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Tacoma schools well on their way to 2020 goals

OPINION

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FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Whitman Elementary School kindergartener Cavali Davis, class of 2029, right, gives his undivided attention to Mount Tahoma High School class of 2020 member Aniya Critton as they shake hands after making a graduation pact during the the semi-annual Graduate Tacoma event last year. **Dean J. Koepfler** News Tribune file photo, 2016

There was a time when Tacoma's high school graduation rates dragged down state averages. Now Tacoma is leaving the state (and Seattle) in the dust.

When the community-wide [Graduate Tacoma](#) initiative began in 2010, just 55 percent of students were earning a diploma on time. Today's [four-year graduation rate is 85 percent](#), an astounding turnaround when you consider nearly two-thirds of Tacoma kids live in poverty.

Students in the poorest parts of town face far greater challenges than reading, writing and arithmetic. Too often poverty is coupled with a lack of family support and few resources to expand their horizons outside the classroom.

Inequitable school funding, [which this state is too familiar with](#), can result in unevenness in education quality and in whole groups of children falling behind peers in wealthier school districts.

Thankfully, the Foundation for Tacoma Students, which runs the Graduate Tacoma effort, doesn't accept unfair funding or poverty as an excuse for academic inertia. The umbrella group believes every child can excel, and the numbers prove the point: Since the foundation's inception seven years ago, the rate of Tacoma students graduating on time has climbed steadily across income, race and ethnic groups.

Tacomans should feel good about being at, or slightly ahead, of where the foundation said they'd end up in 2020: raising the high school graduation rate by 50 percent from the "dropout factory" days of 2010. What remains elusive, however, is the corresponding goal to increase college degree or technical certificate completion by the same 50 percent.

There's also room for improvement in [early-childhood benchmarks](#) that can predict future performance, such as kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading.

"We don't want to take our eye off 2020 because we're not there yet," foundation president and CEO Eric Wilson told The News Tribune Editorial Board last week.

Foundation leaders credit the collective impact of high expectations and measurable goals. One of the most commendable things they did was make the community part of the solution. Local businesses, nonprofits and others have skin in the game — a total of 240 community partners.

Picture this: At Jason Lee Middle School in the Hilltop neighborhood, parents, neighbors and [community members form a welcoming line](#) for incoming students on the first day of the school year, in hopes that a high-five might make the difference between a good or bad first day.

Sixth graders at Jason Lee also participate in a Jump Start program, where they learn fundamentals like how to navigate the cafeteria and gain study skills.

It's no surprise that [sixth-grade achievement](#) stands as a highlight in this year's Graduate Tacoma report. Ninety-two percent of all Tacoma sixth graders are passing all, or all but one, of their classes. Since 2010, that number has gone up 20 percent.

Better yet, achievement gaps are closing between white students and kids from other race and ethnic groups; sixth graders from poor households are catching up, too.

Tracking student achievement and other data across a galaxy of demographics is what the Graduate Tacoma project does best.

Some data points are concerning, especially if you believe attendance is critical to student success. While suspension and expulsion rates have dropped for ninth graders, [chronic absences have ticked up](#) slightly district-wide. Unexcused absences have increased at all age levels, including elementary school.

Catching students before they stop attending is key. So is forestalling steep learning losses during the summer break.

Here again, Graduate Tacoma has stepped up to form a summer-learning partner network that includes Metro Parks Tacoma, The YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club. [Summer Learning Tacoma.org](#) has grown to include 400 programs in three years.

Clearly the Tacoma Public School District is benefiting from both the data and drive of Graduate Tacoma. Students are learning that their success matters, and the community is getting the message that parents and teachers can't do it alone.