

Multnomah Education Service District

2026-27 Hearing Minutes

Tuesday, May 19, 2026
6:00 pm
11611 NE Ainsworth Drive
Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Matt Donahue,
Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore,
Commissioner Tod Burton,
Commissioner Dr. Will Terry,
Commissioner Erik Kvarsten,
Executive Director Allegra Willhite,
Budget Analyst Brittanie Abayare

Absent: None

Multnomah Education Service District:

Rene Anderson, Board Chair
Jessica Arzate, Board Vice Chair
Helen Ying, Board Member
Denyse Peterson, Board Member

Doana Anderson, Chief Financial Officer (CFO)
Dr. Paul Coakley, Superintendent
Sascha Perrins, Assistant Superintendent
Heather Severns, Executive Assistant to Superintendent and MESD Board Secretary
Todd Greaves, Director of Student Services
Sara Bottomley, Senior Program Administrator for Business and Operations
Marifer Sager, Director of Communications
Bernadette Adeniran, Human Resources

Opening Remarks

Chair Matt Donahue called the annual Multnomah Education Service District Budget Hearing to order and welcomed attendees. He stated that the TSCC is a community oversight commission established by the Oregon Legislature over 100 years ago that oversees the budgets of all TSCC member taxing districts, conducts budget reviews, and holds public hearings to provide opportunities for public comment before budget adoption.

The TSCC commissioners and staff then introduced themselves, with all confirming they had no conflicts of interest regarding the county. The county representatives also introduced themselves.

Public Comment

No public comment was received during the hearing.

Commissioner Questions and District Responses

Question 1: Asked by Commissioner Dr. Will Terry: Your partnership with the Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF) includes several efficiency projects, including window replacements at Wheatley School. Can you tell us a little about the projects that were scheduled for this current year - are those on time and within budget? And have you further defined other upcoming PCEF projects for future years?

- **Doana Anderson** answered that MESD completed a technical energy audit on the eligible buildings in the summer of 2025 and has been redefining project scopes after the City awarded less funding than requested in the collective application. MESD is currently working with McKinstry to design and implement energy improvements.
- In FY 2025-26 MESD completed upgrades to LED lighting at Helensview, Wheatley and the original Knott School building. Another defined project will include doors, windows, and HVAC systems for Wheatley School. This project is still in the design phase, with implementation planned for FY 26-27 and FY 27-28.
- MESD is currently investigating the purchase of EV vehicles to replace our aging fleet, and the installation of EV vehicle charger stations at the Ainsworth Building to support these new EV vehicles. The new EV fleet would support MESD needs including facilities service vehicles and Student Passenger vans/micro buses.

Commissioner Dr. Will Terry asked a follow-up question: We understand there will also be some smaller scale student-led projects - what types of projects will these be, and what involvement will students have?

- **Doana Anderson** answered that PCEF SLI funding at both Helensview and Donald E. Long, MESD's Juvenile Detention Education Program, has created meaningful opportunities for students to participate in smaller-scale, hands-on sustainability projects.
- At Donald E. Long, students have played a central role in developing a sustainable agriculture program from the ground up. With support from a CTE Sustainable Agriculture teacher, students helped transform an unused greenhouse into an expanding garden space, with plans for continued growth next year. Their work includes building garden infrastructure, preparing soil, growing crops from seed to harvest, and creating products from what they grow.
- These projects also support cultural connection, teamwork, and workforce readiness. Students participate in discussions about food systems and culturally relevant foods while building technical agricultural skills. Just as importantly, they are developing transferable skills such as communication, adaptability, collaboration, and problem-solving.
- The TSCC Commissioners asked a series of follow-up questions, discussing MESD's process working with PCEF.

Question 2: Asked by Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore: We recognize that this is an exceptionally

challenging budget cycle, requiring choices between less than optimal options. In reviewing the budget, we noticed the declining fund balance and understand that utilizing reserves is a common strategy to protect services. Could you share more about the district's policy for preserving reserves versus spending funds now to help keep costs low for your component school districts? How do you strike that balance?

