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TOP 10 STORIES of 2015

7 TACOMA GRADUATION RATES NOW TOP STATE AVERAGE

Tacoma now has a school district others envy. The school district's graduation rate last year reached 82.6 percent. That is not only the highest rate since the state began tracking rates in 2003, but also shows the fifth straight year of gains, toward the district's goal of 85 percent by 2020.

On top of the sharp increase in graduation rates at each of the district's nine high schools is the narrowing of what some have called the "education gap" between white students and minority students and between students from affluent homes and those from poor households. The "graduation gap" between white and minority students is now less than 4 percent. The graduation rate for students receiving free or reduced lunch, a federal standard to determine poverty, was 61 percent in 2013. It is now 76.8 percent.

The full-court press to improve the district's high school graduation rate as well as student scores on standardized tests began



PHOTO BY STEVE DUNKELBERGER

SCHOOL. Tacoma has a graduation rate of 82.6 percent, the highest rate since tracking started in 2003, but also 5 percent higher than the statewide average.

in 2012, when the school board set student achievement goals at a time when graduation rates were hovering at 55 percent. The dramatic turnaround between when the district was labeled a "dropout factory" in a national publication in 2007 until now has

come from community involvement toward specific goals, transparency in district policies and efforts as well as openness around the district to listen.

The release of the district's graduation rate increases came as the district also learned that four of its schools have been named as Schools of Distinction, a state award that focuses on improvement that honors to the top 5 percent of schools in Washington. Those Tacoma schools are Geiger and Stafford elementary schools and Lincoln and Wilson high schools. The announcement marked the fifth year in a row for Wilson, which set a state record. Geiger has won the award four times while both Stafford and Lincoln are newcomers to the statewide honor roll. But Lincoln has the distinction of hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier this year as well as being home to the state's reigning Teacher of the Year Nate Bowling.