ost high school principals learn that the solutions to old problems often become new problems in themselves. That was the case when our small high school faculty of 45 made the decision to move from a traditional seven-period daily schedule to 90-minute blocks that met every other day. There were a number of reasons for that decision, foremost among them was the desire to facilitate greater depth of student learning by involving students in significant project work that focused on specific issues or events.

In addition, in response to national and international reports that called for high school graduates to have better interpersonal skills, increased group collaborative skills, and opportunities to showcase their learning, we wanted time for students to work together to plan and present what they had learned and to demonstrate that they had personalized it. So we moved to 90-minute blocks and, to a great extent, accomplished what we had wanted to. However, we also created some new problems.

First, as more and more teachers began assigning in-depth group projects, the students began having more and more trouble finding time outside of class to meet with their group partners. Group projects were assigned as homework with the expectation that much of the research, information sharing, and presentation planning would take place outside of class. But many students lead lives as busy, often busier, than those of teachers. The new schedule made it easier for students to take more courses (another reason we moved to 90-minute blocks), but resulted in fewer opportunities during the day for students to get together to work on their projects. And a very high percentage of our kids participated in after school activities and athletics, further reducing, even eliminating, any out-of-school time for group work. To solve
the problem, students started organizing Friday night, all
night, coed slumber parties, the ostensible purpose of which
was to do school work together. Needless to say, parents had
mixed emotions about all of this.

The second problem was the apparent lack of coordina-
tion among teachers of the due dates for the projects they
assigned. Many students ended up in near panic (and,
invariably, so did parents) when more than one major proj-
et was due in the same week, sometimes even the same day.
When students and parents complained, some teachers
revised due dates, but others felt they had been the first to
stake the claim and refused to adjust their schedules. We
realized we had to improve communication among staff
members, especially those who worked with students in the
same grade level, to coordinate assignment due dates. And
the realization that we needed to improve coordination of
assignments led us to investigate coordinating not only due
dates but also topics and concepts, and to begin to consider
interdisciplinary instruction. To do this, teachers needed
time to meet. But finding time for teachers to meet across
disciplines during the school day was as difficult, if not more
difficult, than finding time for students to meet.

A third problem was insufficient time for students to
access the media center for information and materials rele-
vant to their assignments. Just as they seemed to have less
and less time to meet with their colleagues on project work,
they also had less and less time to go to the media center.
We had a wonderful facility, but because of the tight sched-
ule, kids couldn't find time to actually use it.

A fourth problem was assemblies that eliminated or
shortened classes. As part of our restructuring efforts, we
increased our efforts to involve the students in the decision-
making process. One way that we did that was to hold
periodic, sometimes impromptu, short town meetings in the
gym to discuss a common concern (e.g., the mysterious dis-
appearance of book bags) or to explain some procedural
issue (e.g., the growing number of tardy students to morning
advisor-advisee). We also wanted to publicly recognize those
students who had accomplished noteworthy goals (e.g.,
the one-act play cast winning a regional competition,
the girls’ field hockey team heading into the state final) by holding short, pep rally–like assemblies. We had no block of time built into the schedule specifically for assemblies, nor did we want one. But as a result, every assembly we held was carved out of instructional time. And because we had gone to longer instructional blocks meeting every other day, to eliminate a class period or part of a class period for an assembly often meant that the effected classes did not meet for a three- or four-day period. Consequently, deciding when to schedule an assembly became a real political issue.

Finally, we had perennially wrestled with the issue of how long the lunch break should be. Teachers complained (understandably) when we gave them only 22 minutes for lunch, but we were trying to squeeze in three lunch periods without starting lunch at the inhuman hours of 10:45 or 1:05. Students complained if a major cafeteria production (e.g., the Thanksgiving turkey luncheon) slowed down the lunch line and those at the end had to inhale their banquet to avoid being late to class. Others, especially those who ended up with the third lunch, complained that they had to get on the bus at 6:15 in the morning and waiting until 12:20 for lunch put them in a semiconscious state.