- **Doana Anderson** answered that it is helpful to review reserves by fund and to consider contingency together with ending fund balance, as some reserves are intentionally budgeted as contingency to maintain flexibility. She explained that overall, combined reserves remain relatively stable from FY24 through FY27, with two notable exceptions. In Fund 1 (Resolution Services), component districts have discretion over reserve levels; for example, of the approximately \$10 million budgeted for transit services this year, districts have identified roughly \$3 million they may choose to retain in reserve, with final decisions to be made at year-end. In Fund 3 (Debt Service), reserves are being maintained to address a potential temporary increase in PERS costs at the end of FY27 if bond rate credits expire before related debt service obligations conclude, which would be used to stabilize costs for component districts if needed. She added that their Operating Fund reserves are guided by Board policy requiring an unassigned ending fund balance of at least 7% of Property Tax and State School Fund revenues. Overall, their approach is to balance fiscal stability with affordability for component districts through conservative planning, ongoing collaboration with superintendents and business managers, and annual review of future service costs.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question regarding the costs to component districts for MESD services..

- Doana Anderson answered that it depends on the services the component districts purchase from them.

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore asked a follow-up question: We'd like to hear the latest about the QEM, or quality education model. Is there a collective effort among school districts and MESD to advocate for changes to the quality education model? What changes would you like to see to QEM?

- **Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley** answered that Oregon's Quality Education Model is long overdue for modernization, having not been substantially updated since it was first developed in 1999 despite major changes in student needs, educational practice, service delivery, and the cost of operating schools. He stated that MESD and their component districts support efforts to modernize the QEM so it more accurately reflects the realities districts face today, and they expect to work with lawmakers and education partners during the 2027 legislative session. He noted they appreciate the recent evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research and support recommendations providing a useful path forward, particularly greater input from practicing educators through professional judgment panels, expanding the number and diversity of prototype schools, and developing more accurate estimates of how costs vary based on student need and district characteristics. A modernized QEM should better account for current instructional practices, early learning, technology and

infrastructure, student mental health and behavioral health supports, regional cost differences, and the additional resources needed to serve students experiencing disability, poverty, language acquisition needs, housing instability, rural isolation, and other barriers to learning to give a realistic understanding of what it costs to provide a high-quality education.

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore asked a follow-up question, inquiring if there is a sense that there is a consensus that the QEM should be preserved.

- Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley answered that changes are desired to the QEM but it could be beneficial if updated.

Question 3: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: We've discussed the issue of staff burnout in previous hearings. While we see encouraging results from your 2025 Staff Climate Survey in some areas, we know special education staffing remains a hurdle. What specific strategies are included in this budget to improve long-term retention, and move beyond the reliance on temporary staffing agencies to fill gaps due to staff absences?

- **Bernadette Adeniran** Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue. While we are encouraged by the positive trends in the 2025 Staff Climate Survey, we recognize that maintaining a stable special education workforce remains a significant challenge. Reliance on temporary staffing agencies is not a sustainable long-term solution, and this budget focuses on addressing the root causes of turnover and absences.
- The budget includes investments in competitive compensation, including COLA and PERS pickup, to help ensure MESD remains competitive within the region. It also supports employee retention through milestone incentives tied to years of service and continued collaboration with labor partners around attendance and staff wellness.
- To reduce dependence on outside agencies, MESD is expanding the use of an internal substitute pool through regional ESD partnerships and funding permanent substitute positions that can provide more consistent support. Overall, this budget reflects a shift from reactive staffing practices toward proactive workforce planning designed to strengthen long-term recruitment, retention, and continuity of services for students.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked another follow-up question about the family leave act.

- The district responded that they see a large use of it, noting it is a lot easier to qualify for it.

Question 4: Asked by Commissioner Erik Kvarsten: In this budget, we see you are adding a 1.0 FTE Employee Safety Training Coordinator to help address high rates of staff absenteeism and workers' compensation claims. Could you elaborate on the specific responsibilities of this role?

- **Bernadette Adeniran** answered that this position is a strategic investment to address both staff safety and long-term operational stability. MESD serves a high concentration of students with significant social-emotional and communication needs, and staff injuries related to behavioral incidents have contributed to elevated absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, and substitute staffing costs.

- The Employee Safety Training Coordinator will help shift the organization from a reactive approach to a more proactive safety model. The role will focus on strengthening implementation of Safety Care protocols, improving staff training in de-escalation and situational awareness, and identifying trends in injury and loss data to target supports where they are most needed.
- Reducing injuries not only improves staff well-being, but also helps stabilize staffing and control costs. When staff injuries occur, MESD often incurs both workers' compensation expenses and substitute coverage costs to maintain required staffing ratios. By reducing the frequency and severity of incidents, we anticipate lower substitute utilization, fewer claims, and improved workforce stability over time.
- Ultimately, this position is intended to support safer learning environments, improve staff retention, and ensure more consistent services for students.

