

Multnomah Education Service District

2024-25 Hearing Minutes

MESD Board Room
11611 NE Ainsworth Drive
Portland, Oregon
Tuesday, May 21, 2024

6:00 pm

Present:

TSCC: Chair Harmony Quiroz, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Matt Donahue, Commissioner Tod Burton, Commissioner Allison Lugo Napp, Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

Absent: None

Multnomah Education Service District:

MESD Board Members: Helen Ying, Denise Peterson, Rene Anderson, and Dr. Samuel Henry

Staff: Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley, Executive Assistant to Superintendent and MESD Board Secretary Heather Severns, Assistant Superintendent Sascha Perrins, Director of Business and Operations Doana Anderson, Director of Curriculum Angela Hubbs, Director of Regional Equity Initiatives and Partnerships Reiko Williams, Senior Program Administrator for Business and Operations Sara Bottomley, Director of Student Services Todd Greaves, and Director of Communications Marifer Sager

Chair Harmony Quiroz opened the public hearing by welcoming everyone to the hearing and briefly introducing the duties and responsibilities of the TSCC. She asked the Commissioners and staff to introduce themselves and state if they have business relationships with the district that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. Each commissioner and staff member introduced themselves and stated they had no conflict of interest with the district. She asked the district to introduce the board members and staff present. Then she asked if Superintendent Coakley would like to explain the budget briefly. She stated that following Superintendent Coakley's introductory remarks, testimony from the public would be taken.

Superintendent Paul Coakley said the district is dedicated to high fiscal accountability and responsibility. Their staff has a proven track record, allowing them to support the component district across the region while remaining flexible with the ever-changing needs of the students. The changes were significant throughout the pandemic and post-pandemic period. He said he feels good about their work and the messages they hear from the component districts. The level of support is there for the work that is happening. The budget is built on the strategic plan, Blueprint 28. It has three goals that are:

1. Creating a high-quality learning environment for all;
2. Operationalizing systems that engage our community; and
3. Building a culturally responsive workforce.

The focus of the strategic plan supports the region in specific areas, such as Student Services, School Health and Special Education, Instructional Services, Technology Services, Communication and Community Engagement, and Administrative Services.

Following Superintendent Coakley's remarks, Chair Quiroz asked if anyone had signed up to comment publicly. She said anyone wishing to speak is limited to three minutes. Executive Director Willhite and MESD Board Secretary Heather Severns reported that no citizens signed up to speak at this hearing, and no written comments were received.

With that, the commissioners started their questions.

TSCC Questions:

Commissioner Matt Donahue asked the following questions:

This year we see a decrease in federal funds in the budget, an expected change as pandemic aid dries up. Are there any programs formerly paid for with pandemic aid that are now going away? What work or programs that were being done with these dollars will now stop?

Ms. Dona Anderson said to the greatest extent possible, the district found one-time uses for most of the federal pandemic aid, such as seed money to start up Rivercrest Academy, roving special education teachers to mitigate impacts during substitute teacher shortages, and HVAC maintenance. Unlike School Districts, ESDs did not receive any funds in the third round of aid, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III), to be used for general purposes.

MESD did receive ESSER III funds to provide additional support for four specialized programs: the Youth Corrections Education Program (YCEP), the Juvenile Detention Education Program (JDEP), the Hospital School Program (HSP) and the Long-Term Care and Treatment Education Program (LTCT). Given the short-term nature of the funds, JDEP and YCEP programs have used the funds for special projects, including updating Career Technical Education equipment, digitizing student records for easier access, and replacing classroom furniture to meet updated facility safety requirements.

Chair Harmony Quiroz asked these follow-up questions.

We have talked in the past about the needs highlighted by the pandemic. Some needs are ongoing from your constituents. Moving through this stage and onto the endemic stage, are you seeing a shift back or forward? What does this evolution look like?

Mr. Sascha Perrins said the need has risen nationwide, not just in the MESD area. This continues to be the case. The district has not seen a pullback in the needs. MESD has created a Climate and Culture subgroup that works around the district to support positive and inclusive school climates. The subgroup looks at attendance, and other needs that have cropped up due to the pandemic.

Enrollment is trending down for many districts. Yet they still need the services. With enrollment decline and state budget struggling, there is a tipping point where districts may be unable to afford the services they want. Can you tell us what you hear from schools and any reductions you expect in the upcoming school year?

