

Tacoma schools announce record percentage of students receiving diplomas in 2014

BY BRYNN GRIMLEY

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Tacoma School District administrators and staff took time out Tuesday to celebrate their record high school graduation rate — 78 percent for the district’s class of 2014, compared with 70 percent a year earlier.

It was cause to rejoice for a mostly urban school district that four years ago saw a citywide graduation rate of just 55 percent.

The statewide graduation rate is expected to be announced at the end of next month. Tacoma leaders hope the recent gains will put their rate above the statewide average, which last year was 76 percent. The state started tracking those numbers more than a decade ago.

One of the biggest local success stories can be found at Wilson High School, where the overall graduation rate rose to 91 percent — up 6 percentage points from last year’s rate.

At the start of last summer, Wilson Principal Dan Besett made it his mission to help seniors graduate who should have graduated in June with the rest of the Class of 2014.

Armed with a list of 23 names, he set out to have students complete missed tests, homework assignments and other requirements needed to graduate by September.

Besett “relentlessly” called the students over the summer. His message: Complete the work, graduate and he’d leave them alone.

His methods worked. All but two students met the requirements to graduate before September.

Wilson is just one example of what principals, teachers and counselors are doing to help students succeed.

Lincoln High School Principal Patrick Erwin said his staff has gone to similar lengths. Their willingness to work with students on weekends and after hours is what led to the school’s significant graduation rate increase, Erwin said.



Tacoma Public Schools Superintendent Carla Santorno hands a slice of cake to Wilson High teacher Cameron Rogers as he and fellow teachers, counselors and administrators celebrate the school’s graduation rate — 91 percent, the highest rate among the district’s comprehensive high schools.

DREW PERINE — Staff photographer

Lincoln saw the largest increase of all the schools with a graduation rate of 79 percent, up 13 percentage points from 2013.

“That sense of accountability to each other, that drives my school,” Erwin said.

Addressing a room of district officials, staff and community supporters, Tacoma Superintendent Carla Santorno fought emotion Tuesday as she announced graduation rate increases across all demographics.

“The graduation rates went up, significantly up, for every racial demographic,” she said. “That’s remarkable.”

Most notable was a 19.6 percentage point increase in the number of Native American students graduating in 2014 over a three-year period dating to 2012. Sixty-eight percent of Native American students graduated in 2014 compared with 48.6 percent in 2012.

The district’s Pacific Islander population saw an increase to almost 69 percent in 2014, compared with 51 percent in 2012.

The rate for black students went from 59 percent to almost 74 percent over the same period.

Although Tuesday’s announcement was celebratory, Santorno said the work is not done. The district has set a goal to have an overall graduation rate of 85 percent by 2020.

The most recent graduation numbers show that goal is attainable, said Kent Roberts, chairman of the nonprofit Foundation for Tacoma Students. “This really validates the work that has been done and gives us the motivation toward meeting our goal,” he said.

The foundation is a coalition of civic leaders with representatives from business, government, higher education, labor and other Tacoma-based charitable foundations. It sponsored a recent effort called Graduate Tacoma, meant to pull the community together to help mentor and tutor students, offer internship opportunities and prepare students for graduation.

School Board President Scott Heinze said the rise in graduation rates is a direct result of a system that includes teachers and guidance counselors conveying to students that they matter and following their progress throughout all four years of high school.

“They know who’s worth tracking and who’s at risk,” Heinze said. “They know every kid.”