exist.

The team analyzed 58 block-scheduling studies to determine efficacy and unveil the decision-making process leading to the switch. “Change is superficial without incorporating real consequences into the overall equation,” Zepeda said. “Schools adopt the block to meet students’ needs, but altering bell schedules alone is phantom restructuring. Teachers must integrate into the new system, and those processes are nearly undocumented.”

Success in any educational reform depends on teacher “buy-in,” she said, and “teachers are doing great things on this system. But what concerns me is our era of accountability.” As more testing and administrative milestones are put into place in response to new education legislation, schools need protocols in place to measure impact.

“Everything in education is high stakes now,” Zepeda said. “There are many arguments for and against the block, and in the end, time is the

enemy. We now need to know how and why schools are going on the block so we can tell if we're winning.”

Zepeda hopes to identify categories of school systems, document and evaluate their experiences moving onto and—possibly—off of block scheduling. “Systems need the ability to evaluate the change on a school-wide level. Everyone wants the best for students, but the best isn't the same thing every time.”

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