

Collaboration charts successes for Tacoma students

BY STEVE DUNKELBERGER

Thursday, 4 May 2017



PROGRESS. Graduate Tacoma unveiled its annual Community Impact Report that charts progress on educational programs for all ages of Tacoma Public School students. *Photo by Steve Dunkelberger / The Tacoma Weekly*

The Foundation for Tacoma Students and Graduate Tacoma released the 2017 Community Impact Report toward the community-defined goals for all grades and all Tacoma schools at an unveiling event that about 200 community boosters attended April 28 at Metro Parks Tacoma's STAR Center.

A collection of Gray Middle School eighth graders punctuated the fact that data points represented real students by parading through the audience to the stage to state their future. Some will be lawyers. One would be a surgeon. Another plans to be an industrial designer. Yet another will be a software designer, while another will repair cars. Another will be a teacher and another will be a forensic scientist.

The take away was that the good numbers are up and the bad numbers are down for the most part in the 17 different student and community indicators used to chart progress, but more work needs doing to reach the cradle-to-career goals set seven years ago as the 2020 target nears.

The overall achievement gaps between white students and minority students and those in poverty are closing. Students seeking education after high school is on the rise, with a 92 percent increase in the number of seniors submitting formal plans to enroll in college or certification programs. Enrollment in summer programs grows in an effort to stem the educational loss during summer vacations that is known in educational circles as the “summer slide.” The number of students who attend summer programs is now, 6,400, an almost doubling since 2014. High school graduation rates are up. Specifically, the district’s high school graduation rate is 85 percent, six points higher than the state average and one point away from the goal of 86 percent by 2020.

“We are a few years ahead of schedule, but we aren’t there yet,” Foundation for Tacoma Students CEO Eric Wilson said.

The non-profit foundation serves as the umbrella organizer of the citywide of parents, educators, business owners and elected officials under the Graduate Tacoma campaign banner.

Some of the effort’s goals are lagging or even losing ground, however. Chronic absenteeism in elementary and high school is increasing, for example, while absences of middle school students are dropping. The readiness gap between white and Hispanic and multi-racial children entering kindergarten, for example, has grown since 2013.

“What this data says is that we have to dive deeper to figure it out,” Wilson said, noting that information will then drive the work to reach the cradle-to-career goals set seven years ago.

Community members set those goals in a call-to-action after Tacoma schools were labeled a “drop out factory,” with a graduation rate of just 55 percent. That effort quickly morphed into Graduate Tacoma, a partnership of some 250 groups and organizations to boost educational achievements at all levels by all students under the mantra of “what gets measured, gets done.”

Tacoma Schools Superintendent Carla Santorno had much to celebrate in the community impact numbers, but she reminded everyone to continue to be engaged and focused on the goals.

“There is something special going on in Tacoma,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Detailed reports about programs, partnerships and achievements in educational efforts can be found at GraduateTacoma.org.