Dear Santa Teresa High School Parents, Guardians, and Families:

As the Fall semester nears the end and we begin to prepare for the Spring semester, we are already looking towards the 2015-2016 school year. One major decision upcoming is the proposal to change from the traditional, 55 minute bell schedule to a block, 100 minute bell schedule. About six years ago, we had a modified block schedule, wherein two days a week we had 95 minute periods and two days a week we had 55 minute periods with collaboration on Mondays. When the economy affected class sizes and teacher schedules, we were forced to resume a traditional bell schedule.

Now that we have increased revenue, we are investigating the merits and faults of adopting a block schedule. In addition, we are studying the value of incorporating a twice a week Advisory/Tutorial period and extending lunch from 30 minutes to 40 minutes.

On Wednesday, December 10, at 6pm in the ST Theater, you are invited to share your thoughts and concerns. Ultimately, the teachers vote in March to either adopt or veto the proposal, but we want to receive feedback from all of our stakeholders and develop all necessary support structures for any negative ramifications. The proposal to adopt a block schedule is not new. In Santa Teresa High School’s 40 years, a number of bell schedules have dictated when classes begin and how long they last. There are four reasons why block schedule is proposed for next year.

1. Student stress is at an all-time high. The opportunity to consider student health and change from a six period, 55 minute school day to a three period, 100 minute school day simply makes sense. Students should have roughly half as much homework at night and more time during class to work with the teacher and fellow students to better learn the curriculum. When we add in Advisory/Tutorial, we create 50 minute periods, twice a week to do groups, focus and address stress, provide additional tutoring time, and make more efficient the work load on our students and staff.

2. With Common Core State Standards as the curricular focus, it is difficult to reach Depth of Knowledge (DOK) 3 (the level of strategic thinking) in a 55 minute period. Gone are the days of simply "knowing" and "understanding." Students need more time to collaborate, think, and internalize the information they are learning. Providing students the time to focus on what they are learning is essential to student success.

3. A block schedule creates time for collaboration, grading, lesson planning and increased parent/guardian contact.

4. We are planning the launch of a Small Learning Community (SLC) for approximately 135-170 incoming 9th grade students. The SLC will be designed off of a block schedule. To keep life simple, it would be ideal to have the entire campus on a four day block schedule.

There are 40 comprehensive high schools (schools like ST) in Santa Clara County. There are 16 schools on a traditional bell schedule--11 are from the East Side Union High School District. The other five schools at least have an advisory/tutorial period of some sort. Of the 24 high schools that have some form of block schedule, nearly half are on a four day block variation as the other half are on some modified block.

To ensure we learn as much as we can about the value of block schedules before the vote, teams of Santa Teresa teachers and students are visiting three high schools: Saratoga, Palo Alto, and Sobrato. In addition, we have a professional development advisor coming into train teachers on how to teach more efficiently during an extended period and we have members of the Sobrato and Saratoga high schools coming to meet with teachers and their departments to address best practices and concerns.
The adoption of the Common Core State Standards by California and 42 other states demands a shift in public education. As we all know, how students learn and how teachers are expected to teach continues to evolve. What worked for us when we attended high school, no longer applies to this generation of students. As teenagers, we did not have everything that we wanted to know at the touch of a search engine. Teaching and memorizing facts and details are no longer as important as guiding students to critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. Students need to learn how to ask questions, seek answers, and differentiate accuracy from fallacy. Our students are on the verge of the next great Renaissance and educational practices, bell schedules, and instructional methods need to also adapt.

My commitment to the families and staff of Santa Teresa High School is to take all necessary steps to ensure a smooth transition. If the new block schedule negatively affects your family’s routine, we will have the campus available in the morning and afternoon for early drop offs and late pickups. If there are concerns about student’s attention spans, trust the fact that students will appreciate the time to think and collaborate in a student centered learning environment as opposed to a direct instruction teacher centered informational setting.

The implementation of block schedule will not be perfect and it is not the magic pill, but it is currently the best option to best facilitate the learning we want our students to achieve. I look forward to seeing you at the meeting Wednesday night at 6pm in the ST Theater. If you can not attend, please share your thoughts on the Google form: http://goo.gl/forms/5v2E4T0pAK

Sincerely,

Greg Louie, Principal