Commissioner Erik Kvarsten asked a follow-up question: How will you measure success for this position - are there specific metrics for staff attendance, retention, or safety that you can share?

- **Bernadette Adeniran** answered that they will evaluate the effectiveness of this position through several measurable indicators related to staff safety, attendance, and retention. Key metrics will include rates of absenteeism, substitute staffing costs, employee retention, and workers' compensation claims.
- We will also monitor workers' compensation data such as claim frequency, lost workdays, medical costs per injury, and the severity of claims, including trends in disabling versus non-disabling incidents. While workers' compensation MOD ratings are calculated over a three-year cycle and may take time to fully reflect improvements, these interim indicators will help us assess progress annually.
- In addition, we anticipate broader organizational benefits, including improved staff morale and workplace satisfaction, which may also be reflected in future staff climate survey results.

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore asked a follow-up question, inquiring what kind of experiences the substitutes have if they do not have experience with children.

- **Bernadette Adeniran** answered that the substitutes have experience with teaching, but not necessarily experience with children.

Question 5: Asked by Chair Matt Donahue: Statewide data shows a significant trend in student absenteeism. Is MESD seeing a similar pattern across its specialized programs? And do you have a sense of what has caused the increase?

- **Todd Greaves** While statewide data shows a significant increase in student absenteeism, MESD has not experienced the same level of student absenteeism across our specialized programs. Attendance within our programs have remained relatively stable, due in large part to the structure and supports built into our service model.

- Our programs are intentionally designed to meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities and students who may have struggled in traditional educational settings. Through individualized IEP supports, smaller class sizes, and strong staff-to-student relationships, we are often able to identify and respond to attendance concerns quickly.
- When students are absent, staff conduct direct outreach to families to better understand and address barriers such as transportation, mental health, medical needs, or emotional challenges. In addition, many of our programs provide predictable, supportive environments that help students feel safe, connected, and engaged in school.
- We also emphasize proactive, relationship-based practices, including regular check-ins, family engagement, and wraparound behavioral and mental health supports. These strategies help strengthen student belonging and engagement, which are key factors in maintaining consistent attendance.
- Because they provide specialized schooling for SPED and alternative schools, students are often happier getting specialized schooling and feel like they are being successful for the first time, benefiting from very low student ratios such as 1:1 or 1:3.

Chair Matt Donahue and **Doana Anderson** discussed specialized schooling costs and the process for budgeting for them.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question, inquiring if they have more demand for the supply.

- **Todd Greaves** answered that they saw a large shift around the pandemic, but it is going down now, noting they seeing lower rates of students identified for the programs.

Chair Matt Donahue asked a follow-up question: Beyond general classroom support, is the district implementing or proposing any initiatives in this budget to re-engage students and improve daily attendance?

- **Todd Greaves** answered that MESD's approach to improving daily attendance is grounded in individualized student support and strong relationships with families. Because our programs serve students with highly individualized needs, re-engagement strategies are most effective when they are personal, consistent, and relationship-based.
- One proposed strategy is a targeted check-in mentor model for students with the lowest attendance rates. Under this approach, selected staff members — including teachers, behavior support facilitators, administrators, support staff, and other trusted adults — would be paired with students who need additional attendance support. The mentor's role would be simple but intentional: a brief daily check-in to welcome the student, reinforce belonging, and communicate that their presence matters.

- This approach shifts the tone from compliance or consequence to connection and encouragement. It also aligns with Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) practices by focusing additional support on the small percentage of students with the greatest attendance needs, while continuing broader classroom and family engagement supports for all students.

Chair Matt Donahue asked a follow-up question: Does MESD have any role in addressing student absenteeism in the component school districts? If so, what does that look like?

- **Sascha Perrins** answered that MESD provides three primary forms of attendance-related support to component districts.
- First, the MESD School Improvement team provides professional learning, consultation, and technical assistance focused on attendance, communication, data literacy, school climate, and student engagement. These supports are delivered through specialists funded by Oregon Integrated Guidance and are available to district and building teams upon request.
- Second, the grant-funded East County Bridges program provides direct outreach and reengagement support for students disconnected from school. Through partnerships with districts and community organizations, ECB helps connect youth and families with educational opportunities and culturally responsive supports.
- Third, the School Health Services department works directly with schools to reduce health-related barriers that impact student attendance.

