



From the Office of the Headmaster

Tuscaloosa Academy

Think. Play. Belong.

The School Schedule

A critically important element of a school is its schedule. The schedule outlines the daily routine of the school. It structures the school day for the entire community: students, faculty and parents. Through the schedule you specify how much, what, where and when you offer your entire curricular and extracurricular program. Thus, it is critical that we have the best possible schedule. My observations and experience suggest we can do better than our current schedule.

The major deficiency in our current schedule is that, relative to the average independent school in America, we simply do not have enough scheduled academic time. We are currently at about 315 minutes per day, whereas the standard is about 350 minutes. That's 35 minutes a day, 175 minutes per week, 5000+ minutes per school year, or, about 12.5 days of instruction! As Headmaster, I'm not comfortable with this loss of academic time. So, if nothing else, we need more academic time.

I also notice the ongoing tension between academic time and athletic time. Playing in the AISA causes us to travel a great deal; however, in conversations with a great many TA parents and faculty, including Athletic Director John Rushing, it's clear that competing in the AISA is best for us. So the question is: what, if anything, can be done to alleviate the demand on time created by the travel. In the new schedule, we will insert more frequent and more systematic opportunities for students to complete some of their homework during the school day.

We are also investigating other scheduling options such as rotating periods. With rotating periods, students would not have the same thing at the same time on a particular day. The benefits are that the best teaching times are shared among the various classes e.g., one class doesn't always meet last period of the day, and, if students miss a lot of classes due to athletics they are not always missing the same thing. The drawback of rotating periods is that it is more complicated and thus takes a little time to internalize.

Another variable in a schedule is length of periods. We are investigating the possibility of having longer periods. We're even considering the possibility of varying the length of periods based on the day of the week; thus have longer periods on a couple days of the week and shorter periods on other days of the week. The advantage of longer periods is that there are fewer transitions times during the day; thus we are more efficient with student learning. For example, simply going from seven 50 minute periods a day to six 58 minute periods per day would increase instructional time by 14.5 hours in one school year. Of course, with longer periods the teacher has to be prepared to engage and interest students for longer stretches. Great teachers do this.

As an aside, it's important to note that the primary impact of the new schedule will be on the Middle School and Upper School, simply because Lower School students spend about 80% of their time with one teacher; thus they have the flexibility to manipulate their own schedules.

I want to publically thank the faculty Schedule Committee for their good work on this complex issue. We are making progress and have narrowed down 5 or 6 options, to 2 or 3 options. We plan on sharing these options with parents through the Parent Council process, and we hope to get as much feedback as possible before a decision is made.

Perhaps the most important thing to note is that absolutely no schedule is perfect. More of one thing typically means less of something else. The trick is to find the best schedule for us. Having done scheduling for many years, I know that it may take a couple of years of serious observations and discussions before we have the best schedule for TA, but if that's what it takes, we will do it.

I want to thank all parents and faculty for their ongoing support of this great school,

Dr. Jeffrey L. Mitchell, Headmaster

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "JLM", followed by a horizontal line.