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Educational foundation sets sights on ambitious graduation goals

Initiative aims to raise Tacoma's graduation rate to 87 percent by 2020



PETER HALEY/Staff photographer

Business people, community leaders and educators chat Thursday before a presentation about Graduate Tacoma at the STAR Center. Graduate Tacoma is a project organized by Foundation for Tacoma Students aimed at raising the graduation rate 50 percent over the next six years.

BY DEBBIE CAFAZZO
Staff writer

Kids from Gray Middle School get it. So do students from Lincoln and Foss high schools, the Tacoma School of the Arts and others.

They all were invited Thursday morning to help support a citywide push to boost graduation

rates and other learning goals in Tacoma Public Schools.

Now it's time for the adults to get behind the kids, say members of the Foundation for Tacoma Students, which sponsored the Graduate Tacoma event at the STAR Center in South Tacoma.

"We are going to become Tacoma's 12th Man," said former

Tacoma schools superintendent Jim Shoemake, who chairs the foundation. "This is our community's call to action."

The foundation, created in 2010 with fundraising as its primary focus, has expanded its mission. The board of directors

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RAISING THE BAR

The Foundation for Tacoma Students has compiled a list of cradle-to-college indicators it will be tracking to measure progress for students in Tacoma Public Schools.

To learn more, or to find out how you can help: graduatetacoma.org.

GRADUATION

From A3

now reads like a Who's Who of city civic leaders with representatives from business, government, higher education, labor and other Tacoma-based charitable foundations.

Behind the board is a sweeping collection of more than 100 organizations from throughout the city that have signed on to work together. They've pledged to help Tacoma students reach the goals the foundation highlighted Thursday in its first report to the community.

The foundation vows to update the report annually with statistics and trends on how Tacoma kids are doing.

The big goal: increasing Tacoma's 2010 graduation rate by 50 percent by the

year 2020 — when those Gray sixth-graders who helped host Thursday's event are scheduled to graduate.

In 2010, Tacoma's graduation rate stood at 58 percent, according to the foundation. It climbed about 10 percentage points by 2012, but the foundation has set an ambitious goal of 87 percent by 2020.

Boosting graduation rates isn't the only goal. The foundation also wants more of those graduates heading to college. And leaders realize that to change outcomes for high school students, they will have to start at the beginning of their academic lives.

Other areas targeted for action by the foundation: making sure kids enter kindergarten ready to learn, and raising the percentage of Tacoma third-graders

who read at or above grade level.

Behind those goals stand a broad group of community and school-based efforts, many of which were spotlighted Thursday. They range from doctors at Pediatrics Northwest dispensing books and advice to parents of preschoolers to efforts like the YMCA's Brotherhood program for boys and Sisterhood program for girls.

"You need a foundation," said ZeAyre Trimmings, a Lincoln senior who said he went from middle school failure to now being accepted by five four-year colleges. "The Brotherhood was there for me at the right time."

The Tacoma foundation, along with the school district, is also keeping an eye on efforts like

the expansion of eighth-grade algebra classes. Once offered only for the brightest students, the course is now standard fare in Tacoma middle schools.

Meeker Middle School teacher Shannon Rich calls it a "gateway subject" that students need to prepare for high school level math and for college.

Her advice to those at the "Graduate Tacoma!" gathering: "Stop saying, 'I hate math.' Math is in everything we do."

Tacoma Superintendent Carla Santorno told the audience that their presence is the first step to creating change.

"This is not rhetoric," she said. "We are on our way to making a difference."

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