



TO: OSBA Board of Directors  
FROM: Jim Green, Executive Director  
SUBJECT: 2022 Spring Listening Sessions  
DATE: June 13, 2022

## Introduction

OSBA conducted its second phase of listening sessions this spring. From March to May, 12 sessions were held around the state – five in person, two virtual, and five as hybrids. OSBA staff engaged with more than 150 school board members, superintendents, and other school administrators from 30 school districts and 12 education service districts from the following OSBA regions: Linn/Benton/Lincoln, Marion, Yamhill/Polk, Washington, North Coast, Eastern, Southeast, Douglas/South Coast, Clackamas, Lane, Multnomah, and the Gorge.

## Purpose and Process

OSBA leaders wanted to hear directly from school board members from across the state on vital issues to inform the work of staff. To prepare a cohesive report for both the fall and spring listening sessions, Executive Director Jim Green, asked the same four questions, and attendees were again encouraged to let the conversation flow organically, while staff took notes that summarized the conversation.

- What are the biggest leadership challenges you are facing in your district and community?
- What is a lesson you have learned that we should share with your fellow board members or superintendents across the state?
- How can OSBA support your work? What services should OSBA improve upon or begin providing?
- Where do you see achievement gaps among your students? What can OSBA provide to support your diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

Several significant factors changed between the fall and spring listening sessions, including lifting the statewide mask mandate, returning COVID-related decisions to local control, and a greater focus on the upcoming 2022 primary and general elections in Oregon and nationally. Because of these changes, the feedback from both listening sessions is more accurately represented in two separate reports.

## What We Heard

The feedback during the listening sessions was impassioned and ranged across a broad spectrum of school- and society-related topics. Responses have been condensed under broad categories, as follows:

- **Student achievement guides decision making.**

Statewide, participants described a student-centered approach to decision making and choices. Participants specifically cited certain metrics or indicators when making choices, including student

achievement, student mental health and well-being, and student connection with the school community and trusted adults.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented student suffering, and the suffering is coming with students to school.**

Participants described students returning to in-person school as having greater needs than pre-pandemic. Fights, absences, disruptions, and similar misbehaviors are more frequent than pre-pandemic. Educators, including veteran teachers, sometimes reported having trouble keeping basic order in classrooms. Participants specifically noted student disruption was especially prevalent in kindergarten, first grade, and ninth grade. Even when students are not disruptive or acting out, some are simply less able to adjust to a classroom and to school dynamics. Stress, absence, and fear are all more prevalent in the classroom than they were pre-pandemic.

- **Public schools are necessary to the community and need to be treated as such.**

Participants described how schools meet the needs of the community, especially in the face of the terrible challenges over the past 24 months, including the wildfires, the pandemic, and social and economic instability. Participants were proud of what schools had done to serve the broader community, for example, with meal distribution and wildfire response, but were also frustrated by a perceived lack of resources or ability to do more for local communities.

- **School staffing is at a crisis point.**

Participants described a crisis in staffing. School districts, regardless of size or location, are unable to hire staff. This is seen most acutely in positions that are specialized or that require specific skills, including licensed and classified special education staff, speech-language pathologists, counselors, and mental health professionals. Participants described general staff shortages for all positions, including classified staff (often bus drivers), elementary educators, and science educators.

Participants further report that the actual job of working in schools is harder than ever before. Across all positions, there is too much work for licensed and classified staff to do. Employees are working outside of the scope of their jobs more often and are being asked to do more than ever before, such as central office staff driving busses and covering classrooms, educators giving up preparation periods to cover other classes for colleagues, or classified staff doing any number of things that they did not plan for.

Staffing challenges are compounded by economic factors outside school district boards' control. In many areas, the economic changes caused by COVID have meant that other local jobs, notably fast-food and warehouse jobs, have become better options for workers. For example, a superintendent in Douglas County reported that he could not hire classified workers because his wages are not competitive. His contract

hourly wage is \$12.37 per hour and the local fast-food restaurant is starting at \$14.11 per hour. Generally, wages in Oregon have risen faster than schools have been able to keep up with, and many employees are leaving the education industry and moving to other sectors.

Participants reported economic challenges beyond low wages. In the past, the relatively generous benefits of school district employment could offset somewhat lower wages. But other costs, specifically housing, now impact employee decision making in unprecedented ways. School districts across the state, but especially in small, remote, and rural districts, report that housing is the main challenge to hiring employees. Lack of affordable housing options has meant that when offers are made to qualified employees, sometimes employees must turn down the jobs because they can't find places to live. Some districts have pivoted to creative solutions, including district-owned housing or even administrators temporarily leasing/loaning rooms to new hires. These alternatives are the exception, and the practical result of housing challenges is that smaller districts often lose out on capable employees, even if their salaries are competitive.

