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Mount Tahoma High School student Kadire Haliti, Class of 2020, reacts with surprise after being asked to look into the eyes of her partner from Whitman Elementary School to see what color they are. They participated in a Graduate Tacoma event that introduces high school students of the present to those of the future.

Dean J. Koepfler News Tribune file photo, 2016

OPINION

Tacoma high school grad rate soars; will college follow?

From the Editorial Board

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Imagine sizing up a class of five-year-olds on their first day of school knowing that statistically the odds are stacked against them. Imagine knowing that nearly half should expect higher unemployment and lower overall lifetime earnings, in addition to a shorter life expectancy and an increased chance of incarceration.

It sounds like an absurd, dystopian scenario, but actually it's a haunting reflection of the year 2010. That was when [Tacoma Public Schools](#) recorded a shameful high school graduation rate of 55 percent.

In 2010, when teachers stood in front of a kindergarten class, they did so aware that only about half of students would end up at the finish line in four years.

The outlook is immensely brighter today. **Seven straight years of improvement preceded last week's announcement that Tacoma's on-time graduation rate now stands at 86.1 percent.**

When measured in real diplomas and commencement ceremony smiles, the difference is shocking. If the 2010 graduation rate had carried forward to 2017, some 565 fewer students would've crossed the stage last June -- the rough equivalent of a full graduating class at a Tacoma high school.

[“Dropout factories”](#) was the apt label given to Tacoma schools by national news in 2010, but it was unacceptable to Carla Santorno. She came on board as Tacoma's deputy school superintendent in 2009, then was promoted to superintendent in 2012.

Santorno leads with the mantra **“what gets measured, gets done.”** She, along with Tacoma's school board, deputy superintendent Josh Garcia and many other staff, identified a wide range of student data and used it to close gaps in access, opportunity and achievement.

By 2015, the district saw 20-point gains across every race and ethnicity, regardless of poverty, and its overall graduation rate surpassed the state average.

Teamwork is the trite but true reason for the turnaround. [Graduate Tacoma](#), a coalition of representatives from business, government, higher education, labor and charitable foundations, partnered with TPS. Together they've been relentless in their development of diploma earners.

But Santorno isn't one to bask in glory. She finds herself thinking about the 46 students who entered kindergarten 12 years ago but didn't graduate this year. “Where did those kids go? What happened to them?” she said in an Editorial Board interview last week.

Santorno and Eric Wilson, president and CEO of Graduate Tacoma, told us **there's more hard work ahead to close achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups.** They also want to focus on college enrollment numbers, which are well below where they need to be.

TPS tracked the Class of 2014 and found only 57 percent of students went on to two- or four-year colleges, apprenticeships or technical certification courses within a year of graduation. The state average is 61 percent.

Increasing college enrollment and completion rates by 50 percent by 2020 is the new metric TPS will be chasing, and it's a reasonable next step: The earnings gap between college grads and non-grads has never been as wide as today. Those who get a degree or certificate after high school earn 56 percent more, on average, than those who don't.

Santorno says the key to building bridges from high school to continuing education is developing aspirations early. She says middle school students often become motivated first by art, music and athletics.

Of course you have to name it to claim it, which is why, since 2012, TPS also requires students to complete a written High School and Beyond Plan before they graduate. The district also gives students access to SAT tutoring and pays for every student to take the exam.

What about navigating the complicated admissions and financial aid process? This is where the [Tacoma College Support Network](#) comes in. They've partnered with Graduate Tacoma to provide a roadmap for students.

In addition to scholarships, students get assistance with college financial aid forms and can attend workshops that include consultation with vocational and financial aid experts.

Today's kindergarteners will graduate in 2030. We don't know what challenges that year will hold in terms of science, technology and automation. We don't even know what the next five years will look like.

But we're happy to report Tacoma schools are moving in the right direction; they're doing their best to guide each child to a high school graduation celebration fortified to meet that uncertain future.