Mr. Perkins said there are a few places where the districts have been pulling back. MESD has just received the district selections for 2024-25. There has been some pullback with school nurse positions, about 4.8%, and the total program, including student health assistance, has been pulled back about 1.4%. There are also a few related services positions that have been pulled back. Overall, though, there is a net increase in special education.

Since the ESD offers a wide array of services, some service districts need more when they make cuts because they're legally obligated to do things in special education and health care.

Are you planning for future cut scenarios?

Mr. Perkins said they are unless the state school fund increases dramatically, which seems unlikely. The districts will likely have some challenges, so MESD will look at each piece and part and see how they can make it as lean as possible. The district expects that there may be some shifts next year.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked the following question:

Education funding is a frequent topic of conversation with the legislature. What is ESD's role in encouraging additional investments in education from the state?

Superintendent Coakley said MESD employs a Government Affairs Administrator who advocates for the ESD and the component school districts in Mid and East Counties (per their selections from the LSP). This individual works closely with statewide partners such as the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators, Oregon School Boards Association, Oregon Education Association, and Oregon School Employees Association to advocate for adequate school funding. In addition to meeting with legislators one-on-one, through this position, MESD helps convene an annual meeting of superintendents from all districts within the county and area legislators to discuss priority issues, which always include funding. In addition to the requested \$10.2 billion State School Fund, one recent example of the specific benefit from this type of position is that MESD recently saw \$8.3 million statewide investment in education programs for youth in the carceral system thanks to multi-year advocacy led by the Government Affairs Administrator.

Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:

What policy changes are you advocating for or hoping to achieve in your constituent districts?

Superintendent Coakley said that the cap for special education should be raised since every district is above the current cap. That would be huge. Then, there are also the buckets for Student Success for students of color, fully funding those or increasing them. For years, efforts have been made to weigh the funding based on the racial population.

Chair Quiroz asked the following question:

We'd like to address this question to the Board - but staff is welcome to join in as well. We've had conversations with you in recent years about work around equity, including an equity audit done prior to the strategic plan. You are now several years into this work. What are some changes to your operations you can share as a result?

Ms. Helen Ying said Dr Cookley mentioned one of MESD's goals is to have systems in place to operationalize things. So, the district is building a support system to permeate all aspects of MESD's services and work with an equity and inclusion focus.

She shared some examples of how they are doing that by building systems to permeate the agency. The board is utilizing a policy equity lens. The board is ensuring that all of the students they serve through these policies will now have a lens that they can use to review the guidelines as a part of their policy adoption process. They also open every meeting with a land acknowledgment and an educational opportunity topic to help remind them to place equity as the main focus and ground themselves in their work.

The board adopted an Educational Equity Policy back in 2018. They reviewed it in 2022. Then they used the tool to see how the board was doing. It took a couple of meetings to go through the review. The board came up with some ideas for making it even better.

The second thing she wanted to highlight was the Communication Department. The board learned there is a rollout of a strategy to build awareness and understanding of the agency's equity, which stands in multiple ways. One is that the website will have a link to the equity page and highlights with a section letting viewers select a language to view the website content.

Another one is sharing the equity work in the newsletters regularly and highlighting what the district

is doing in this area. The district has posters with the mission and vision and equity lens, which will be in all the conference rooms throughout this building and at the school sites as a reminder of what the district believes in and what they are doing to achieve what MESD believes in.

When the administrators meet, they discuss these essential aspects of the work and the expectations to pass on to their team members.

She said the most crucial part is that they are not only sharing information but also asking staff and the community to give feedback so that they know how they are doing. Then, they will use that information to make it even better.

The third thing she wanted to highlight is the Equity Office. In 2018, the board pushed for an operationalized equity policy. They hired an equity director. It is 2024, and MESD has been putting its money where it counts. Now, the Equity Office has not only a Director of Regional Equity and Partnership, Dr. Raiko Williams, but also a Lead Equity Facilitator, a Native American Youth and Family Support Program Manager, and an Administrative Assistant. This team procures resources and information for staff to continue to develop and grow in their equity lens. It needs to permeate the entire agency. They consult with program leaders regarding obstacles and the implementation of equity center programs and approaches. MESD has also adopted courageous conversations about race protocol. Many staff members have received professional development to understand the protocol. Several board members also attended the courageous conversation about race and the implications of race. These conversations have become more common. Staff have received training at all levels of the MESD administrators and are expected to facilitate equity leadership teams at each of their schools and programs. So 75% or more of the schools and programs either have an equity leadership team in place or are working to implement one. The board adopted equity lens tools to evaluate policy and programmatic decision-making with the equity lens. Each month, staff gives the board a presentation to let them know how they include actions and progress that align with the strategic plan.

