

# New attendance policies increase punctuality

By AIDAN DOWNEY

Student attendance, at this time a year ago, was 95.3 percent and has now increased to 96 percent as the administration has made attendance rates a priority.

Last school year, Grady's student tardies totaled close to 20,000, with approximately 15,000 tallied during first period. This year, the staff started strict attendance enforcement early in the year in an attempt to decrease first-period tardies.

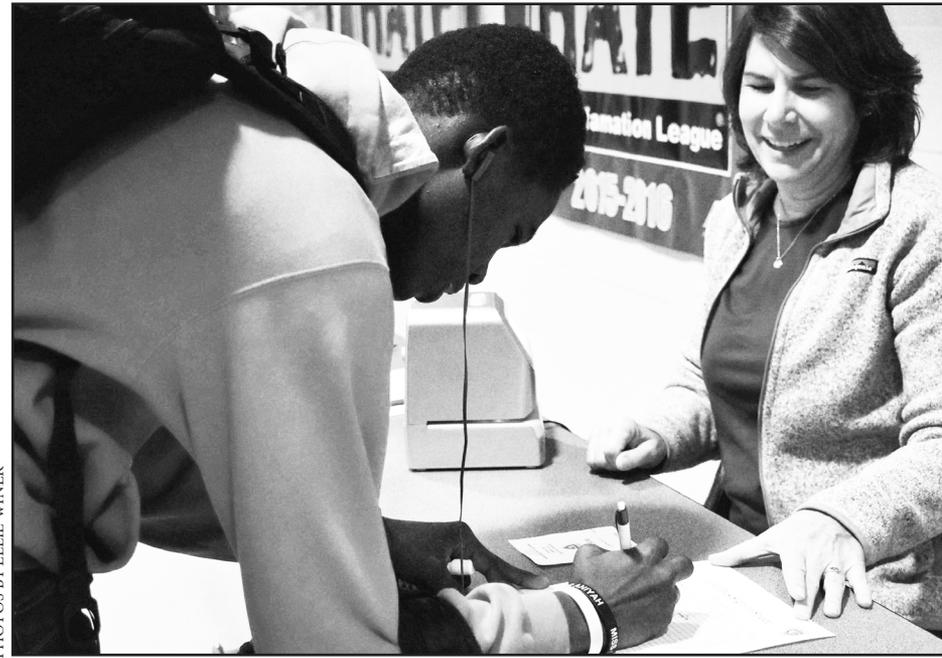
"I've heard more this year from teachers about first period tardiness," Principal Dr. Betsy Bockman said. "It's a burden on the teachers to have to keep up with kids that are late and missing work, but first period tardies are disruptive to the rhythm of the class and instruction."

Chronic absenteeism, when a student misses at least 10 percent of school days due to any type of absence, is a nationwide issue. Twenty percent of U.S. public high school students were chronically absent in the 2013-2014 school year; 17.8 percent of Grady students were chronically absent during that year. This rate decreased slightly in 2015 to 17.2 percent.

While Grady's chronic absenteeism is lower than the national average, Atlanta Public Schools' rate of 17 percent in 2013 exceeded the national average of 13 percent and increased to 20 percent in 2015, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, which has not released a 2015 national average.

APS is aware of the issue and is trying to improve attendance with new strategies: encouraging schools to create attendance teams; training administrators on attendance protocol; establishing an audit protocol: messaging families, according to the APS Office of Communications.

During the 2013-2014 school year, Grady's total unexcused tardies totaled 12,515, the lowest total in the past eight



**SMILES FOR SIGNATURES:** Parent volunteers, such as Paula Ward, help issue tardy slips for sophomore Christian Bryant and other students with excused late bus passes.



**TARDY TROUBLES:** Students have to wait in line in order to get tardy passes to go to their first period classes.

school years. However, in the 2017-2018 school year, Dr. Bockman improved methods for monitoring student attendance and found its highest numbers in recorded history: 19,478. The school cracked down on attendance, establishing guidelines for late students.

"Last year's data was the most accurate that we have done as it relates to tardies," Byron Barnes, the school's business man-



**TIME FLYING BY:** Student's tardy passes must be time stamped by officials. These stamps are later checked by their teachers.

ager, said. "In the past, when buses were late, we gave them (students) passes but didn't record the data. We started that when [former Principal Timothy] Guiney left, but last year, we had a full year of capturing those tardies."

Students often write other students' names when signing in to the tardy sheet in the morning, so Assistant Principal Raymond Dawson created a plan to use

student ID's to check into school when late. The process to enforce this procedure is lengthy and will not be used until next year.

While Grady's attendance has improved, other district schools struggle to make progress.

"For APS, our attendance has traditionally been high, with Grady and North Atlanta high schools coming in at the top of the list attendance-wise," Barnes said.

Grady's administration focuses on first-period tardy and attendance metrics rather than students skipping class because skipping happens at a lower rate.

"The number of students we know that are class cutters is very small compared to how many are actually late every day," Barnes said.

Barnes prepares data on attendance, tardies, discipline and academics. He tracks student attendance monthly and prepares weekly reports of unexcused absences in first period.

"The biggest challenge that we have is the number of students coming to school late everyday," Barnes said. "I identify those students who have been tardy three or more days within a given week, and then I pass that information to an administrator so that discipline can be issued."

Dr. Bockman attributed the high tardy rate to students getting up late, stopping on the way, parents dropping students off late and students coming from out of district. The staff further instituted new changes this year as well while also trying to jump on consequences quicker.

"The first 20 minutes are the heaviest," Dr. Bockman said. "If a child needs to eat breakfast, then it adds more time. This year we have tried to do some different things." □

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