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To: Helen Vivian, Co-Superintendent of Schools
Alton Sprague, Co-Superintendent of Schools

From: Mark Jackson, Principal

Re: ARHS Trimester Evaluation

The Trimester Evaluation Committee was originally constituted in August of 2006. The following section from the District's September 2004 – August 2007 Unit A contract provided the committee with its charge:

“At the beginning of the 2006-07 school year, the High School Principal shall convene a committee which will include faculty from different departments, for the purpose of reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of the current high school schedule and making recommendations on a schedule for the 2007 – 2008 school year, which may or may not be the current high school schedule.”[p. 61]

During SY 2006 – 07, the committee began with the assumption that high school master schedules are complex in ways that the faculty, generally, did not fully appreciate. So, the committee designed a series of experiences for the faculty to achieve the following objectives:

- To understand master schedules as a way to apportion time to support the school's academic mission;
- To understand the hard choices and trade offs implicit in all master schedules;
- To understand the breadth of available master scheduling options;
- To build understanding, if not empathy, of the range of thinking about the trimester, specifically, and master schedules generally among their colleagues;

Next, after approximately eight months of study and reflection, a survey designed to capture the faculty's assessment of the trimester as well as their thinking about master schedules generally was administered to the entire faculty.

From the survey, designed, in consultation with the committee, by a University of Massachusetts sociologist with a specialty in quantitative program evaluation, there emerged five criteria with strong support across the faculty that became the evaluative framework for the trimester as well as possible alternatives. The five criteria are listed below:

1. Provide enough blocks for student electives (minimum of 15 blocks per year);

2. The length of periods should be 60 minutes long;
3. A 4-5 course schedule is preferable for students and teachers;
4. The 1-3 class split negatively affects students;
5. The 4-class term negatively affects teachers and students.

From here, the committee arranged several additional experiences for the faculty to consider a range of scheduling options that embodied or gave expression to the five criteria.

These discussions were very involved. Each of the scheduling options had both strengths and challenges; in its own way, each addressed concerns and created new ones. From this welter of considerations, no clear consensus emerged. Regarding the relative merits of the trimester and the other semester options, the faculty remained evenly divided.

The impasse largely centered on the concerns expressed in the fourth and fifth criteria. The committee, therefore, set out to fashion a scheduling option that addressed it. The committee settled on a model that combined features of both the trimester and semester master schedules. It was referred to as the 'hybrid' and, ultimately, became the recommendation the committee made to the faculty.

The essential feature of the 'hybrid' was the organization of major academic courses in a way that enabled them to span all three trimesters. To do so, a course would meet daily for one trimester and every other day for two trimesters. In this way, within the framework of the trimester, the concern about discontinuity could be addressed. As well, teachers, in the two trimesters where their courses met every other day, would, in effect, teach four courses in a day only every other day, thus mitigating the weight of teaching four courses every day.

After several additional rounds of discussions, while the appeal of the model remained strong, it became clear that the range of operational challenges was daunting. The challenges fell largely into two categories. The first was curricular: courses taught within two trimesters would need to be reorganized to span three. The second, and more daunting, was the actual scheduling: all academic courses would need to be paired with another course so that students, on their 'off' day, would still have a full schedule. Given the size and scope of the high school's Program of Studies, and the general vagaries of scheduling, there was no guarantee that this could actually be achieved. In addition, several faculty also noted that, while the every other day rotation for two trimesters was a good faith effort to mitigate the weight of having to teach four courses in a day, the proposal, ironically, would actually function to increase the workload of teachers. Since there was the likelihood, in a given trimester, that different sections of the same course could all be on different schedules—some taught every day, some taught every other day—the variation in pacing could create substantially different courses. This would diminish, rather than enhance, the efficiency of teachers' work. This likelihood cooled somewhat the early support of the 'hybrid' proposal.

So, the upshot of the two years worth of work is this: the committee was not successful in building consensus, which was the decision-making standard stipulated from the beginning of the process, around its recommendation. For now, then, the trimester schedule is the default and will remain in effect. There remains, however, a desire to revisit this question in the future. How to effectively reconstitute the committee and refocus its work hinges, in part, on a debrief of the last two years and a teasing out of its lessons, which we are committed to do in the fall. More importantly, however, since the committee's charge originated in contract negotiations, we need to wait for further direction from the union and superintendents.