She continued by saying they embed equity in their professional development opportunities. Another area, for example, is the diversification of the workforce. They wanted the workforce to manage the students served. In April 2019, they were at 21%, and in April 2024, they were at 30%. The percent of component district staff that agree MESD service helps improve their practices related to hiring racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse staff told the district in 2023, 43% was the response, and in 2024, 64%. That's a considerable increase. The percentage of component district staff who agree that MESD service helps improve their practices related to retaining racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse staff in 2023 was 40%, and in 2024, 64%.

Commissioner Mark Wubbold asked this follow-up question:

Can you give me an example of a decision, perhaps a board-level policy or a budget decision, that was made after an equity lens review was applied, and it changed how you decided to spend your money?

Ms. Ying said that at the MESD level, a lot of the budget is actually not controlled by the board because the board responds to the component districts. One of the things that changed was because the board had conversations with staff. She said she is the chair of the Equity Inclusion Committee. They have a lot of conversations within the committee discussions. The staff, led by the superintendent, understands that equity is the focus and the center of everything the district does. When they meet with their regional counterparts, what they share with them is all equity-focused. It's what is being done at the ESD level. It's not just confined to the MESD, but how the district helps serve the component districts so the staff representing the board are permeating their work and demonstrating how the district can focus their work on equity.

Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp asked these follow-up questions:

I know it's a huge lift to implement all the community engagement pieces into an organization, and

implementing this into an organization is a lot of work. How are you keeping this fresh? How are you checking in on yourselves? What are your plans looking down the road in three to five years to continue making sure that this is part of your work going forward?

Ms. Ying said she asks this question all the time at the board level and also at the community level. She is always asking for the data, continually checking in with staff to understand how the organization is doing and how it can do better.

Commissioner Lugo Knapp asked the following questions:

Last year you shared that a Social Specialist position was planned for the fall, the first step towards adding an Ethnic Studies program. What additional progress has been made towards the ethnic studies program? What will this program look like when it is launched in FY 26-27?

Ms. Angella Hubbs explained that they hired a Social Science Specialist in Oct 2023 from the Beaverton area. Many things have already happened, even though he's only been with the district for part of this school year. MESD is looking at backward mapping from the 2026-27 school year, which is when the new standards, which are in the process of revision right now, will be required for full implementation. The year before that is the year that most districts will be selecting new instructional materials to align with those standards. Fortunately, MESD has a bit of a runway here to help build capacity and staff.

The district's Social Science Specialist joins some existing staff members. MESD has literacy and math science specialists funded by the service plan. What is different about social science is that most of the component districts do not have their own Social Science Specialists to serve as a connection point compared with most of the districts currently having Literacy and Math Specialists, which is a natural connection point between MESD staff.

The new specialist has already started doing professional development for staff out in the component districts. He has already been doing consultation and planning with the school districts to help support their own Professional Development Planning and also carefully teaming within the agency, with Dr. Williams's department, and also with the Climate and Culture Specialists to make sure the professional development can be aligned to best practices in Trauma Informed Education as well as the new Social Emotional Learning Standards which districts are implementing as of next year.

The goal is to build capacity in educators including teachers and district leaders to understand the main shifts that are part of the new standards and select instructional materials. Then, implement those materials and the best practices as far as instruction goes to make sure that MESD implements all of the shifts and standards by 2026-27. He's been swamped even though he's only been here since October, and the district already has more professional development in next year's work plan.

As you shared, you're giving yourselves a runway before this is implemented. What are you hearing so far that they've been in the position for a short time regarding readiness from the school districts?

