

Tacoma Schools continue to make strides in most areas

BY **STEVE DUNKELBERGER**

Thursday, 31 March 2016



MARKED IMPROVEMENT. More than 200 people attended an event at the STAR Center last month that highlighted the release of Foundation for Tacoma Students' "2016 Community Impact Report." *Photo by Steve Dunkelberger / The Tacoma Weekly*

Spreadsheets and partnerships are doing what text books and class instruction couldn't do alone. Students in Tacoma Public Schools are largely learning more, passing more classes and increasingly looking at their educational options for after they graduate.

"The bottom line is that what gets measured gets done, and we have proved that," said Superintendent Carla Santorno.

Foundation for Tacoma Students, the non-profit umbrella group that serves and coordinates partnerships for Tacoma schools, presented its "2016 Community Impact Report" to a crowd of more than 200 people at an event at the STAR Center last month that highlighted the progress the group's Graduate Tacoma drive to improve student achievement at all grade levels.

The Graduate Tacoma effort formed six years ago as a way to increase high school graduation rates, boost elementary school reading abilities and shrink what is known as the “achievement gap” between white students and minority students. The effort started in the wake of USA Today labeling the district a “drop out factory,” with a graduation rate of just 55 percent of high school seniors.

The district-wide gut check following that slam sparked the school board to set a goal of improving graduation rates by 50 percent by 2020, an effort that would involve all students in all grade levels as well as a unified partnership between district administrators, teachers, community leaders, volunteers, business owners and agencies.

So far the effort seems to be working, but everyone needs to remain engaged to reach the goals.

"There is a long road ahead," Foundation for Tacoma Students Board member and event emcee Holly Bamford Hunt said.

The overall graduation rate has jumped from 55 percent in 2010 to 82.6 percent last year, the highest district rate recorded, and above the state average. Preschool enrollment is up. Enrollment for summer learning programs has almost doubled. The “achievement gap” has all but evaporated.

One step back outlined in the impact report is that the rate of ninth grade students passing all but one of their classes or better has dropped from 72 percent to 70 percent. That is a key statistic because student success in ninth grade is a significant indicator of whether a student will graduate three years later or fall behind and potentially drop out of high school altogether.

"If they drop out, we lose them and we aren't likely to get them back," said Foundation CEO Eric Wilson.

The four-year, on-time high school graduation rate for Tacoma Public School:

2010: 55%

2011: 62%

2012: 68%

2013: 70%

2014: 78%

2015: 82.6%