

# Multnomah Education Service District

## 2023-24 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

6:00 pm

### **Present:**

**TSCC:** Chair Harmony Quiroz, Commissioner James Ofsink, Commissioner Margo Norton, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

**Absent:** Commissioner Matt Donahue

### **Multnomah Education Service District:**

MESD Board Members: Vice-Chair Pat Rene Anderson and Helen Ying,

Staff: Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley, Executive Assistant to Superintendent and MESD Board Secretary Heather Severns, Director of Business and Operations Doana Anderson, Senior Program Administrator for Business and Operations Sara Bottomley, Student Services Special Education Director Todd Greaves, Project Director Christine Ott, Director of Human Resources Dr. Dean Logan, Director of Human Resources Sascha Perrins Director of Student Services Todd Greaves.

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.

Since the last hearing, Superintendent Paul Coakley said the district went through the strategic planning process. They looked at their strengths and areas of growth. Following the process, they made several changes. The plan is called Blueprint 28 and has three goal areas. The budget is linked to these three areas. This will help the district stay focused and aligned on the work that needs to be done.

Chair Quiroz asked if there was anyone signed up to give public comment. 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:**

#### **Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:**

We want to start with a question specifically for the board - this year marks the first year of your new strategic plan, the "Blueprint '28". What new areas of focus are included in this plan that weren't present in previous plans? And in what ways did you incorporate strategic plan objectives in this

year's budget decisions?

Ms. Helen Ying acknowledged Dr. Cokeley's great work leading this planning process. Using an equity audit they did before the creation of the Strategic Plan was helpful to determine what areas the agency was doing well and what areas needed to improve. They gathered staff and directors together for a full-day planning retreat. This was a good foundation for the plan. The focus was on inequity and how to bridge the gaps at a grassroots level. They involved the community, focused on building capacity within staffing, and used data to improve their decisions.

The budget includes responses to what they heard from the community. Rivercrest's opening resulted from the needs they heard throughout the districts. They are adding a Social Specialist in the fall, the first step towards adding an Ethnic Studies program, which is required for all schools to have this program by the 2026-27 fiscal year. Multnomah ESD has added a Legal Rights Consultant to deal with expungement and an Outdoor School Community Engagement Specialist to ensure students feel comfortable during their Outdoor School experience.

**Commissioner Ofsink asked the following question:**

As Helen Ying mentioned, MESD plans to open the Rivercrest Academy, a new recovery high school, this year. We'd love to learn more about this program - what was the impetus for creating the school?

Superintendent Coakley said this was a conversation that repeatedly came up with the component districts and superintendents. Drug and alcohol abuse increased during the recent pandemic. Suicide rates have increased, and trauma and mental health issues have increased. MESD's Student Services Department took the lead, researching other programs, and Rivercrest was the result. It is the second school of its type in Oregon. Lake Oswego had the first one. After visiting the site and collaborating with the Lake Oswego, the development of Rivercrest began. It took a year to come together. There are now 40 students.

How many Instructional Staff and Counselling Staff does the school have?

Mr. Todd Greaves said they will have additional staff to support students with drug and alcohol abuse challenges. Because they are at the high school level, they will also have to have highly qualified teachers in specific content areas, not only for the drug and alcohol, but also for your language arts, reading, math, and social studies to make sure that they can attain those credits in high school for graduation.

**Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:**

This is a long-term placement at least a year. Students would continue to earn their high school degree. So the program could be transitional or working towards completion, depending on where they are in their high school career. Is 40 students the eventual goal?

Ms. Christine Otto said the agency is just beginning to take referrals and applications, and the principal's phone is ringing off the hook. There is a process associated with it. The current capacity is 140 students. MESD doesn't anticipate ever having that many students in that space. It is a unique program that is built upon trust. Most of these students had situations where trust had been broken. The goal is to make students feel like a community, and to do that, it has to stay under 100.

The district anticipates maximizing capacity at 60 students in that program. If they reach above that, they will look for a different space for a satellite school to keep that community spirit together. It is a high school program. The district anticipates having more kids at the sophomore-junior level and some seniors at the school.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked this follow-up question:**

Are you replicating the Lake Oswego school?

Ms. Otto explained that they are both using the same model. There's an Association of Recovery Schools model. Lake Oswego is part of the Oregon Recovery High School Initiative. Multnomah ESD is also part of that initiative and is in collaboration with them.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:**

Can you help us understand what makes this school different from other schools? What makes it a "recovery high school"? How will you know if this new program is successful? What are examples of the metrics you will use to gauge whether the program is working as expected?

Ms. Otto said Association Recovery Schools (ARS) had been around for about 25 years and were based in higher education learning levels. Harmony Academy, Lake Oswego's school, opened up in 2019-20. They connected with Vanderbilt University, which has been researching recovery. It's been a complex pathway to develop strong metrics that are consistent. But with the capacity of several students and schools linked to tenure, they can start building up those metrics. MESD will meet with Vanderbilt University in a few weeks to discuss potential success metrics and plans.