The Strange Solution
Consequently, the staff spent a lot of time trying to figure out ways to address all of these problems. Then, during one of our staff meetings when we were brainstorming possible solutions, someone suggested what I initially thought was one of the dumbest ideas I’d ever heard. “Let’s have just one long lunch period.”
“What do you mean, one long lunch period? We've got 400 kids. The cafeteria seats only 150,” was the predictable reply. The following conversation went something like this:

“Don't make them all eat in the cafeteria.”
“Where are you going to let them eat?”
“Wherever they want to.”
“Are you serious?”
“Well, for the most part, yeah. Look, if we had a 50-minute lunch period, we could solve a whole bunch of problems. No kid takes 50 minutes to eat lunch. . . .”
“You're telling me! They inhale their lunches in two and a half minutes! What do you think they're going to be doing for the next 47 and a half minutes? They're going to be checking every unsupervised exit door in this school to try to sneak out to the woods. They're going to be playing cards with cash under the table. Couples are going to get amorous in the unsupervised corners. And where in the world do you expect them all to eat? We can't get even half of them into the cafeteria at one time.”

“Yeah, well let me finish. First of all, students who need to get together to work on projects could have working lunches. They could either bring their lunches to school or go to the cafeteria and get something to eat and take it to a classroom if we let them eat in classrooms. That would solve the problem of kids not having time during the day to plan and work together. And that answers your question of where they would eat when there's no room in the cafeteria.

“Second, not only would students have time during the long lunch to meet together, but also so would we. Teacher grade-level teams could meet weekly to coordinate assignments and project dates and begin to explore developing interdisciplinary projects. We could set up a weekly schedule of team meetings and lunchtime supervision duties so while one team was meeting, another team was on duty watching all those exit doors you're worried about and throwing cold water on the couples in the corners. Third, kids who never have a break during the day and, consequently, can't find time to get to the media center or to the computer labs could go during lunch. You've said yourself that they inhale lunch in two and a half minutes. They'd get 45 minutes a day after they inhaled their lunches for independent work in the media center or the computer lab if they needed it.

“Fourth, we've all complained about assemblies, town meetings, and short recognition rallies cutting into our class time. When the need arises for one of those, schedule it for the last half of the lunch period—and make it optional. Let the kids who want to stay in the cafeteria, stay; let those who are working on projects continue working on their projects. If the assembly is worthwhile, they'll all want to go anyway. And last, with a 50-minute lunch period, nobody can give you a hard time about lunch being too short. You know, the more I listen to myself talk, the more I like this idea.”

It Worked!
Although I was more than a little skeptical, we tried it. And it worked! To reduce crowding in the cafeteria, we created an upper-class privilege—seniors and juniors only in the cafeteria for the first ten minutes of lunch. Freshmen and sophomores who weren't in a group meeting started waiting in the gym lobby for their turn in the cafeteria, so we set up additional lunch tables in the lobby and it became the underclassmen's lunchroom. We also implemented the rule that kids could eat their lunches in any corridor that was not carpeted, in any classroom approved by the teacher, and at the picnic tables on the front lawn. Teacher grade-level teams became more influential and effective planning and coordinating assignments and projects across grade levels.

My fears about kids sneaking into the woods never materialized. Our lunch break took on the atmosphere of purposeful relaxation and recuperation, everyone slowing down a bit to catch their breath, get caught up, and reorganize.

As I reflect on the appropriateness of trying this idea in a school of over 1,000 students, my initial hesitation returns. But one school of 1,000 students successfully implemented this type of lunch plan, and circumstances, demographics, and culture in other school settings may make the implementation of one long lunch period feasible regardless of student enrollment. I can testify that moving from three short lunch periods to one long lunch period turned out to be an amazingly easy innovation to orchestrate, and was one of the most significant factors in our school's progress toward instructional reform. The day it was proposed in the faculty meeting, I thought it was a crazy idea. I grimaced, anticipating that this was another example of someone's solution to an old problem becoming a new headache for me. But the headache never developed, the grimace disappeared, and oftentimes I could be seen actually smiling during lunch.

Kenneth P. Nye (knye@usm.maine.edu) is a former high school principal and an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Southern Maine.