Ms. Hubbs said it connects back to what she mentioned before about most districts not having a person in their district who holds the Social Science work. MESD has heard so far that the teachers are eager and hungry for support, which hasn't been there. It is not a knock on the districts at all. It's just that the staff is leaning more towards math and literacy, and MESD has set up a regional network, for example, that staff can attend. It is a virtual program, so the travel time is not a factor, and MESD is consistently getting a lot of engagement, positive feedback, and repeat attendees.

The feedback from the Professional Development itself, the Regional Network, and the District Administrators who have been working with the specialists has been positive so far. MESD expects the engagement to increase even next year.

Chair Quiroz asked these follow-up questions:

What does it look like as you move from helping districts with early professional development to standards for instructional material? There's always a balance in a classroom between "I have this much to teach in this much time", and "how do I fit it in"? Layering on another set of standards for teachers to integrate, are there conversations or pushback from teachers, such as how am I going to do this? How do I incorporate this into my day?

Ms. Hubbs said that's a lot more present in the elementary levels when the teachers are not specialized. MESD would love to see more effort put into interdisciplinary work. It's not about adding a new thing but more about integrating concepts. One area that shows up well is the Tribal Shared History Standards, incorporated into content areas. They are not only showing up in the Social Science period. They're showing up in math, science, English language, and arts. MESD is trying to support this, and there's an interest among the curriculum directors in doing more curriculum integration. It's not seen as an add-on and one more thing but as a real connection between these concepts, which is not an extra ask for teachers who already have so much on their plates. Sometimes, they don't have enough time in the day to do all of the things.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

Last year we heard about the exciting new Rivercrest program, the recovery high school. How was the first year? How many students were served? What were the lessons learned?

Mr. Perkins said it was a great first year. It was a little bumpy initially. Some changes were needed. Then, there was a shift in the inspector's code requirements. The first week, kids weren't actually on the site. Once they were in, they helped make a mural and take ownership of the space. Fifteen kids are served there now.

The challenge around that is the cost to the districts is significant. This is not something that has previously been part of their budgeting. Based on the new legislation, MESD is optimistic that the Rivercrest program will be one of the three sites in the state chosen for funding. This year has helped position the district for that. If that happens, ODE will pay for the slot cost for each kid. That would free up the districts. He said he believes there is space enough to serve 45 kids.

You've talked a bit about how the state might help with funding. That would expand the capacity potential. How do you choose your students?

Mr. Perkins said that at this point, they have a list that has been first come, first served based on the criteria by which they say this child would advance. These are kids in a recovery program, so there are just kids who have, you know, been struggling with their recovery.

Chair Quiroz asked these follow-up questions:

So, are the 15 students there all need that service right now? Or is there a waiting list?

Mr. Perkins said oh no, it is much higher. Currently, there is a short waiting list. Because of the funding process, MESD only takes referrals from school districts because the district is obligated to pay for the student, and they give up the ADMw associated with the student. So, MESD does not work directly with the family. Districts only have a certain amount of funding allocated for this.

Commissioner Burton asked the following questions:

Last year, the job description for Behavior Support Facilitators was updated, and compensation was adjusted to align with that change. One year later, how is this going? Are you seeing better retention in these positions?

Mr. Todd Greaves said last year in the fall, MESD noticed that the Education Assistant role, that's what the old terminology, was in misalignment in terms of if you look at general education districts and schools, you think of an education assistant as someone that assists the teacher in a classroom, maybe a separate table for small group reading. That is not necessarily what the

Instructional Assistance or Behavior Support Facilitators do. They truly work with students who have behavioral, social, and emotional challenges.

MESD wanted to align the title so that there is a much better understanding when someone applies for the job of what they're applying for. Also, the job description is now wholly aligned with that position. MESD has noticed through this, and also internally through many conversations behind the scenes, and also getting input and feedback from others, that MESD wasn't necessarily meeting the market value of that position.

The district was lower on the salary scale for those positions within the region. One idea was whether it was possible to raise them a couple ranges to put them maybe at the 67th or 80th percentile. So, the district is not at the top but not the lowest, but somewhere in the middle. The staff has found that not only the attendance for the Behavior Support Facilitators has been better, turnover is lower than it has been. Employees the district attracts for this position are coming in with much more knowledge aligned with the social emotional piece and behavior and support. They are not just coming in and doing the academic reading piece.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

What are the vacancies like? Are you able to fill the positions for Behavior Support Facilitators? We know that even filling EA positions at your component districts can be challenging to fill - are you able to fill all the spots?