Question 6: Asked by Commissioner Dr. Will Terry: Outdoor school programs saw roughly a 20% reduction in state funding for the current biennium. How has this decrease impacted your program delivery? Have you received any feedback from the community about the changes to this program?

- **Sascha Perrins** answered that the 20% reduction in state funding has had a significant impact on both the design and delivery of our Outdoor School program. While we are working to minimize the impact on students, the program has been reduced from a 6-day, 5-night experience to a 4-day/3-night model, or 3-day/2 night model. As a result, instructional time has decreased from approximately 22.5 hours per week to about 10 hours, limiting both the breadth and depth of the student learning experience.
- The reduction has also affected the high school leadership component of the program. High school students serve as volunteer leaders and mentors, helping teach lessons and build relationships with younger students. With fewer days on site, there is less time for students to develop those connections, which reduces opportunities for mentorship, confidence-building, and social-emotional learning.
- In addition, the funding decrease required significant staffing reductions. For the 2025–2026 school year, staffing was reduced from 30 year-round employees working 160 days annually to 12 employees working 150 days. This has limited our ability to provide family engagement nights, high school recruitment events, classroom presentations, and other outreach supports.

- We have received substantial feedback from teachers, school partners, and high school leaders. Teachers and districts have advocated for restoring funding to return to the 6-day model, citing its transformational impact on students. High school leaders have also shared that the longer model allows for stronger peer connections, deeper cabin relationships, and more meaningful learning experiences.

Commissioner Dr. Will Terry and Sascha Perrins discussed the changing the days and times for Outdoor School related to the funding issues.

Chair Matt Donahue asked a follow-up question, inquiring how that complies with the ballot measure.

- District staff responded by stating that is indeed a question. Without adequate state funding, the district is unable to comply with the ballot measure language.

Commissioner Tod Burton and Doana Anderson discussed partnerships for outdoor schools.

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore made a comment about how life-changing outdoor school is.

Commissioner Dr. Will Terry asked a follow-up question: Looking past FY27, what do you anticipate for future Outdoor School funding?

- Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley answered that education funding remains challenging across Oregon; however, Oregon voters specifically directed the state to fund Outdoor School through a dedicated 4% allocation of Lottery Funds. These funds were intended to support Outdoor School without competing with other K–12 funding priorities.
- Over the past several years, the state has successfully built a robust statewide Outdoor School system that now serves students across Oregon. Maintaining the full 4% allocation will be essential to ensuring that all districts requesting Outdoor School programming can continue to provide students with access to these experiences at a meaningful level of quality and impact.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked about Outdoor School programs in other states.

- **Superintendent Dr. Paul Coakley** answered, noting that Washington state does not have an outdoor school program.

Question 7: Asked by Commissioner Erik Kvarsten: MESD continues to support implementation of Preschool for All (PFA) initiatives in partnership with local and regional organizations. What does this look like? What role does MESD play?

- **Dr. Angela Hubbs** answered that MESD plays a collaborative role in supporting the implementation of Preschool for All across Multnomah County. We work closely with component school districts, Multnomah County's Preschool and Early Learning Division, Child Care Resource and Referral, the Multnomah Early Childhood Program, higher education partners, and workforce organizations to help align systems, share resources, and support consistent implementation.
- A key part of MESD's role is providing direct, job-embedded support to educators in

PFA-funded classrooms across our component districts. MESD currently provides instructional coaching through four coaches assigned to six districts. These coaches work with teachers, classified staff, and administrators to strengthen instructional practices, support inclusive classrooms, and build long-term capacity.

- This work is grounded in established early learning frameworks and tools, including the PFA Quality Standards, Oregon's Early Learning and Kindergarten Guidelines, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), the Pyramid Model, and Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES). Together, these supports help ensure that PFA classrooms are high-quality, developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and responsive to the social-emotional needs of young children.
- MESD is also supporting the future early learning workforce through a new Early Learning Career Pathways position beginning in 2026–27. This role will partner with district CTE programs, community colleges, and workforce organizations to expand student awareness of early learning careers and create opportunities such as summer programs, college credit courses, and work-based learning placements in PFA classrooms.

Commissioner Erik Kvarsten asked a follow-up question: Do you receive any funds from Multnomah County related to PFA, and how are those spent?