MESD has also been in conversation with the Harmony Academy principal to see if there are shared ways to do comparative data. The agency is also looking at just recommended metrics that ARS. These are typically good ways to start looking at effectiveness. One of those is the length of ways to stay in recovery. If you look at a student who reenrolls in a regular public school, the likelihood of lapsing within a year is over 70%. For students in an ARS program, their likelihood of relapsing within that year is less than 30%. So, MESD has a baseline that isn't necessarily specific to Portland but is national. They can use that as a comparison.

Will there be extracurricular activities for the school?

Ms. Otto clarified that they do not provide clinical support. They offer recovery mentors and group support, but clinical support requires specific treatment qualifiers that the district is not offering. MESD provides recovery, support, and a group atmosphere. They will be doing some collaboration, including having a prom with Harmony. There is some discussion about opening another recovery school program down in Eugene. This would also provide opportunities for some collaboration with those that have similar programs.

In terms of other activities, successful ARS schools work closely or have something built in their associated peer group, a type of sorority or fraternity. It's a group that comes together and has year-round activities outside of school. It includes parents, families, and friends. They create an alternative opportunity, a peer group to go out and do community events, activities, etc. Because they are in a school that doesn't offer sports, students can still go back to their home district and play for their home school as long as they meet the academic qualifications.

**Commissioner Norton asked these follow-up questions:**

How do you choose who enrolls? Are they coming through referrals through districts?

Ms. Otto said there are a couple of different avenues. They can contact MESD directly through the website. The agency is trying to get the word out that this option exists, so even students who may not have come to the director or superintendent's attention as needing this support will be aware that this support is available. They're not dependent on adults in the school system to be able to refer them to it. The districts agree to pay for it, and MESD will work with each district to ensure they can support youth in attending if they meet the qualifications. It is not a placement. The kids must want to be there for it to be successful. The districts pay for this for each student attending.

**Commissioner Ofsink asked this follow-up question:**

Do the constituent districts pay for the placement of their student?

Ms. Otto said they could use resolution dollars and contract dollars. So, some of them have already purchased slots using resolution dollars. Others want to use contract dollars.

**Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:**

Enrollment for many schools is still below pre-pandemic levels, and with declining birth rates and other factors, enrollment may continue to decline or be slow to build back. We know from your budget that enrollment declines have not substantially impacted the number of services requested from MESD's component districts. If enrollment continues to decline, are you forecasting potential service cuts in the future? Where is the tipping point? What potential impacts are you planning for based on enrollment forecasts?

Mr. Greaves said requests from component districts have historically been steady and remain consistent for this coming 23-24 academic year. Projecting service cuts is difficult as MESD provides services for schools, programs, and students who have not succeeded in their local district placements. These students are the most impacted by higher needs and have been successful within the internal offerings, schools, programs, and placements. At this point for next year, there will be few impacts as districts have provided their service levels and requested slots. The tipping point would be when low enrollment does not support staffing, and the agency cannot assign staff through attrition. Following contract language and best practice, a possible reduction in force process would be utilized if this occurs. This will always be the last option once all other scenarios and strategies have been exhausted.

**Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:**

It is an ongoing struggle for many districts to fill certain positions. Last year we discussed a number of strategies to improve hiring, including a number of recruiting strategies. How did those efforts work? What are your vacancy rates like today?

Dr. Dean Logan said the district staff has been creative in utilizing the referral stipend which has helped increase diversity, fill open positions, and help get the word out through word of mouth. MESD has been able to use its employees to go out and recruit for the district. The hope is that this is a consistent method based on people's experiences within the agency to continue networking with those folks, especially those hard-to-fill positions such as the Education Assistants, whose title has changed to Behavior Support Facilitators.

The agency conducted stay Interviews for this group were conducted last month and they learned that folks enjoy working at the MESD. The feedback received was from a wide range of folks with diverse experiences within the agency. The five groups included staff employed here from 15 to 20 years, from 10 to 15 years, from 5 to 10 years, from 3 to 5 years, and from 1 to 2 years, so a well-rounded group participated, giving their thoughts. One of the things the district learned from this was that this is a great place to work. The employees recommend MESD to their friends, family, and former colleagues. MESD has enticed other folks to return to the agency because of the changes in the job descriptions of Behavior Support Facilitators. The biggest takeaway was that people want to grow with the agency. They love the services offered and want to find the pathway to become a Special Education Teacher, District Administrator, or Building Administrator.

Another program is Gateway Entry Interviews, starting with people filling out applications. Then, during the interview process, the agency learns the applicant's goals, especially for entry-level positions. MESD has such an extensive reach, connecting with nine different component districts. This agency can't hire everyone, but it can be a resource for component districts to fill their hiring

needs. This strengthens the relationships with the component districts, too. It can also help with diversity efforts, especially in areas like special education.