Mr. Greaves said the feedback from the advisory groups, which are MESD's component district directors, is that they have the same challenges that MESD is having with the workforce. It's challenging for them to find instructional assistance. He said they are demanding positions because MESD's programs are so very specialized. The district has ratios that it must maintain. Some programs are one adult to one student; some are two adults to one student; most programs are one adult to three. If the district can't keep those ratios, it cannot bring additional students into the program. MESD has used some contracted services, which allows them to bring in individuals for these specialized positions, try them out, and if they work out, many want to become part of the MESD. Just this year, the district was able to bring in more Behavior Support Facilitators on the contracted side. After their probationary period, the district can bring them on as employees.

Do you see that you may have incentivized these contracted staff to stay in their position for a long time because there is probably a pathway for them to become teachers or move somewhere else up the academic ladder?

Mr. Greaves said that in the past classified unit, which is basically where behavior support facilitators are, MESD had a powerful team of individuals who had been with the district for many years. After the pandemic, the district also had an influx of new employees, but that core group has stayed. This gives the district that historical knowledge and all the benefits of long-term employees. Also, within the district, they believe in creating those pathways for individuals who want to move in a different direction or become a teacher or related services staff, whatever it may be. MESD has a program in place to help them move forward. As supervisors or principals, they will help them reach that goal.

Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp asked the following questions:

We've heard about challenges locally and nationally in hiring and retaining staff for certain support positions, such as speech language pathologists and occupational therapists. Has this been a challenge for MESD? If so, how are you planning to address it?

Mr. Greaves said MESD had seen the challenge of hiring and retaining speech language pathologists and occupational therapists within the region. Due to these shortages, the district has needed high support from contract agencies to provide related service positions for school sites. Staff is pleased to report that many contract agency staff have decided to apply for permanent positions within MESD after their contract with their agency has ended. As a result of the culture

and climate of the schools, these contract agency positions have felt valued and have desired to stay on with the district. MESD hopes this will continue for these highly sought-after positions as they compete against hospitals and clinics that offer full-year work rather than school-year employment.

Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:

How does that work with the agency staff when they finish their contract? I imagine it could go either way; they may be happy for that pipeline through hiring or are not satisfied to see staff leave the agency to come to MESD.

Mr. Greaves said when the contracts are written, they have an exit clause. Sometimes, it is a payout. Sometimes the district negotiates. As an employee of MESD there are perks. The district pays the 6% pickup, and all benefits of the ESD are based on the job descriptions. It is better financially for the person to work for the MESD versus the agency, where the agency takes a relatively large portion of the salary.

Commissioner Lugo Knapp asked this follow-up question:

In some positions, like behavior support speech-language and occupational therapy, are you seeing a demand for more bilingual staff as demographics change?

Mr. Greaves said, speaking specifically about MESD's programs, they do not see that need because of the students they serve and their challenges; 90% have IEPs about behavior and their challenges. There is more demand for that in the component districts.

Commissioner Wubbold asked this follow-up question:

Do you feel there is a gap in the higher-education pipeline?

Mr. Greaves said they continue to compete with healthcare organizations. They cannot compete with large hospitals like Kaiser and other large organizations. However, in a hospital setting, they work 300 days a year; in schools, staff only 190 to 200 days a year.

Chair Quiroz thanked the district for the robust discussion and contributions during the hearing. Then, she closed the hearing and opened a regular meeting of the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission to certify Multnomah Education Service District's 2024-25 Approved budget. She asked if the commissioners had any questions or comments concerning the budget. There were none. She checked again to see if anyone had signed up to comment. No one had signed up to give testimony.

She asked Executive Director Allegra Willhite to give staff recommendations for the certification letter.

Ms. Willhite expressed how much she enjoys working with MESD's finance staff. They have been very responsive to TSCC's questions all year, and she appreciates the partnership with TSCC. Staff found the budget estimates reasonable for the purposes stated, and the budget complies with Local Budget Law. TSCC staff has no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 2025 budget.

Chair Quiroz called for a motion.

Commissioner Wubbold moved to certify the MESD Approved Budget with no recommendations or objections as recommended by staff. Commissioner Lugo Knapp seconded the motion, which passed with a unanimous vote of the commissioners.

There being no other business, Chair Quiroz closed the meeting.