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As Tacoma graduation rates rise, educators and community look to next steps

Graduate Tacoma issues third annual report

Measures educational indicators

Graduation rates and college enrollment increasing



Graduating high school is no longer enough.

With graduation rates in Tacoma Public Schools on the upswing, educators and others are focusing not only on giving kids a good start and getting them across the high school finish line, but also on students' life after high school.

This week, the Graduate Tacoma movement — sponsored by the nonprofit Foundation for Tacoma Students and about 200 community partner organizations — released its [third annual report](#) on education statistics in the city.

In conjunction with the data release, Graduate Tacoma also gathered participants from its partner groups and asked them to brainstorm solutions to educational challenges.

The Graduate Tacoma report is a summary of educational indicators from preschool to college and career, a look at everything from third grade literacy scores to student absenteeism rates. Sources for the data include not only Tacoma Public Schools, but also state agencies and the College Board.

Eric Wilson, president of the foundation, said increasing college completion rates is an important goal for Graduate Tacoma.

“What seems to be happening is that there’s momentum, a culture shift,” he said. “The school district and its higher education partners are creating a college-bound culture.”

When Graduate Tacoma launched during the 2010-11 school year, fewer than half of Tacoma Public Schools’ seniors took the SAT, required by many colleges for admission. In the 2014-2015 year, 77 percent did, the report states.

What’s changed in the interim: Tacoma Public Schools began paying for all high school seniors to take the test.

The district also began administering the test during school hours, eliminating the need for students to travel to a testing center on a Saturday, the traditional day of the week the SAT is administered.

Both the cost of the test and the Saturday transportation can pose challenges for low-income students, educators say.

Average SAT scores have declined, from 1,461 in 2010-11 to 1,316 in 2014-15, according to the Graduate Tacoma report. Over the past year, reading and writing scores increased, but math scores dropped. With this year’s overhaul of the SAT — including more reading and more math word problems that reflect new educational standards — educators will be watching as new baseline scores emerge.

“We still have some work to do,” Wilson noted.

Helping Tacoma kids succeed in college involves more than academics, according to Steve Smith, director of the College Success Foundation in Tacoma, a Graduate Tacoma partner that provides scholarships and support for low-income students.

College Success mentors work with high school juniors and seniors, helping them with college and scholarship applications and ensuring they complete the high school courses needed for college admission. Mentors stay with students through their first year of college.

“Part of it is helping students make the transition from high school to college,” Smith said.

Even earlier, educators and others need to reach out to students who may be the first in their family to contemplate going to college.

“It’s helping a kid think, ‘I can be there,’ ” he added.

Juanita Cantrell-Jeffreys, a career counselor at Tacoma’s Foss IB World School, said it’s important to walk students through their chosen career pathway.

“Based on what you’re good at, you make an informed decision,” she said. “Are you interested in health careers or computers? Does it take a two-year degree or a four-year degree? I tell them, ‘You’re in the driver’s seat.’ ”