

Orange County High School: School Structure

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1. Orange County High School is located in Orange County, Virginia which is in the northern, central part of the state. This high school is considered to be a rural high school as the total population of Orange County is only around 37,000 and the surrounding community is incredibly rural and agriculturally based (Orange County Public Schools, 2023). In total, there are nine schools within this school division with a total population of 5,066 students (Orange County Public Schools, 2023). Furthermore, 81.7% of the student body is white, 13.2% African American, and the remaining percentages are of other races such as Hispanic and Native (Orange County Public Schools, 2023).

2. Schools either function in a centralized or decentralized manner. In a school that is centralized, all matters pertaining to education are decided on a large scale. For example, if the schools in America were centralized, all schools, their curriculum, and ways of functioning would be decided federally. In the United States, public schools are decentralized, and curriculum and all other matters pertaining to the schools are decided by local school boards and state education boards (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Orange County Public Schools function in a decentralized manner. Its schools operate independently from other state schools. The Virginia Board of Education sets policies and oversees setting statewide curriculum standards, establishing graduation requirements, licensing teachers, and implementing testing programs. Localities are accountable for implementing the standards set by the state and formulating programs that allow each of the policies set by the state to be carried out (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). As a result, a partnership is formed between local school systems and the state government with shared responsibility and power. The state disperses much of the decision making power regarding the day to day operations of the school to the county,

which in turn trusts school administrators and faculty to ensure regulations and policies are being followed. In doing so, the logic of confidence comes into play as each level of the school assumes that the other levels are carrying out their responsibilities in an appropriate and acceptable manner (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

3. The school calendar for Orange County High School is a traditional calendar model. The year consists of a total of 180 instructional days split across 4 nine week periods. As is typical with a traditional model, the school system incorporates one long period of vacation during the summer which lasts for approximately three months. There is also an extended break during December, between semesters one and two, as well as a week long spring break in April (Orange County High School, 2023). Research regarding academic benefits to a particular type of calendar model is inconclusive, though some would argue that a year-round calendar model has benefits over a traditional calendar model (*Year-Round Education*, n.d.). These benefits include the avoidance of burn-out for both students and teachers, more time for remediation to occur across the year, and improved retention of the curriculum (Chen, 2022). Despite the benefits, the traditional calendar model is the most prevalent model used in United States public schools, with 180 days being the typical number of instructional days. Per state regulation, Orange County High School must meet a minimum number of hours of instruction of 990 (DeSilver, 2023). This is achieved by utilizing a seven hour school day which begins at 7:25 am and ends at 2:25 pm. The required hours are actually exceeded by this school day duration, which enables the division to accumulate bank time that can be used in the event of inclement weather (Orange County Public Schools, 2023).

4. Within the Orange County district, educational choice is limited. There are no charter or magnet schools as you might find in larger or more urban districts (National School Choice

Week, 2023). There is one private school that families may choose for grades kindergarten through eight, as well as a residential high school for boys. Families may also choose to homeschool. In conjunction with the public school system, there is the option to attend an out of district school that is not a child's assigned school. In high school, courses are varied and do provide some choice depending on a student's interest level and track. Orange County High School has a career and technical education program that students may enroll in to earn certifications for a variety of jobs after graduation. The high school also offers a number of advanced placement and dual enrollment courses that students may choose to take in order to earn college credit. There are also virtual courses available to students which can be taken during the school day, as a fifth block, or during the summer. The county cohorts with Blue Ridge Virginia Governor's School, which combines on campus learning with virtual learning courses and in-person collaboration with BRVGS instructors. Most of these courses count as advanced placement or dual enrollment, and some are affiliated with colleges such as Shenandoah University and the University of Virginia (Orange County High School, 2023).

Depending on the route a student wants to take, access to these choices varies. Private schools require an application process, acceptance, and tuition payments. Those wishing to homeschool need to follow the guidelines established by the Virginia Department of Education. Enrollment in advanced placement and dual enrollment courses takes place during scheduling with a student's guidance counselor. There are prerequisites and grade requirements for enrolling in these courses. Those wishing to participate in Blue Ridge Virginia Governor's School are encouraged to apply in eighth grade. To be eligible, a student must have completed Algebra I by the end of their eighth grade year. The county admits approximately 36 students to the program

each school year. Those students progress with their cohort until graduation if they continue to meet the requirements and expectations (Orange County High School, 2023).

