

News Release Everett Public Schools



Everett Public Schools

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Graduation rate for Everett Public Schools tops 90 percent

Students are now graduating from the district's four high schools at an extended graduation rate of 90.2% – up from just 53% for the graduating class of 2003

According to Chief Academic Officer Terry Edwards, the dramatic increase in the extended graduation rate for Everett Public Schools, "is the result of a lot of people working in a lot of different ways over the last six years. We were delighted last year when the rate rose to 81.5%, but this year's jump of more than 10% further affirms that work happening in the schools is making a difference." Edwards notes also that 125 more seniors earned diplomas in 2009 than did in 2008.

[When the school board six years ago declared the 53% graduation rate as reported by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\) "Not acceptable!"](#) district staff and then-superintendent Carol Whitehead established the *On Time Graduation Task Force*. The *Task Force* of high school principals and top district administrators has met at 7:00 almost every Tuesday morning for the last six years with one goal – to make sure that more students graduate from high school prepared for whatever future lies ahead, whether that be for an immediate career or further education.

Cleaning up and validating data were among first steps

The first step toward a better graduation rate was cleaning up data. "Statistics are no good if the data is faulty," notes Edwards. As he explains, six years ago, the state was establishing its rules for calculating high school graduation rates and dropouts, and districts were responding with systems and technology to track and calculate how well students did who entered high schools as freshmen.

"The state and school districts' access to technology improved the way we enter and keep data," says Edwards. "Using the state's student ID numbers, tracking where a student is living and attending school is more accurate than it was when all we had to go on were paper records, a birthday and middle initial to match and making countless phone calls to follow up on individual students. Better electronic data systems and cleaning up our records proved that our rate was not as bad as was first reported, but cleaning up data was not enough; we needed to make and launch strategic plans and programs to get more kids across the stage."

Personalized one-on-one detective work

Once the data systems were in place, the district instituted more processes to ensure that more students were graduating. Those processes include personalized one-on-one detective work. "When a student leaves this district, that departure counts as a dropout statistic unless we can prove the student enrolled in school somewhere else. Not all districts in all states are diligent about reporting their enrollment to former school districts," Edwards explains.

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Karen Sullivan, the district's student records coordinator, spends part of each day tracking such lost students. That means talking to their friends and relatives, watching Facebook and other social networking sites, and negotiating the bureaucracies of other state educational offices. Once she verifies that a student has entered school in Texas or Alaska or Rhode Island, that student comes off the potential dropout list for this district and becomes a potential graduation statistic for that other school district.

"The same thing is true of students who come to us from another country or another state," says Edwards. "Once they enter our system, they are a graduation responsibility of ours. No matter the quality or nature of their educational experience prior to becoming our student, we are responsible for helping each student meet graduation requirements here."

Board emphasizes the importance of "extended" graduation rate data

The school board made a strong statement when they asked for data about "on time" graduation rates and "extended" graduation rates, Edwards points out. "Ideally, we would like all students to graduate in four years. However, not every student matures at the same rate. Some students need more than four years to get through high school, and our board felt then and feels today that doing the work to earn a diploma is more important than the time it takes to reach that goal."

In 2004-05, when OSPI published Washington state district graduation rates for the previous school year, the data only included "on time" rates. By the next year, the state also began reporting two different kinds of graduation rate results – one percentage for students who earned a diploma in four years and another for those who earned that diploma in five years. The former is the "on time" graduation rate; the latter is the "extended" graduation rate.

Increasing math graduation requirements

While the district was focusing early on data systems, it also increased the math graduation requirement from two unspecified math classes to three challenging math classes. "We were right to increase the standards for graduation," says Edwards, "even though we knew doing so could reduce our graduation statistics." To make sure that didn't happen, the *On Time Graduation Task Force* began searching for ways to remove graduation barriers for students who fell off graduation trajectory by failing a required class – in math or any other subject.