The district is moving into the second phase of those Stay Interviews with the nurses, teachers, and folks in that classification. They will fill out an application, answer the questions, and then the staff will decide who to interview.

Superintendent Coakley added that the district also has the Grow Your Own Program. This removes many barriers, especially for people of color who want to go into the teaching profession or administration. This program has 122 educators in it.

**Commissioner Norton asked the second part of the question:**

Could you talk more specifically about your Special Education staff, the Certified Teaching Staff, and the Behavioral Support Facilitators?

Dr. Logan answered, saying we had a high exit rate last year. Folks just weren't happy with the pay, with the structure, with the setup, with the job. One of the things that the agency did was observe the work. Staff discovered that they do a lot as far as academic work, as far as social-emotional work, and being that backbone and support to the teacher in the building. The agency reviewed the current job description and switched those from Educational Assistance to Behavior Support Facilitators to match the work they're doing in the classroom. The feedback received has been positive.

What about certified teaching staff? Do you have vacancies there? Have these positions been challenging to fill?

Dr. Logan said they do have a few vacancies in this area. What is attractive about the MESD is the class sizes. So, the turnover in this area is not as high as in the component districts.

Mr. Greaves explained that at Wheatley school if the teacher has ten students, there will be 10 Behavior Support Facilitators and one certified teacher. Other programs have a ratio of one certified teacher to three students.

Superintendent Coakley added that the agency has retained 88% of the new hires in the current school year.

**Chair Quiroz asked this follow-up question:**

Can you tell us about temporary employees for outdoor school?

Mr. Sascha Perrins said MESD has eliminated part-time work for outdoor school. All outdoor schools are now full-time employees. The program cost increased, and OSU was supportive even though the price increased. Since they are the ones paying for this, their buy-in was necessary. By doing this, MESD can retain quality personnel. The agency felt it was the right thing to do. The results seen this year were terrific.

**Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:**

We know filling positions in Special Education has been particularly challenging. Do you have a sense of why? Are qualified employees choosing other employers? Or are employees choosing to leave the field altogether?

Mr. Greaves said MESD teachers must be master teachers with SPED qualifications. The agency utilized individuals on emergency certificates who are finishing their degrees.

Attrition is very low this year compared to previous years. One person who left said they were leaving due to gaps in learning, behavior management, and self-regulation created by the

pandemic. MESD feels the learning gaps created by the pandemic will take considerable time to close the gaps.

**Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:**

The pandemic has had far-reaching impacts that are still being felt, which is certainly true for children in schools. At the same time, federal and state pandemic funds that schools have used to address these impacts are winding down, and enrollment is decreasing for many schools. If the needs highlighted by the pandemic (mental health, wrap-around services, etc.) are continuing, as we assume they are, what changes does MESD see for school districts? How are they balancing ongoing needs with declining revenues? How have requests from your component districts changed?

Mr. Greaves said the agency expects more requests for Behavioral Health, the Social Emotional Skills Program, and other behavioral support services as they continue to experience the lasting effects and gaps created by the pandemic. The districts may also need additional services for their staff in the form of professional development and internal support for classrooms, such as Response to Intervention, developmentally appropriate behavioral interventions, and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. There is a great demand to support middle school students experiencing academic, instructional, and behavioral struggles, maturity, and self-regulation within an alternative setting. MESD is actively asking component districts to do an internal review of appropriate space and classrooms within their building so if services are provided, the student may remain in their home district.

**Commissioner Norton asked these follow-up questions:**

Could you address the financial component? Districts are all looking at substantial enrollment declines, their ability to fund their basic district services, and purchase additional demand-driven services from the MESD. How does your blueprint 2028 address that?

Mr. Sascha Perrins explained how MESD operates with the district to determine the services they will be receiving from the agency. Several years back, MESD transitioned from a required expenditure in six major areas to the menu format. All the services that they provide are services the component districts have requested over the years.

If the entire society contracts, the agency will feel that contraction, too. But MESD is a step behind them. There is no alternative to the Special Services that the agency provides. That student cannot sit in that classroom. It's not an option. So, in that case, with component schools, those things are required.

Ms. Doana Anderson added that MESD must be creative about how the agency can serve those students without having such a high cost that the component district will consider pulling it back into its district. MESD needs to be transparent about the programs, showing component districts what they need to be successful and how much it will cost. The agency needs to look at alternatives, such as opening up a classroom in one of their schools if it is less expensive. That is the beauty of having the menu. MESD can be flexible with the districts.

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 2023-24 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 said staff found the budget estimates reasonable for the purposes stated and the budget to

comply with Local Budget Law. She said staff have no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 23-24 budget. She thanked MESD for their quick responses and willingness to answer questions.

Chair Quiroz called for a motion.

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

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