- **Dr. Angela Hubbs** provided a response confirming that MESD receives funding from Multnomah County to support several PFA-related services and positions, including four instructional coaches, one Career Pathways Coordinator, and a 0.625 FTE Early Learning Administrator who supervises coaching and career pathways and serves as the primary liaison. She noted that MESD also receives funding for School Health Services support via school nurses, which began at 0.5 FTE in 2024–25, expanded to 3.4 FTE in 2025–26, and is planned to increase to 8.0 FTE in 2026–27 as PFA continues to grow. In addition, Multnomah County PFA contracts with MESD for Feeding Team support (including speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and nursing) for safe feeding for students with choking or aspiration risks, with 0.9 FTE planned for 2026–27.

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore and district representatives further discussed PSA and noted MESD does not work with private schools or anything similar.

Question 8: Asked by Commissioner Tod Burton: Last year, Rivercrest Academy, MESD's recovery high school, was targeting an enrollment goal of 35 students for 2026. Did you meet that target?

- Sascha Perrins answered that Rivercrest Academy did not meet the 35-student enrollment goal. This year, enrollment has averaged approximately 20 students.
- Given current state funding limitations, we are also reassessing whether 35 students is the appropriate enrollment target for next year. Due to state funding constraints for this biennium, Rivercrest's funding is capped at 25 ADM, and we anticipate that cap will remain in place next year. While the cap does not technically prevent us from enrolling more than 25 students, it does mean we would not receive additional funding for students above that level.

- It is also important to note that ODE-approved recovery schools are funded differently than traditional schools. Rivercrest's funding includes a combination of sources, including State School Fund and Student Investment Account dollars, and is determined in part through a carve-out rather than the standard school funding model.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: How do you measure success for students in this program, and how is it going so far? Are students who enroll staying with the program?

- **Sascha Perrins** answered that Rivercrest is completing its third year as a school and its second year as an ODE-approved recovery school. Like any new program, it has taken time to build the systems needed to fully support students academically and in recovery.
- One important step this year was securing a recovery-focused case management system, which will allow us to better track recovery service plans, student goals, and program outcomes. With that system now in place, Rivercrest is on stronger footing for both service delivery and data collection.
- We measure success through several indicators, including student progress toward recovery goals, attendance, academic progress, family and student feedback, and graduation. Last year, Rivercrest had three graduates who had been with the program for both years, and this year we anticipate five more graduates.
- We do see some student turnover, but much of it occurs when students need a more intensive level of support, such as treatment. In some cases, students return to Rivercrest after completing that higher level of care. ODE's Recovery School team has also recognized Rivercrest's work and has used aspects of our program as a model for staffing and providing education and recovery supports.
- Looking ahead, Rivercrest is also working with the Association of Recovery Schools to pursue accreditation, with a goal of becoming ARS-certified in fall 2026.

Commissioner Tod Burton asked a follow-up question: Are you seeing more demand than available capacity in this program?

- **Sascha Perrins** answered that there is a clear need for youth recovery services in our region, and there is strong interest in recovery school options. In that sense, demand does exceed current capacity.
- However, not every student seeking support is immediately a fit for a recovery high school. We are seeing families reach out to Rivercrest when the student may actually need a more intensive level of care, such as residential treatment. That reflects a broader regional challenge: there are limited adolescent treatment options available.
- Rivercrest is designed to be part of a continuum of recovery supports. It provides a higher level of educational and recovery support than a traditional school setting, but it is not a treatment center.
- Through a grant from the Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission, MESD and Rivercrest are also working regionally to help strengthen the broader recovery support continuum. That

includes helping students connect either to recovery schools like Rivercrest or to other supports, such as school-embedded Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselors.

Closing Remarks

- Chair Donahue delivered closing remarks for the Multnomah Education Service District (MESD) hearing, thanking everyone for their conversation.

Staff Recommendations & Certification

- TSCC Executive Director, Allegra Willhite, expressed a public thank you to the district finance staff, noting that it was a pleasure to work with them throughout the year.
- Staff found the budget estimates to be reasonable for the purposes stated. The budget was also found to be in substantial compliance with budget law.
- Staff suggested no recommendations or objections to the fiscal year 2026-27 approved budget for MESD.

Vote to Certify

- A motion was made by Chair Donahue to authorize the commission to sign the certification letter as recommended by staff.
- Commissioner Will Terry moved to certify MESD's FY 2026-27 Approved Budget estimates as reasonable and in full compliance with Oregon Local Budget Law, with no objections or recommendations.
- Vice Chair Moore seconded the motion.
- All commissioners present voted "Aye".
- The Multnomah Education Service District's budget was certified by the TSCC.

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