5. Orange County High School uses a 4 x 4 block, which means that each school day is separated into four class periods with students taking four classes each of the two semesters during the year. The school also includes a thirty minute advisory block during which students can work on homework, meet with their counselor, or seek help with classes (Orange County High School, 2023). The use of this model is consistent with some research recommendations. There is evidence that this type of schedule supports better and more in depth learning by allowing time for various activities within a block, such as direct instruction, collaboration, and project based learning (*Explore a Library*, n.d.) Research based on more than 100 case studies shows that block scheduling reduces discipline referrals somewhere between 25 and 50 percent, increases academic performance, and encourages a declining failure rate (Rettig & Canady, 2009). Teachers and faculty tend to have a positive outlook on the 4 x 4 block schedule for these reasons. Studies indicate that a majority of students agree, citing more opportunity to take various courses, fewer courses to focus on at once, and more time to ask questions in class. Standardized test scores also seem to show improvement with a 4 x 4 block schedule (Mizhquiri, 2019).

6. In regard to discipline, Orange County High School has an extensive section addressing misconduct in their *Code of Student Conduct* manual (2023). It defines and outlines 26 offenses that warrant disciplinary action. The manual also includes the school's policies on leveled response to student behavior for 5 different categories. These responses are outlined for all behaviors for which a student will be considered for discipline, as well as the range of disciplinary actions that might be imposed. The categories are leveled as behaviors that impede

academic progress, behaviors that interfere with school operations, behaviors that create negative relationships between two or more community members where no physical harm is done, behaviors that create unsafe conditions, behaviors that endanger the safety or well-being of others, and persistently dangerous behaviors. Leveled responses include redirection, intervention measures, and detention for most of the lower leveled behaviors. They escalate to threat assessment, placement in an alternative education program, and notification of law enforcement for higher leveled offenses. Suspension guidelines are also included and follow VA codes established by the department of education (*Code of Student Conduct, 2023*).

These policies are primarily designed with the intent of maintaining order and safety within the school. The majority of the offenses listed in the manual pertain to behaviors that create unsafe situations, which can be both physical or psychological. The most severe interventions or responses are directed to those offenses that create harm to another person or group. However, there are also policies set within the manual that are geared more towards the theme of maintaining control. The most prominent are procedures for a teacher removing a student from class due to disruptive behaviors. This policy is specifically related to the levels of offenses that are considered to impede academic progress and interrupt normal school operations (*Employee Handbook, 2023*).

7. The core subjects taught at Orange County High School are in the domains of English, math, science, and history. In addition, there are multiple courses required for graduation which include physical education, foreign language or career/technical education, and an economics and personal finance course (Orange County High School, 2023). These courses are taught in accordance with the Standards of Learning established by the Virginia Department of Education in order to meet state requirements for graduation. There is a standard diploma track and an

advanced diploma track, which dictate the courses and how many of each course in a specific domain must be met to earn the desired diploma (Orange County High School, 2023). The philosophy used to guide the school and its curriculum most closely resembles a combination of the humanist curriculum and the social efficiency curriculum theories. The establishment of core knowledge curriculum for all students supports the ideas behind the humanist curriculum philosophy by offering some choice to students in their course selection, while also providing core instruction to everyone within the school community regardless of their plans after high school. Additionally, the beliefs behind the social efficiency philosophy can be seen in how the school offers differing tracks and course levels to students based on their abilities. This facilitates the economy by producing future adults who will fill various jobs within the workforce (de Marais & LeCompte, 1998). Some will move on to college, others will enroll in trade schools. There are students who earn certifications while in high school that help them acquire employment upon graduation and others who take on more labor focused employment. Each area of the workforce within the economy receives new members who have graduated from this school.

While the state dictates the majority of the courses that the school must offer, there is some contribution from administration, faculty, and the community. Each summer, teachers and administrators across the county work together to create the specific curriculum for each course offered within the district. These teachers and administrators ensure that all Standards of Learning are met and followed, while using their judgment and professional knowledge to create the lessons, exams, and assignments that will be given to students the following year (*Employee Handbook*, 2023). Parents do not participate in this, however the community does frequently become involved in the development of career and technical education courses. Recently, there

has been a great deal of support for the expansion of these programs within the district, led by parents and local business leaders. This has occurred through an extensive strategic planning program implemented by the district's new superintendent, which began in 2022. Various groups were established that consist of faculty, parents, community members, and current students. One group is tasked with the topic of instruction and curriculum, as well as making improvements to the overall instructional plan of the district in an effort to offer the best opportunities possible to every student (Orange County Public Schools, 2023).

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