

Spotlight shines on Tacoma students at community rally



BY DEBBIE CAFAZZO

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

DEBBIE CAFAZZO — Staff writer

Tacoma kids were front and center Tuesday during a pep rally for grown-ups staged by the Foundation for Tacoma Students and Tacoma Public Schools.

Outside the front door of the downtown event, the Lincoln High School drum line pounded out a steady beat. Meanwhile, a whirring wheeled vehicle made by students from the School of the Arts and the Science and Math Institute circled the entry space.



Inside, young participants included JROTC students from Mount Tahoma High School, a dance company from the Grant Center for the Expressive Arts, and the Ukulele, Guitar & Drum Club from Stafford Elementary. And Nolan Garrett, a SOTA junior, gave a soulful performance of one of his original songs, “All the Time.”

An estimated 700 educators, volunteers, business leaders and others gathered at the Bicentennial Pavilion at the Murano Hotel to celebrate Tacoma Public Schools’ successes and hear about new challenges they need to take up. Chief among those, said Superintendent Carla Santorno, is the need to end racial inequity in school discipline. She acknowledged that the issue is a national problem, but added that “our record is deeply concerning to me.”

As in many school districts around the country, black kids in Tacoma schools are disciplined at rates disproportionately higher than the overall student population. Forty percent of Tacoma’s suspensions and expulsions are black students; they comprise 20 percent of the district student body.

Santorno said that, all together, Tacoma students are suspended or expelled at a rate of 8 per 100 students — the fourth-highest rate in the state.

She said students who are suspended or expelled are often the same students who are already at the academic margins.

“The more time they miss, the less likely they are to graduate,” she said.

One way the school district is trying to change how student discipline is handled is with the introduction of a program called the [Tacoma Whole Child Initiative](#), developed in partnership with the University of Washington Tacoma. The initiative, which includes methods for teaching and reinforcing positive behavior, is already having an impact in schools, Santorno said.

“Teachers have more time to teach,” she said. “It builds a positive sense of community that makes kids want to go to school.”

She said 27 schools are part of the initiative, with the goal of phasing it into all schools by 2016.

Santorno shared several other statistics indicative of successful programs and problems the school district and the community must tackle.

The school board has set a goal of raising the district graduation rate to 85 percent by 2020. Santorno said the rate hit more than 70 percent in 2013, and she expects to hear more good news when 2014 graduation rates are announced by the state.

Kent Roberts, incoming chairman of the Foundation for Tacoma Students, said that “success requires reaching our students when and where they need us, from cradle to college.”

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