

## BLOCK SCHEDULING IN LAS CRUCES: NO ROADBLOCK TO ARTS LEARNING

"Band parents" like Doug and Jan Brown have long been the backbone of music programs nationwide. Their son Jeremy, a high school senior at Las Cruces' Mayfield High School, and his parents talked about his commitment to music over dinner with the researchers during their visit.

Without a lot of fanfare, over the years Jeremy had quietly become the trombone mainstay of his school band, and, when it came time to plan his schedule for senior year, he told his parents he wanted to include music as one of his areas of concentration.

Doug Brown was worried that, with the new block scheduling at Mayfield, college-bound Jeremy's academic performance would suffer if he spent too much time in the arts. "One-fourth of my son's education was going to be spent in band. That was hard to swallow at first. Then, as I saw what playing did for him – he's a quiet kid, but he really shines in band – I saw how he learned and grew. I became a believer."

Jeremy's parents' willingness to accommodate his music studies was matched by Mayfield High's willingness to adapt as well. The entire Las Cruces district is moving towards block scheduling. Mayfield began restructuring in 1995-96 as it moved to a full block schedule with a four-period day throughout the week. Traditional two-semester classes are offered in one semester. Students take fewer courses. For Mayfield, the key to this transition has been flexibility. In order for Jeremy to continue to pursue band and Advanced Placement coursework, Mayfield guidance counselors developed an independent AP English course so he could attend band. This adaptation impressed the Browns, who felt that Jeremy would not have to choose "arts" or "academics." He could do both.

Las Cruces uses block scheduling in different forms, including 4x4 with a 6-period Monday and the above 5x4. Arts educators mentioned their concerns about the changes. Among them is a possible reduction in enrollment in arts courses given that students will take fewer courses on these schedules. Professional development and a risk-free year of experimentation have helped the transition in Mayfield. The students interviewed preferred block scheduling: "Less stress, less homework." "More time to learn; you're not bouncing around so quickly." Ruth Bird, one of the visual arts teachers at Mayfield, appreciated the extra time to work and develop ideas with students.

Eighth graders schedule an appointment to present their work before three of their peers and their teachers. Parents and grandparents often attend. The students then answer questions, much like an oral dissertation defense, to demonstrate their knowledge of the material covered. "It's an emotional experience. It helps them with the realization that middle school is over – and see what they have learned!" says principal Olivia Ogas.

### • Presentations to the School Board: Keeping the Arts in Mind

Every board meeting begins with a student performance. The board meeting that the researchers attended was packed with presenting district administrators, parents of performing students, and other community members. Led by an award-winning elementary music teacher, Laurie Norman, a class marched in to the library and began to sing and dance. The teacher conducted and coaxed as Orff instruments accompanied young voices. For the finale, large tires and bottles, wrapping paper and paper bags started rattling and shaking during a difficult counterpoint piece about recycling.

John Schutz explained that the performances help keep the arts on the table as board members – former educators, a business leader, a former legislator – make decisions that affect education. Schutz, for example, has begun exploring ways to expand dance in the Las Cruces schools by engaging the community. As schools dabble with groups like Ballet Folklórico, he can remind board members of the successes of the Las Cruces High School Mariachi Band, which linked arts education to community culture.

One important way the board supports the arts is to keep the arts in mind during discussions about remodeling or new construction. "When it's time to build a new building," said a member, "that's the time to remember the arts. I'm the one who remembers to ask, 'What about the music sound system? What about the music space?' In a rapidly growing district, the commitment of space makes all the difference in the years to come."

### • Continuity in Las Cruces

Las Cruces has the benefit of a stable board and a superintendent who enjoys the board's support and, therefore, remains in his eleventh year. But Las Cruces still faces challenges of resources and expansion. The visual arts program at the elementary level continues to grow slowly, but it may begin facing funding competition from incoming technology initiatives. Theater appears to be less valued in the community, and the expense of meeting ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements for accessibility to stages has affected Las Cruces' decision not to invest heavily in raised proscenium performance spaces. Lack of a large enough performing space limits the district and the community.

Despite any drawbacks or concerns, however, the atmosphere from community to school leaders, superintendent to district coordinator, parent to student, new teacher to veteran is one of arts growth and strengthening. Las Cruces is moving forward to reform education and including the arts at the heart of their children's learning.

### A Case Study:

## MIAMI - DADE COUNTY (FL)

### Factors

The Community✓  
The School Board✓  
The Superintendent✓  
Continuity in Leadership✓  
District Arts Coordinator(s)✓  
A Cadre of Principals✓  
Teachers Who Practice Their Art✓  
An Elementary Foundation✓  
Opportunities for Higher Levels of Achievement✓  
National, State, Other Outside Forces✓

### Statistics

Schools (Total): 328  
Students (Total): 341,000  
Per Pupil: \$5,137  
Arts Teachers (Total): 1,200

## THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Miami-Dade County is not only the fourth largest school system in the country – with more than 340,000 students and nearly 18,000 teachers – but it is also one of the nation's most diverse. The district's students come from 155 different countries and speak 150 different languages, which adds language barriers to the hurdles of poverty and other urban ills constantly facing Miami schools leadership.

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