

The Modular Schedule Revisited ... Again **Dennis L. Calkins**

As I listen to criticism in the media recently about what is wrong with education in our country today, it is intriguing to compare what is being said with what we believe and practice at Holland Hall. I hear endless discussion about **quantity** – length of the school year, time in class, standardized test scores, for example. I don't hear or read very much about **quality** – what skills and concepts are necessary and important for students to learn, what good teaching looks like, how students learn best.

I recently reminded my mathematics students that our modular schedule in the Upper School requires far less of them in terms of class time than their peers in most other schools. Our math course meets for 42 minutes on five of the six cycle days for a total of 210 minutes. In other schools, the class period is likely to be 55 minutes long every day, for a total of 330 minutes over the same six-day time period. The difference is significant – 120 minutes per six-day cycle. How can we justify two hours less class time every cycle than other schools while claiming that our educational experience is superior to theirs? If this measure of quantity is our only focus, it looks as if we have fallen short.

The answer is grounded in one of the underlying assumptions of the modular schedule. Not all learning experiences can or should take place during class time. Therefore, the class schedule should provide time and opportunity for learning to occur outside the normal classroom experience. It is crucial that Upper School students be exposed to as many different learning opportunities as possible and encouraged (and required, perhaps) to take advantage of them.

My mathematics students can often be seen during their unscheduled time working with each other on their homework problems. They schedule extra help sessions with me either individually or in small groups so that I am able to attend to their specific learning needs. At certain times, they are required to meet with me individually so that I can examine their work and make suggestions or corrections. Recently, they were given the opportunity to take a long exam in a setting of their own choosing and at a time that was convenient to them.

The examples in my short list could be added to dozens of others from every faculty member in the Upper school – examples of the creative and innovative uses of our modular schedule that provide unique and meaningful opportunities for our students to learn. These learning opportunities are made possible only by providing every student with “wasteable time” and then giving them instruction and guidance in learning how not to waste it.

It is perhaps not surprising that so much focus is placed on quantity in the world of education – those characteristics that are easily measured by numbers. The issue of quality is a much more difficult discussion to undertake, but a discussion we always look forward to engaging in the Upper School. Time in class is easy to measure; what constitutes meaningful learning is a much more elusive subject. The modular schedule allows time to be allocated in a manner that makes it possible for students to experience education in a variety of unique and meaningful settings and circumstances. We are able to “measure” the quality of that experience by listening to comments from our graduates. Without fail, they tell us that their experience with the modular schedule was invaluable in teaching them how to use their time to gain the most from their education.