

Tardy, attendance policies fall short

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The unthinkable has happened – you’ve overslept.

Your bedside clock reads 8:45, and you know there’s no way you’ll beat that tardy bell. Wishing for teleportation, you speed towards school. Your heart pounds as you sprint through the deserted halls. The tardy bell rings, and now you’ve done it: this is your second accrued tardy. You trudge on to the attendance office, meeting the other stragglers who share your fate.

You have jumped headfirst into the jaws of the monster that is Northwest’s tardy policy.

Before long, you’ll become intimately familiar with its details: your first tardy every year results in a warning, and subsequent tardies incur progressively harsher penalties, starting with hour-long after-school detention (ASD) on your second tardy. All tardies past your fifth will result in day-long in-school suspension (ISS), and tardies are tracked on a yearly basis.

Media specialist Natalie Strange said that the policy is a result of multiple tardies in past years, especially to first period. These tended to be “fast-food tardies,” Strange said, as students would stop at McDonald’s or Bojangles’ on the way, thinking their time plentiful.

You begrudgingly serve your ASD and get on with your life. But then, a friend approaches you in the hall, sporting a mischievous grin.

“You know,” your friend says with a wink, “you didn’t have to serve ISS. In fact, you could’ve gotten out of your tardy.”

“How?” you ask, skeptical. Too good to be true, right?

“It’s simple,” they say, ever the economist. “The school’s attendance policy specifies no punishment for your first five absences – and that resets each quarter. From there it’s obvious – whereas the cost of you showing up tardy, even by seconds, is a whole hour in ISS, if you had just not shown up, there would’ve been no punishment – none at all.”

You find this hard to believe – that’s just illogical – but there it is, in black and white on the school website.

“Accrued absences (excused and/or unexcused) that exceed five in number per period per quarter are considered excessive,” the policy reads. Class absences beyond five result in the student’s grade in that class being changed to a 59/F – which can be avoided by either making up time or obtaining a special waiver – but nowhere is there a mention of a penalty for five or fewer absences each quarter.

Principal Ralph Kitley, however, warns of the non-administrative consequences of skipping class.

“A student who chooses an absence to avoid detention or ISS due to tardies is punishing himself,” Kitley said. “Choosing to miss a class ends up



Junior Declan Feeley, senior Gabe Norman, sophomore Mary Moore and sophomore Briggs Spatafora stand in the attendance office waiting to get their tardy slips for first period. For the second month of school first period had the most class tardies with a total of 276 and sixth period had the least with 65 tardies. Photo by Franklin Wei

punishing you (the student) way more than anything we could do to you.”

Assistant principal Donnie Watkins agrees with Kitley, warning students to carefully consider the long-term consequences of skipping school, by pointing out the lost class time, which, he said, could hurt academic performance and degrade work ethic.

“Students need to be in school to learn,” Watkins said.

According to Watkins, the tardy and attendance policies are intended to maximize attendance and prepare students for life after high school.

“The purpose of school is to prepare students for a job,” Watkins said. “If you have a job, and you consistently show up late, or just don’t show up at all, what do you think’s going to happen?”

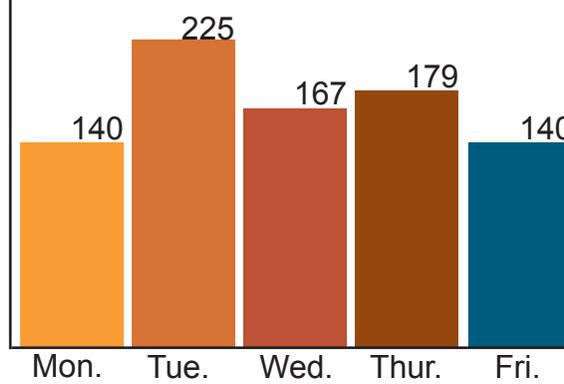
Watkins also calls on students to take responsibility for their actions. Students are near-adults, he said, and “should be able to do what’s right.” The point of the tardy policy, he continued, is to “instill a sense of responsibility in students.”

That’s true – to an extent. Tardies surely cannot go completely unpunished. However, it’s clear that the penalties for tardies are disproportionately harsher than the penalties for absences, whether excused or

unexcused. A student’s fifth tardy, per class, per year, results in ISS while there is currently no penalty at all for a student being absent up to five times every quarter.

If anything, tardies – which might result in missing just a fraction of class – ought to be penalized less harshly than absences, which result in missing an entire hour-long class – not more.

Tardies Mon.-Fri. for the first month of school (2018)



Graphic by Franklin Wei

no good reason are able to get off scot-free, as long as they remember to limit their absences to five a quarter – or up to 20 a school year. Although high school students should, in theory, be mature enough to weigh the consequences of their own actions, at the end of the day, all people – whether young or old – will respond to the incentives put in front of them.

Thus, the role of attendance and tardy policies should be to encourage students to be in class, but the current policies do the exact opposite: they create a system where the punishment – possibly hours of ASD or ISS –

is wildly mismatched with the “crime” – showing up just a few seconds late to class.

What is needed is a combined tardy and attendance policy that properly incentivizes class attendance. The two policies should work in concert to maximize a student’s class time; no longer should a tardy for unavoidable reasons – traffic or car issues – be penalized more harshly than an unexcused absence with no good justification. Students should be granted more warnings or tardies should reset quarterly, giving students a “clean slate,” like absences do now. The penalties for absences should shift from a quarterly to yearly basis, which would discourage excessive absenteeism.

However, a more stringent attendance policy could bring some unintended consequences if not implemented with care. Students who are absent for a legitimate reason – such as injury or chronic illness – face enough challenges already. School policies should not add to these challenges by forcing students to either obtain a special waiver to avoid failing their classes, or serve time – a punishment that is eerily reminiscent of our criminal justice system. Therefore, the distinction between excused and unexcused absences should be reinstated. Doing so would clear the way for harsher penalties for unexcused absences.

Northwest’s current attendance and policies combine to create a discordant system that fails to accomplish its goals. These incompatible policies fall short of what Watkins called Northwest’s number one priority – “providing a great education” – and are in dire need of reform if our school is to continue being the focal point of excellence that we all know it to be.