



# Rock Talk

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## Rock Talk

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# The benefits of balance

*New GRHS  
schedule dumps  
the daily grind*

It's a new day at Glen Rock High School. Literally.

Because when school opened this year, Principal John Arlotta, with the support of the BOE and Superintendent Dr. Paula Valenti, launched a rotating, drop schedule where six of eight classes meet every day on a four-day cycle. While it may sound confusing, it is actually designed to reduce stress, improve academics and ultimately restore balance to the lives of students.

The initiative was two years in the making, and resulted from the work of an exploratory committee of teachers, trustees, students and parents. Today, with roughly one-third of the school year under way, it is clear that the district hasn't seen a change of this magnitude since the referendum in 2008. And while it didn't come with as much fanfare or financial investment, it is apparently having just as great of an impact on the staff and students.

Previously, the high school day included nine, 45-minute class periods that met in the same consecutive order five days per week. Students were assigned to

one of four lunch periods, which began at 11:06 a.m. and ended at 2:18 p.m. And health and physical educa-

teachers to cover material in the academic classes while creating appropriate experiential opportunities in

huge benefit.

"The Physical Education staff could not be more thrilled with the new schedule!" Sileo exclaims.

According to Arlotta, ongoing comments he is receiving from the teaching staff overwhelmingly echo that sentiment. "There is simply more time for meaningful coverage of material in every subject area." He also indicates that the teaching staff has been prepared for teaching longer periods, through professional development and a consultant who is working with a group of teachers on how to maximize the class period. Teachers are offering more options and a variety of activities. "I think our students are seeing the benefit of that."

If the opinions of junior Haley Rosenwald and senior Lee Maitner are any indication, Arlotta is right on the mark.

"You might think that students would think longer classes would be a terrible thing, but they are really appreciating the extra time," says Maitner. "Seniors especially appreciate how it is preparing us for the college schedule experience."

Adds Rosenwald, "There is more time to get more in depth with topics. There is more time to learn in different ways so I think this helps the students learn the



A large number of Glen Rock High School students utilize the Media Center during their common, expanded lunch period.

tion classes had to share time with science labs.

The new rotating/drop schedule increases class time to 58 minutes; decreases the number of days each class meets during the week through a daily and weekly rotation; and provides the same unit lunch for all students, which is offset periodically by a student's science lab.

The schedule was designed to bring a number of benefits to both staff and students. So far, it's proving to be successful across the board.

From a curricular standpoint, the longer class period provides more time for

performance-based classes.

"It's been incredible," says Physical Education teacher Sue Sileo, referring to the amount of time now available for fitness. It's always been a large component of what the department wanted to do with the curriculum, but the time needed for dressing and moving large numbers of students to and from the fields or tennis courts meant rushing through the day's lesson. The new schedule has given them more opportunity to cover both fitness and planned activities. And the fact that health classes are no longer impacted by science labs is a

material since we don't all learn the same way."

One of the most significant hoped-for outcomes of the new schedule is a reduction in the stress levels throughout the building. From Arlotta's perspective, he sees the change in the atmosphere as the greatest improvement to date.

He recalls his site visit to Ridgewood when researching other high schools with similar schedules. "You could really feel the difference [from Glen Rock]... just walking down the hallway it was definitely a more relaxed environment."

Now, not only are he and his staff experiencing a more relaxed student body in Glen Rock – the students are recognizing it in the teachers as well.

more relaxed and comfortable... and if I start to feel stressed I go over my schedule and see that something isn't due the next day and I realize I have more time to prepare. I'm even going to bed earlier!"

Rosenwald has had a similar experience. "I thought having more time between classes would mean the teachers would assign more work or that their expectations would put more pressure on... 'You should have done better.' But you have more time to manage how you spend your time. When I had tennis I would worry about my workload, but having the time to break up assignments over more days really alleviates the stress of worrying about getting it all done in one night."

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The Sports Lobby in GRHS is one of the new locations where students can purchase lunch items



The new open campus at GRHS during lunch includes utilizing the high school gym for eating and socialization.

"I see it not only with the students but the teachers are more relaxed" says Maitner. As for herself, she admits that even her parents have noticed that she is less stressed around the house. "I'm really involved with the school. I go from volleyball to yearbook to Madrigals... even on the athletic field or in choir I was fitting in my homework. Now I just feel so much

Arlotta points out that with fewer classes meeting each day, the amount of non-instructional "passing" time has decreased, allowing for an earlier dismissal without eating into instructional time. And with the schedule rotation throughout the week, the disruption to the last period due to athletic contests is now shared across more classes. In fact, more seniors can take ad-

lunch period, all agree that the opportunity for a mid-day break with friends brings additional balance to the student's day, and opening up the campus has been a welcome change. Both Maitner and Rosenwald recall their days as entering freshman, when a student's greatest fear is having a lunch schedule different from all of their friends. Now, not only are friends able to eat together daily, there are more options for where to purchase food and where to spend that lunch period. And the overall day is more balanced between morning and afternoon classes for all students.

Something Arlotta admits he hadn't anticipated is the large number of students now utilizing the Media Center during lunch. "It's packed. Especially the second half of lunch. We've actually opened up the computer labs for the students."

Maitner agrees. "More people are taking advantage

time to do both." Though the year is barely half over, Arlotta is optimistic. "I couldn't be any more pleased than I am. They are relaxed. We've been able to reduce the stress but not the rigor."

There is no doubt that a more balanced experience is emerging for GRHS staff and students. By any measure it's a win-win for all.

*The focus on increased stressors for high school students was highlighted two years ago when the BOE hosted the "Race to Nowhere" forum. Since then, the themes of stress reduction and management have been woven into the health curriculum and the rotating drop schedule supports that effort. On March 2, 2015, the BOE and Superintendent Dr. Paula Valenti will partner with community organizations to host Dr. Denise Pope, Stanford University Senior Fellow and co-founder of Challenge Success. The event continues the dialogue begun in 2012. Pope will spend the day in Glen Rock and time with students, staff and finally parents in an evening presentation.*