The importance of middle school in preparing students to graduate from high school

One such barrier-removal strategy was to switch some required high school classes to middle school. "We know middle school students are capable of doing more challenging academic work, and that there are advantages to their having experienced highly challenging courses in preparation for high school," says Edwards. "So we moved Washington State History to the middle school, and we made it possible for middle school students to take algebra and even geometry for high school credit." With some of those required classes out of the way in their high school schedules, students had more room for other classes. If they didn't pass those classes as eighth-graders, there was more time to help them make the grade in high school without losing a semester or more during those invaluable and limited four years required for graduation.

The role and the impact of high school "success coordinators"

Staff members known as *Success Coordinators* began working in high schools in 2005. Working hand-in-hand with high school teachers, counselors and administrators, these coordinators are sometimes called "gentle pitbulls" for their tenacious focus on the success of individual students. Once a student is identified as off trajectory for graduation (which means failing one class), the coordinators contact that student's family and design personalized interventions that wrap the stalled student with support and encouragement to succeed in school. "It's a carrot and stick approach," quips Edwards. "The coordinators and counselors are encouraging but tough. They make it difficult for a student to choose failure."

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“College going culture” is emphasized at all grade levels

Edwards acknowledges that while it is obvious why high schools would focus work on high school graduation, the work in grades K-12 is also helping to improve the graduation rate. He explains that standards and expectations at all grade levels are higher now. Middle and even elementary school students are looking at career options and understand what it means to be “at standard” in school. “Teachers at every grade level are preparing students for high expectations, and the results are obvious as more students are moving into the next grade level knowing more and able to do more.”

Superintendent Gary Cohn has been in his role as the district’s new superintendent for just eight months. “One of the things I found most intriguing about this district while a candidate for this position, was the *On Time Graduation Task Force* and the results they were achieving. I had seen their presentations at state conferences and marveled at how they focused attention on the success of each student. Now that I’ve been here a few months, I see that such dedication to excellence is the expectation and the norm for staff at all grade levels and in all categories in this district. The graduation rate increase is an impressive statistic, but more importantly, it means a better future for each student who goes through this public school system.”

History of Everett Public Schools graduation rate improvement

[Each winter, OSPI publishes graduation rates for each school district in the state.](#) Those rates reflect data from the previous school year. The 90.2% extended graduation rate being reported today is based upon data for students who graduated in 2009.

Graduation year:	Reported by OSPI in:	On time graduation rate	Extended graduation rate	Dropout rate
2003	Winter 2004	53.0%	Not reported	6.7%
2004	Winter 2005	58.0%	61.0%	11.7%
2005	Winter 2006	62.6%	66.7%	6.7%
2006	Winter 2007	74.2%	79.6%	4.8%
2007	Winter 2008	73.7%	79.2%	4.8%
2008	Winter 2009	76.8%	81.5%	4.4%
2009*	Winter 2010	83.77%	90.27%	2.41%

*As of the date of this news release, OSPI has authorized the district to release graduation rate information but has not published statewide data on the OSPI Web site.

Related story

In May 2008, high school principals Terry Cheshire (H.M. Jackson High School), Catherine Matthews (Everett High School), Cathy Woods (Cascade High School) and Sally Lancaster (Sequoia High School) were honored at the annual Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) regional Student Achievement Leadership Award ceremony for their leadership and work on the *On Time Graduation Task Force*.

The accolades given to the principals for the powerful impact their work was making, even then in the earliest years of the task force work, included the following comments:

The high school principals in the Everett School District have made extraordinary efforts and taken great personal and professional risks to ensure that EACH student learns to high standards AND graduates on time. For three years, in weekly tactical meetings, they identified the greatest barriers to student success and ways to eliminate them. They pinpointed what would tip students toward success and launched programs and policies to make success the norm.

As a result, over the last three years the district’s graduation rate has risen from a dismal 50% to 80% because of the principals’ leadership.

The list of policies and changes they made is too long to enumerate, and many of you may have heard their presentations at WASA and WSSDA conferences. What is important to know about these principal leaders is:

- their work took moral courage in the face of opposition and inertia,
- tenacity in the face of passive resistance,
- determination when not all plans succeeded,
- patience with the slowness of change,
- strength to do this work and everything else,
- and deep and abiding belief that their work matters.

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