

Too late? Too bad: Schools confront quiet problem of repeated late arrivals by students

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER

[Originally published on: Saturday, January 26, 2008]



GORDON DANIELS

Easthampton High School Principal Jeffrey Sealander, upper right, encourages students to arrive on time for the start of school. Officials have changed the tardy policy mid-year, in an attempt to reduce the number of unexcused late arrivals to school.

EASTHAMPTON - Easthampton High School students have been tardy to school nearly 2,000 times since its doors opened in September. An increase in tardiness over last year so alarmed school officials they took the unusual step of changing the school's tardy policy mid-year.

'That's a pretty staggering number,' said Stefan Czaporowski, assistant principal of the school, which has an enrollment of 530 students, representing a tardiness rate of 4.2 percent.

'I didn't even think our school was big enough to have that many tardies this year,' said Darren Som, a 15-year-old sophomore from Easthampton. 'That's outrageous.'

Easthampton High is following a path taken by Amherst Regional High School, which toughened its tardiness policy in August.

'Teachers last year weren't catching as many students,' said Michaela Tarr, who works in the dean's office at Amherst Regional. This year, Amherst students serve a half-hour detention for each tardy, while last year they were allowed three tardies before getting hit with detention. Last year it was up to the teachers to record tardiness. This year, the dean's office is in charge - and that has meant consequences of being late are felt.

'Students pick a day for detention when they walk in the door,' said Tarr. 'We really cracked down this year on being tardy to school.'

Even so, this year's 4.6 percent tardiness rate is actually higher than last year's at Amherst Regional. As of Jan. 17, there have been 4,892 tardies since September out of a student body of 1,234. With 85 school days so far this year, that represents a tardiness rate of 4.6 percent. Last year's tardiness rate was 4.5 percent.

Czaporowski said many school administrators he's spoken with say they are finding it hard to cut the number of late student arrivals.

The figures at Easthampton break down like this: 36 students have been tardy six or more times, 15 students have been tardy 15 or more times and 19 students have been tardy more than 20 times. (No students were counted twice in those numbers.) Czaporowski said the average is about 25 tardies per day.

He noted that as of this time last year, there had been 1,573 tardies on the 80th day of school, with a student body of 490 - a tardiness rate of 4 percent.

Officials from other local high schools say that while contending with the problem of late students is always a challenge at the high school level, they haven't noticed a marked increase over past years.

Northampton High School this year has logged 1,332 tardies. With an enrollment of 904 students and 78 days of school as of Jan. 17, the NHS tardiness rate is 1.8 percent.

At Hampshire Regional High School in Westhampton, out of its 830 student body, 1,539 tardies were logged since the start of this school year (84 days), according to Mark A. Folta, assistant principal, which represents a tardiness rate of 2.2 percent.

Policy changes

In Easthampton, the School Committee changed its tardy policy on Czaporowski's recommendation. The former policy called for a 30-minute detention for each tardy after the first one, with no regard for a student's repeat offenses, and no notification of the parents.

The new policy, which went into effect two weeks ago, toughens the rules. It was mailed to parents last week.

Czaporowski said there are many problems with students coming to school late: They miss class time and set a bad precedent for college and work. He noted that students often complain to him about having their hours cut at their part-time jobs, mostly because they miss work or arrive to work late. If students practice being timely for school, they are more likely to be on time for their part-time jobs as well, he said.

Officials hope the new policy will address the problem. It involves contacting parents and penalizing students.

'I'm hoping that if the parents know how often their children are late, that maybe they'd help to get them to school on time,' Czaporowski said. 'If we're trying to get students ready for the real world, allowing them to be as late as they want to is not going to help them.'

Mark Jackson, principal at Amherst Regional High School, said attendance and tardiness are a continuing challenge that all schools face, but he noted that as far as Amherst is concerned, the degree of the problem has remained the same in recent years.

'There is a distinction between policy and enforcement,' Jackson said.

He noted that expectations clearly stated in the policy help to avoid problems, but being understaffed makes it difficult to enforce those expectations. There are two deans of students at Amherst Regional, and their responsibilities include talking to students, helping them solve their tardiness issues, managing paperwork and following up with students who fail to serve detention.

'Tardiness is only one of many areas for which they are responsible,' Jackson said.

Easthampton responds to a problem

Jessica Wiseman, a School Choice student from Hadley and senior at Easthampton High, has hurried a few times this year to get to school on time. She leaves about an hour before school starts to make it on time, but was late once before the new policy went into effect.

'The consequences were extreme,' said Wiseman, who leaves her house at 6:30 a.m. to make it to school before the 7:45 a.m. bell. 'We have a certain window of time to get here and it's really hard to scrape off your car at 6:30 in the morning.'

Wiseman joined the committee Czaporowski established to look at the policy. Thanks to her and other students' input, the old policy, which called for detention after two tardies, was replaced with one that calls for detention after three tardies.

The 17-year-old was late to school because her car broke down during her commute. She said most students are late because they oversleep. 'It's usually the same group of people that teachers are like 'Oh he'll be in in 10 minutes,' Wiseman said.

Meanwhile, Darren Som, the Easthampton High sophomore, was marked tardy 20 times this year. Many of those tardies came when the bell rang as he was walking to class, using the bathroom or entering the building, he said. He served his detention penalties, which, after a while, became a nuisance.

'At first it was like, 'Whatever, it's just a detention,' Som said. 'And then I had things to do but I had to stay after school for detention.'

Wiseman said she knows there are times when a parent is the cause of a student's tardiness.

'My friend is tardy a lot because her mother takes her time in the morning,' Wiseman said. 'I don't think it's really a choice; it's just something that happens.'

Tardies cast a shadow on after-school activities. Students who have detention on any given day are not allowed to attend club meetings, rehearsals or field trips. To avoid detentions, some students choose not to come to school at all, if they are running late, Wiseman said.

'If you get a detention on your record then it looks bad,' she said.

Czaporowski said it may take time before the new policy results in improvements. Another policy he came up with this school year is Saturday detention for those who skip two detentions. To avoid more Saturday and weekday detentions, Som has been tardy-free since December, allowing him more time to finish his chores and do what he wants for the rest of the day.

'It's so early in the morning on a Saturday,' Som said. 'I hate Saturday school with a passion.'

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.