

Removing Barriers to Learning

Washington's Tukwila School District is meeting the needs of its diverse set of students

SESSION *Eliminating Barriers for Underrepresented and Students of Color Through Board Policy* | **Presenter** Tukwila School District (Washington), Mary Fertakis, director

Tukwila School District, located in Tukwila, Washington (just a little south of Seattle), is truly an international school district. The student body represents many different cultures and ethnic groups and speaks more than 60 languages. Of the 2,800 students enrolled in the district's five schools, 37 percent qualify for English language learner (ELL) services.

With this diverse mix of students, district leaders have made it their focus to build relationships with all students and remove barriers to their learning. For all students, especially ELL students, there can be many barriers including academic, financial, institutional and systemic, along with family and cultural barriers.

Addressing academic barriers, Mary Fertakis, a member of the Tukwila School Board, said that her district has hired a number of guidance counselors to help students learn about and apply for post-secondary opportunities. At the high school, there is one guidance counselor for every 125 students. This cadre of counselors helps families break down the price of college tuition, fill out financial aid forms, and make sure students are keeping up with application deadlines.

When students graduate from high school, the district's guidance counselors continue to work with them during the summer to avoid

"summer melt" where students, who are already accepted to college, get intimidated by the cost of tuition and don't go.

"Most of us think that when we hand them a diploma, our responsibility ends," Fertakis said. "We changed that way of thinking in our district. We want to make sure they make that next step."

The district also focuses on its younger students in elementary and middle school.

"One of the biggest predictors of high school dropouts is students getting an 'F' in ninth grade," Fertakis said. "We need to make sure our students are on track for success before they reach high school."

To help its younger students succeed, the district has instituted transition goals for all students entering and leaving middle school. At the middle school-level, there is one counselor for every 150 students. They meet with every eighth-grade student and their family and develop a "High School and Beyond Plan," which includes education/career goals and helps students register for high school classes.

Connecting with and gathering input from families from all different backgrounds has also been important to the district. To accomplish this, the school board changed the way it operates. An hour before each regular school board meeting, it holds a



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board study session for the board to ask questions and listen to concerns from families.

"We ask the question, 'What's a barrier for your child to get an education?'" Fertakis said. "If you ask that question, they will tell you. This process has really helped our board identify issues we need to address."

By removing barriers to learning for all students, the Tukwila School District saw lower dropout rates and a remarkable 15 percent increase in its graduation rates from the 2014 school year to 2015. Not only are students improving academically but they're also learning about other cultures and developing a sense of social justice. Fertakis saw this growth and development in her own son who developed friendships with students from different backgrounds and cultures.

"We look at our diversity as an asset," Fertakis said. "My kid has gone to school with the world. All our students gain an understanding of how different cultures interact. They're incredible global citizens." ■