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EDITORIALS

Tacoma graduation goals lofty but reachable

Good progress being made in graduation rate, reaching 82.6%.

Graduate Tacoma project also aims at postsecondary success

Challenges include closing gaps for students of color

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD



The drumbeat of doom rarely lets up when it comes to Washington's education system. Teacher shortages have arrived, a levy cliff is on the horizon and billion-dollar funding inequities that violate a Supreme Court order will persist at least until next year.

Our K-12 public schools also show up on national measures of mediocrity. Washington ranks 28th in per-student education dollars, and teachers here are paid some of the least competitive salaries in the U.S., according to [a report released last week by Rutgers University](#).

What a refreshing change of pace, then, to see Tacoma Public Schools defy those challenges and make progress toward moving more students into gowns and mortarboards – not just high school graduation, but also college.

[The Foundation for Tacoma Students](#) released its 2016 Community Impact Report this week, and shared it with 200 community partners at its annual mobilization event Tuesday. One big highlight: The rate of students graduating high school on time has climbed steadily across all poverty, race and ethnic groups and reached 82 percent overall. Nearly identical gains were reported for the five-year-extended graduation rate – a key gauge for ensuring kids who fall behind aren't left behind.

The Graduate Tacoma project was formed in 2010. Its goal: To increase Tacoma's public high school graduation rate by 50 percent in time for the Class of 2020 to walk across the stage. A USA Today article that branded Tacoma schools among the nation's "dropout factories" prompted a community crusade to flip the script and turn campuses into graduation factories.

It didn't stop there. Graduate Tacoma also pledged to increase by 50 percent the rate of local students who earn a college degree or technical certificate. Six years of data make clear this postsecondary goal will require the most strenuous lifting between now and 2020.

The foundation tracks student academic data across several benchmarks starting in elementary school. An upward trajectory since 2010 can be seen in many categories, including:

- Sixth-grade achievement. Fully 86 percent of these children are passing their classes, with students in poverty making the most strides. (Alas, black and Pacific Islander sixth-graders have slid backwards.)
- College entry exams. The percentage of students taking the SAT has skyrocketed by 97 percent. (Math scores have declined, however.)
- High-school graduation achievement gap. Tacoma's graduation rate tops the state average for a second straight year, thanks to consistent improvement across all groups of students. The gap has closed between white students and students of color, as well as between non-poor and poor students. (Eliminating that gap should not be too much to hope for.)

To its credit, the foundation doesn't gloss over bad news. Ninth-grade achievement has been up and down, underscoring the often-bumpy transition kids face entering the pivotal high school years. The 17-percent increase in the gap between poor and non-poor freshmen who pass their classes is cause for concern.

The transition into kindergarten also shows rough spots – particularly for Hispanic children, for whom the readiness gap has increased by 20 percent compared to their non-Hispanic peers. Not only are they disadvantaged at the start of the K-12 experience, they're also less likely to advance past the end of it. The percentage of Hispanic and black students enrolling in college has stayed flat since 2010.

"This is a place where we have a long way to go," says Eric Wilson, the foundation's president and CEO.

It will require more programs like Tacoma's [Palmer Scholars](#) and Washington's [College Bound Scholarship](#) to turn the numbers around.

And that will go a long way toward helping every student achieve success from cradle to college and career.