

May 4, 2000

Dear Parents/Guardians of Spring Lake High School Students:

The intent of this letter is to inform you about the upcoming changes for students' schedules next year in Grades 9-12. During the past ten years we have been searching for possible ways to improve the daily class schedule in order to enhance student learning opportunities. We have always had the following goals in mind:

- Maximize student opportunities for more classes.
- Minimize the loss of content time currently available in classes.
- Create longer periods of time in classes to use creative teaching styles.
- Avoid overloading teachers with students or more preparations.
- Avoid high costs to implement new scheduling.

Now that we have successfully settled a two-year contract with the teachers, I am very pleased to announce that they are willing to step out of the norm to create a positive change.

During the last two years we have experimented with shorter and longer class periods during two days each week. This type of scheduling was never intended to be a long-term solution in our search for an improved schedule. We have found that it is very difficult to work with our current schedule. It has not worked very well in the shortened class periods. The long periods have really given us the chance to improve instruction with the extended time in class. We have spent a great deal of time working on how to use extended class time through teacher inservice. We have continued to explore different scheduling systems.

Schools currently have four major types of daily schedules. 1) The traditional six-period day. This consists of six classes that meet every day for the same amount of time. Our present schedule is a six-period schedule modified only on the two short and long period days. It is very limiting for students, and teachers are teaching five out of the six periods. 2) The seven period day. This schedule reduces classes to 45 minutes with teachers teaching five of the seven classes. This would again reduce content time significantly and require five more staff members to maintain the schedule. 3) The eight-period block schedule. Students take four classes on one day and four different ones the next. In this schedule periods are 90 minutes or more in length, and one of the eight periods is a seminar/home room period. Such an arrangement would mean a significant loss of content time for each class. We also believe it is giving the students too many classes to prepare for as well as requiring the district to have at least four more teachers to maintain the schedule. 4) The 4 X 4 plan. Students take only four classes for the entire semester. The classes are 90 minutes or more in length. The length of content time is shortened in this schedule, and the class periods are too long for students to learn effectively.

Last year I was able to meet with some administrators in Indiana and came upon an old, but a recently renewed concept for high school schedules-the trimester plan. I examined this plan from a critical point of view and looked for flaws. However, we have been extremely excited and pleased with what we have seen. The trimester schedule consists of five classes per term, each of which is approximately 70 minutes in length. This allows students three more class selections each year. It also provides the most content time out of any additional period schedule we have examined. This schedule doesn't increase the number of class preparations for teachers. Students will be able to earn 7.5 credits during the course of the school year. This plan requires no additional staff to implement. We have done a great deal of research and taken visits to schools in Indiana which use this schedule. In short, we have been very pleased with the results and have jointly agreed to implement this schedule for the coming year.

Again, this schedule provides students with three more class selections per year. We have also made band, advanced placement classes, and college classes the only courses that will meet all three terms. All other classes will be two terms for a formerly year-long class and one term for a semester class. For example, U.S. History will meet during two terms for an A and B section. Students will have their electives spread throughout the year, not just in the final spring term. The new building provides us with the space and flexibility to move to more creative and engaging teaching styles as well as expanded student opportunities.

I would like to address concerns that parents may have. 1) Will students have more exams? At most, three more. All students will have a six-week progress report sent home for each class during all three terms. Students' grades will be based 80% on class work and 20 percent on the final exam. 2) What if a student doesn't take both segments of a course consecutively? For example, U.S. History A in the fall and U.S. History B in the spring. This will not be the norm for a schedule, but will occur in some cases. In looking at research and talking to staff members from other trimester schools, this is not an issue; in fact, it may be a strength. Research has shown that retention drops off the first two weeks away from a class, but then levels off. It is our goal to work on long-term retention as well as prepare students with essential information rather than needless information. 3) Does this affect college-bound students negatively? Not at all; in fact, it enhances their skills. Students will get a more well-rounded education and be required to retain information between terms just as in college. They will also only have to focus on five classes. The fine arts students will be able to take classes of interest and still meet requirements for college. 4) Will we have to increase the number of elective classes we offer? There will be a minimal increase in offerings initially, and I do believe we will gradually be adding courses in a systematic, logical fashion. 5) Will graduation requirements increase immediately? No, next year's senior class will have the same 22 credit requirement; however, all students will be required to be in at least four classes. Senior release will only be available during the first or last class periods as it is this year. Over the next four years we will increase the graduation requirements by one credit per year. The Class of 2005 will need 26 credits for graduation.

We have built several features into this schedule to enhance student learning. We will run all five classes for 35 minutes on half days. The semester exams will be given during the regular time schedule. We will also run a reduced time schedule to compensate for assemblies and pep rallies. At the end of the year we will do an extensive review of the schedule and its effectiveness. This schedule must be done for an entire year because there is much more involved than changing the amount of time contained in a class period.

Students will be given their next year's schedule prior to the end of this school year to look over and make any necessary changes. The guidance counselors and I will sponsor a program called Smart Start in which students will be brought to the new high school in August to go through their class schedule and see the building prior to the opening day of school.

During the next month I will be finalizing the schedule for next year. If I get enough interest from parents, I will be glad to host an evening meeting to explain the new schedule at length. The staff and I are extremely excited about the new building you have provided for us and this new way to use our class time more effectively.

Sincerely yours,

Mark Westerburg, Principal  
Spring Lake High School