

PortlandTribune

'Cradle to Career' a road map to boost graduation rates

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It's not just Portland Public Schools that suffers from an embarrassingly low graduation rate.

Multnomah County's five other school districts share the struggle.

Reynolds ties Portland at 53 percent. Parkrose is at 55 percent. David Douglas is at 57 percent. Centennial is at 62 percent. And Gresham-Barlow comes in at 69 percent, according to 2010 data.

Any way you cut it, "We're failing our kids," says Dan Ryan, executive director of the Portland Schools Foundation, the independent nonprofit that has helped raise funds for local schools since 1998.

Since the foundation works on behalf of all of the county's schools, it's embarking on a major collaborative effort called "Cradle to Career" to address the most persistent problems in education from birth to earning a living wage at age 25.

Cradle to Career has five major goals for success along the spectrum. Behind every goal is an assessment of the problem, backed up by mountains of data.

For instance, the first goal is "Be prepared for school," but four factors stand in the way. One is that of the 3,791 high-poverty students eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start services, there isn't enough space for all, so just two-thirds of those children are served.

That – as well as inconsistent access to prenatal care, quality child care and full-day kindergarten – puts kids on uneven ground in school from the start, the report shows.

A council of 42 top government, education, business and community leaders – including the six district superintendents, Portland and Gresham mayors – began meeting in April to tackle the issues and monitor the work.

No stand-ins are allowed at the meetings; each of the members must take full ownership, Ryan says.

Having all of the players at the table made it easy to boost the effort with a national initiative called Strive, says Jeff Edmonson, executive director of the Cincinnati nonprofit.

"The question was, how could we do education not as a little red schoolhouse ... and how could we organize existing resources better to have more impact?" Edmonson asks.

Portland is the fifth U.S. city to participate in the Strive network, which comes with \$100,000 to leverage in resources. "We're program-rich but system-poor," says Ryan. "Why not let an intermediary connect the dots?"

The Portland schools foundation has begun already using that approach in its "Ninth Grade Counts" work, offering 20 different programs across the county to engage incoming at-risk freshmen during the summer before starting high school.

Edmonson says Portland is on the right track. He's seen other cities just "think of a program and implement it."

"The concept of 1,000 points of light doesn't work," he says. "It's what we call 'spray and pray' philanthropy – spray your resources all over and pray something happens."

Here, he says, "all the providers are together, looking at the data."

For information, see thinkschools.org.

– Jennifer Anderson

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