

Graduate Tacoma reaches key milestone, begins work on next phase

By **Steven Dunkelberger**
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Graduate Tacoma held its Community Impact Forum at the STAR Center last week, announcing that the district's graduation rate has passed its 2020 goal, with 89 percent of high schoolers now receiving diplomas, but more work remains to be done with improving academic performances by younger students. Tacomans can expect to soon see a large flag with the number 89 on it waving on the Tacoma Dome and government buildings around the city to mark the milestone. Photo by Steve Dunkelberger

Graduate Tacoma celebrated a key milestone in its community effort to improve student achievement in Tacoma Public Schools last week with the announcement that the most recent data shows 89 percent of students received diplomas within five years of high school.

Improving graduation rates was a key indicator of progress in Tacoma Public Schools that dates back to a time when the school district was labeled a “dropout factory” in 2010. Just 55 percent of its students graduated on time. That wakeup call led to the creation of Foundation For Tacoma Students, a nonprofit umbrella that has grown to represent 268 governments, nonprofits, businesses and community groups with the singular goal of improving student learning under the Graduate Tacoma banner by monitoring student activities, academic performances and setting “cradle to career” goals with a deadline of 2020, 10 years after the district’s low point.

“That is what is so different about the Tacoma story,” Tacoma Public Schools Superintendent Carla Santorno said at the event, noting the wide and diverse community involvement in improving academic success.

The community effort set goals on 17 achievement indicators, from enrollment in preschool to elementary reading levels and achievement gaps between white and minority or disadvantaged students as well as graduation and post-high school education rates.

“It’s been really easy for members of the community to wrap their heads around the idea of improving graduation rates,” said Eric Wilson, CEO of the Foundation For Tacoma Students that oversees the community effort to boost educational outcomes.

Graduation rates have climbed for the last seven years to record highs of 86 percent on-time graduations, and 89 percent for five-year graduations. More importantly to most people, the graduation and educational achievement gaps between white and minority students and between students from affluent and financially disadvantaged families has largely evaporated in most areas, statistically speaking. The district has 28,793 students with about 58 percent living in poverty as defined by free or reduced-cost lunch program participation. About 60 percent of students self identify as students of color.

Other improvement includes enrollment in college-credit courses that have jumped from 33 percent in 2012 to 71 percent last year and enrollment in college-preparation courses that have gone from 80 percent to 99 percent during the same time.

“It’s about creating a new culture of education,” Wilson said. “It’s about creating a new culture of expectations.”

The news isn’t all good, however.

The number of students missing more than 18 days of school, for example, is on the rise, from 26 percent in 2014 to 28 percent last year, mostly at the high schools, which peaks at 54 percent for seniors. On the other end of the educational timeline, less than half of kindergarteners are meeting all six state standards, an indicator that is actually worsening. It dropped from 48 percent in 2013 to 47 percent last year.

“It’s not saying the sky is falling, but the trend line is not moving up,” Wilson said. Groups are diving into ways to improve those numbers as well as planning on setting the next round of community goals as 2020 nears so that the momentum continues to improve student achievement by engaging more community partners.

“This work doesn’t sunset in 2020,” Wilson said.

The 2018 Community Impact Report, with interactive data dashboards about the report’s data, a calendar of events and ways to get involved, can be found at GraduateTacoma.org/data.