

BERNARDS TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

101 Peachtree Road
Basking Ridge, New Jersey 07920
www.bernardsboe.com

VALERIE A. GOGER, D.Litt.
Superintendent of Schools

Phone: 908-204-2600
Fax: 908-766-7641
E-mail: vgoger@bernardsboe.com

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Dear Parents:

The Board of Education has received e-mail regarding the continuation next year of the nine period schedule at Ridge High School. The overwhelming majority of the correspondence favors the nine periods, although some expressed support for the eight periods. I would like to offer some background and clarification on this issue.

Three years ago, the high school and district administration recommended that the high school return to an eight period schedule. With eight periods, daily instructional time in each class would increase from 41 or 42 minutes to 50 minutes. The decrease of one period would result in a narrowed opportunity for students to take elective courses. The area most affected by such a reduction in any school is the arts. Out of concern for art and music students, the Board did not approve the administrative recommendation. Instead, the Board directed the administration to bring the recommendation back after several of their concerns were adequately addressed. Consequently, the administration developed programs such as Option II, Virtual High School and other online learning opportunities to address the Board's scheduling concerns for the arts. Option II is an alternative method of earning graduation credits that New Jersey has allowed for many years. Students may apply to the school principal for approval of activities or studies undertaken outside of the school day for graduation credit. Given these improvements to the eight period day model in tandem with the current budgeting constraints the Board approved a move to the eight period day at its meeting on November 22.

The Board's approval of the eight period day was a function of not only creative scheduling solutions, but also the stance of the administration who believes the additional eight minutes per class per day, amounting to almost an extra two months of learning per subject, is extremely valuable, and will provide a much stronger foundation in core courses. Students will be able to engage in more meaningful student centered activities to expand upon the content presented in class. Through the use of scored discussions, debates, simulations, and peer reviews students will be able to demonstrate a more thorough understanding of material. Additionally, a math teacher may incorporate one practice HSPA or SAT problem in the last five minutes of every class. That would amount to solving 500 practice problems before her students even take the SAT. Students would also have time to ask extra questions which otherwise might not have fit into the lecture/note taking session when new material is introduced. A teacher may choose to use an entire class period in a week for a performance based assessment because he was able to teach the content in four instead of five days that week. This would enable the teacher to gauge student comprehension and allow him to then re-teach identified areas of weakness. The additional time would not be used as a 'mini study hall', and teachers would not simply 'slow down' the delivery of curriculum to fill the extra minutes of class. In principle, the

administration believes that more time for instruction will also translate to better scores on the HSPA (state graduation test), SAT and Advanced Placement tests.

There is abundant research on the benefits of a growing trend of extending school time, both in the school day and the school year (links included at the end of this memo). While the addition of eight minutes per period doesn't satisfy the additional time recommended in these studies, it is a start towards addressing more time on task. SAT score comparison of benchmark schools studied in the [Program Review](#) shows a possible correlation between length of class periods and scores of the 'middle students' - - those students scoring at the 50th percentile. West Windsor, Chatham, Tenafly, Princeton, and Montgomery for example, scored higher at the 50th percentile than Ridge. Each of those schools has longer class periods than Ridge. Somerset Hills and Hopewell Valley, with the same 42 minute class time as Ridge, scored lower than us, as did Bridgewater, with 40 minute periods.

The loss of elective opportunities in school could be more than compensated for by a host of out-of-school experiences included on a student's transcript. Option II provides varied opportunities to explore new fields or meet graduation requirements in ways we could never deliver during the school day. When a student takes advantage of this alternative, it provides a way to make space in his or her Ridge schedule to opt for the courses we do offer in art, music, or other electives. The new approach provides avenues for building transcripts that can be stronger and richer than before. As students and parents become more familiar with this choice, it will prove to be an exciting and popular one for our students. Additionally, students would be exposed to online learning which is now a part of most college offerings.

The administration expected that the move to the new schedule would have unintended consequences, as new ventures usually do. As we have been working through the scheduling process, we attempted to ameliorate them. To date, these are a few of the adjustments we have made:

- Students can schedule out of PE class twice a week to attend chorus, band, orchestra, and remediation classes
- Most athletes will receive two semesters of study hall
- Graduation credit for approved classes or activities will now be granted
- Junior year honors options will now be offered in British Literature and History of US Government and Economics
- In addition to their offering within the school day, courses in fine and practical arts that are state mandated graduation requirements will be offered at night as parent paid options, similar to when we used to offer the Princeton Review classes at night twice a week
- Courses required for graduation that are taken outside of the school day free up a period during the day for an elective
- Class size in college prep classes will decrease from 26-29 to 24-26 while class sizes in honors and AP classes should remain constant

While budgetary constraints prompted the administration to search for economies, the recommendation for the eight period day was not based solely on savings. Even in the absence of financial constraints, rational arguments for either the eight or nine period schedule each with their pros and cons can be made. However, the reality is that financial resources are limited and cost has to be a consideration when examining a high school schedule. So while it may well be true that for students who want to survey as many electives as possible the nine period schedule is better, the administration believes the eight period schedule is best for the great majority of our students. The beauty of Option II is that it

provides a mechanism for all students to pursue their passion whether it is in the arts or elsewhere, and have it built into their transcript.

As poignantly highlighted in the film *Race to Nowhere*, high school students are under tremendous pressure. Certainly whether students are struggling or excelling in school, having one less course per day, less homework, less testing, less need to spread attention over varied subjects each day, must surely result in a less stressful day for them, and ultimately their families. The 50 minute classes in an eight period schedule could be thought also to alleviate some stress by providing more time for core instruction. In this year's first marking period, 74% of all Ridge students had at least one period a week of study hall. Some of these study halls were a result of lab science accommodations; many were to provide some relief in our students' school day.

The issue of receiving unanticipated state aid for at least one year presents a difficult challenge for the Board. Does it use those funds to extend the nine period day for one more year, despite the strong likelihood that it is temporary, one year financing? Or does it apply the funding increase to non-recurring expenses such as the infrastructure of the school buildings and grounds? The district architect is finalizing the Long Range Facility Plan which prioritizes over \$13 million in renovations, roof and equipment replacements, and repairs over the next four years. Might facilities be the area where these unexpected state funds should be targeted?

The Board voted to adopt the eight period schedule and to reduce kindergarten to part time. Parents then raised money to supplement the kindergarten program, as other parents offered to do in an attempt to maintain the nine period schedule. Perhaps the nine period day could be continued for one year through the use of state aid, with the same understanding as the kindergarten funding. If the funding ceases to exist, kindergarten reverts to the Board approved part time program and the high school schedule reverts to eight periods.

The Public Hearing will be held on Monday evening at which time members of the community may voice their opinion on the proposed budget, and the Board will then adopt a final budget to submit to the voters on April 27.

Sincerely,



Valerie A. Goger

<http://www.timeandlearning.org/images/12.7.09FinalDatabaseReport.pdf>

http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/OntheClock.pdf

<http://www.mcrel.org/newsroom/hottopicExtendedTime.asp>

<http://www.timeandlearning.org/081118%20E-copy%20Final%20ELT%20Toolkit.pdf>