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Superintendent Carla Santorno, right, leads cheers Thursday after Gray Middle School students hung the Velcro-backed number 82.6% on a banner heralding the record-breaking high school graduation rate for Tacoma Public Schools. At left are school board members Andrea Cobb and Karen Vialle.

Tacoma continues 5-year climb on graduation rates

82.6 %

Graduation rate, Tacoma Class
of 2015

55.3 %

Graduation rate, Tacoma Class
of 2010

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2015 graduation rate for Tacoma: 82.6 percent
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It's the highest since state began tracking the numbers
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Better data, more help for students and teachers, contribute to the
trend
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A year after surpassing the state average for the first time, graduation rates in Tacoma continue to climb, reaching a new high of 82.6 percent for the Class of 2015. Tacoma Public Schools officials announced the new figure Thursday.

It's the fifth straight year of

increases for Tacoma, and the highest since the state began tracking the statistic in 2003. The number represents a 27.3-percent increase from 2010.

Tacoma is part of a national trend that has seen graduation rates ticking upward in recent years. The U.S. Department of Education says the nation's high school graduation rate hit 81 percent for the Class of 2013, the highest level since

states adopted a new uniform way of calculating graduation rates five years earlier.

But 2015 School Board President Scott Heinze said Tacoma isn't necessarily measuring its success against others.

"We're competing with ourselves," he said.

He noted that almost two-thirds of students in Tacoma qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a widely used marker for poverty. That makes Tacoma's steady progress even more significant, he added.

Statewide graduation rates for the Class of 2015 likely won't be released until February. But some districts, including Tacoma, chose to re-

lease their numbers early.

Last year, Tacoma officials celebrated when the district's 2014 graduation of 78.3 percent topped the statewide average of 77.2 percent for the first time.

This year, they're cataloging the factors they say are influencing the upward trend here. Some examples:

- Hard work by teachers, principals and school counselors who, with the help of a district data system, can now keep better tabs on individual students and how they're doing in the classroom.

- New indicators of student success or failure. This year,

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for example, the school district began tracking ninth-graders who fail classes. The goal is to help them catch up before it's too late.

- Creation of what the district calls a "college-going culture." "When kids see kids they know actually getting what we promise them, it catches fire," said Deputy Superintendent Josh Garcia.

- Increased support from local colleges, community organizations and individuals outside the district. They are tutoring, mentoring and helping meet the needs of kids who lack food, clothing, school supplies and other basics, district officials say.

"This is what happens when parents, educators

and the community all come together around shared responsibility and high expectations for every child," said Eric Wilson, president of the Foundation for Tacoma Students.

Critics of the district question whether the gains are exclusively the result of hard work on the part of teachers and students, or whether there's statistical trickery going on.

They note that the introduction of programs such as the Willie Stewart Academy, which opened during the 2013-14 school year, artificially pump up graduation rates by moving some of Tacoma's most struggling students out of mainstream schools. By state defini-

tion, graduation figures from the academy aren't calculated in school or district statistics.

District spokesman Dan Voelpel said Tacoma looked at whether including numbers from the academy would alter the graduation rate for 2015, and found it would drop by about 3.5 percent. But he said districts across the state that have started similar programs are playing by the same rules.

Willie Stewart Academy has about 200 students at various stages in their high school education.

Superintendent Carla Santorno said closing the graduation gap between racial groups is especially important, and she's proud of progress on that front.

Graduation rates in Tacoma surpassed 2014 numbers for nearly every racial demographic: up 6.2 percent for black students, 2 percent for white students, 13.1 percent for Hispanic students and 11.4 percent for Pacific Islanders.

The only demographic group that dropped was Asian, which dipped from 2014's high of 86 percent to 83 percent in 2015.

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Tacoma Public Schools graduation rates

High school	2014	2015
Foss	74%	70%
Lincoln	79%	82%
Mount Tahoma	68%	74%
Oakland	15%	56%
School of the Arts	98%	97%
Science and Math Institute	97%	100%
Stadium	85%	91%
Wilson	91%	94%