

OPINION

thenewstribune.com/opinion

ABOUT EDITORIALS

Editorials represent the opinion of The News Tribune editorial board. They are written by Patrick O'Callahan and Cheryl Tucker.

OUR VIEW

Tacoma schools — and their friends — are on a roll

Underperforming schools? Dropout factories? That old narrative about public education in Tacoma needs an overhaul in light of what's been going right lately in the Tacoma School District. A spectacular success story is unfolding in the city's classrooms.

In 2007, researchers at Johns Hopkins University described all five of Tacoma's comprehensive high schools as "dropout factories." It was a glib condemnation based on a superficial analysis, but there was enough truth in it to sting. As recently as 2010, only 55 percent of Tacoma students graduated on time, in four years. The state average was 75 percent.

How things have changed. In 2014, the district's graduation rate actually surpassed the state graduation rate, 78 percent to 77 percent — a signal achievement for an urban district in which nearly two-thirds of the children come from low-income homes.

Other gains are equally impressive. For example:

■ In the 2009-2010 school year, 50 percent of high schoolers took the

college-entry SAT exam. In 2013-2014, it was 83 percent — the result of making it free, convenient and expected.

■ As of 2013, only 34 percent of the district's students were in advanced classes carrying college credits. Now 57 percent are — the result of automatically enrolling them unless they opt out.

■ Graduation rates have risen for blacks and Latinos as well as whites and Asians.

None of this has happened by accident. The gains have resulted from a deliberate, aggressive strategy carried out over the last three years by Tacoma school administrators, the University of Washington Tacoma and the Foundation for Tacoma Students.

Tacoma School Superintendent Carla Santorno deserves credit for throwing open the district's doors to the UWT and to community groups eager to help children. The Foundation for Tacoma Students has coordinated the involvement of those "community partners," which now include 150 companies, nonprofits, government agencies, foundations and advocacy groups.



Staff file photo

Baker Middle School seventh-graders — the class of 2020 — talk about their graduation plans at an October 2014 event hosted by the Foundation for Tacoma Students and Tacoma Public Schools.

There's not space here to do justice to all the efforts that are contributing to the district's success. A few highlights:

The University of Puget Sound announced in September that it would offer full college financing for any Tacoma student it admits. The UWT and the University of Puget Sound also offer generous financial aid to Tacomans.

Tacoma educators are saturating students with go-to-college messages from elementary grades on up. Some administrators have made an art of

hounding seniors who fell just a little short of graduating on time, nudging them into summer classes to earn their degrees.

United Way of Pierce County, the Black Collective, the Boys & Girls Clubs and many other child-focused nonprofits are working to prepare disadvantaged preschoolers for kindergarten and help them read at grade level by the third grade.

The district and the UWT have partnered to promote advanced positive-discipline practices in all schools. Done well, the Whole Child Initiative reduces disruptions, suspensions and expulsions.

The district and its partners still face a long, tough climb. At a certain point, the students who are easier to reach will have been reached, and educators will be struggling with kids who are more disconnected. Achieving an 85 percent graduation rate by 2020 — the district's goal — may take some miracles.

But don't underestimate an alliance that has shown it can push Tacoma's graduation rate to 78 percent in three years should not be underestimated.