As it becomes harder to hire skilled employees, it becomes proportionally harder to hire employees of color, employees with diverse backgrounds, or employees from outside the district. Although there is some mobility among the more populous communities in the Willamette Valley and in central Oregon, this mobility is still limited. Districts outside these areas have few effective tools to recruit and retain employees.

- **Politicization of school board positions is increasing, and trust in institutions, sometimes including OSBA, is decreasing.**

Participants described an increase in political motivations in school board meetings and elections, including increased school board election costs, increased emphasis on political topics rather than instructional topics, and the increased prevalence of like-minded individuals organizing in blocs to run as a slate during elections and vote together when elected. Some participants describe the benefits of this increased pressure on schools, including their own personal desire to run for a seat on and participate in a local school board; however, many participants described the increased politicization as negative, including an increase in bullying in meetings, anti-social or disruptive behavior, and an inability to compromise among adults.

OSBA was not spared from criticism. Some members expressed a desire for OSBA to be more proactive on certain topics, including student mental health, student safety, and equity. Other members expressed disappointment that OSBA had taken positions on draft legislation on these topics. A few participants, often from small and rural school districts, expressed frustration over the direction of political leaders in the state, including Gov. Kate Brown and legislative leaders, and expressed further frustration with OSBA for not working to contravene these political leaders' efforts.

- **School board members are concerned for their personal safety.**

School board members fear violence to themselves, their families, and their property more acutely than ever before. School board members report being harassed in school board meetings, being menaced in the community outside school functions, being followed home, and having campaign signs vandalized. Although some veteran school board members said this behavior should be expected with public service, other participants disagreed. The fear and threats of violence were especially prevalent among school board members of color and female school board members.

- **School districts continue to work on equity, but strongly feel it is an issue for the local community.**

Participants gave a broad range of responses regarding equity. Although equity was among the most prevalent topics discussed during listening sessions with regions containing larger school districts, recruiting and retaining staff of diverse backgrounds, supporting students based upon need, and putting equity at the front of decision making were also common discussion topics.

For participants from regions containing smaller school districts, equity concerns were often expressed using different language, including the challenges facing students experiencing poverty and instability at home, supporting students who work or have long commutes to school, supporting students who need support outside traditional instructional areas, and supporting staff to maintain status as an attractive employer in the community.

Equity, specifically, was not a universally well-received term. Some participants attached a negative, political connotation to it.

Almost all participants said their local school board was in the best position to support student and staff needs and local control was crucial to success and community buy-in.

- **School board training is generally well received, and mandatory training requirements should be left in the school district's control.**

Participants seemed to want to dedicate time and attention to being a better board and were generally favorable to board training. Some specifically praised OSBA board trainers' work, but mandatory board training brought less consensus. Participants were amenable to the idea of training for basic school board responsibilities and requirements, like quorum and public meetings requirements, with some interest in mandatory equity training. Most participants expressed that the local community was the best driver of school board training needs and flexibility would be key in any training requirement.

- **There is great interest in the idea of a rural caucus within OSBA.**

Participants expressed broad interest in increasing participation and lending voice to rural school board members in the form of a rural caucus. There was some question as to how rural would be defined.

- **Frustration with oversight by the state is high.**

Coming out of two years of centralized control by the executive branch, participants expressed a general frustration with increased state oversight, specifically by the Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Health Authority, along with the sheer number of mandates coming from the state. Participants gave multiple examples of how they were unable to effectively meet the needs of their school community due to what they perceived to be limitations on their local governance authority, including an inability to circumvent statewide mandates and work more closely with local health authorities.

- **Despite all these challenges, school districts are doing great work.**

When asked, participants described numerous areas of successful innovation, including how technological advances during COVID have increased instruction and participation in board meetings; how interest in local advocacy is as high as it's ever been; how successful programs, such as peer support among students and staff support groups for employees, were flourishing; and how they felt energized by the students in their school system. One participant wrote, "We are seeing our students able to thrive in our schools. The students are now seen, acknowledged, and celebrated. As we pivot out of this pandemic, let's have the courage to keep looking at creative, innovative strategies to move the dial for students."

### **Next Steps**

This report will be shared with the OSBA Board of Directors, will be made available to the membership, and will inform the creation of the Legislative Workplan for the 2023 legislative session.

### **Thank You**

These meetings are made possible by the staff of the regional ESDs. Our thanks go out to the superintendents and their staffs for their work on these important meetings.

Superintendent Tonja Everest and Board Secretary Lisa Schoen with Linn Benton Lincoln ESD

Superintendent Dave Novotney, Board Secretary Tishri Tucker, and Event Planner Jaime Turley with Willamette ESD

Superintendent Dan Goldman and Board Secretary Lauren Slyh O'Driscoll with Northwest Regional ESD

Superintendent Robert Waltenburg and Board Secretary Emma Winkelman with Grant ESD

Superintendent Shannon Criss and Board Secretary Katie Hill with Harney ESD

Superintendent Karen Patton and Board Secretary Gretchen Piper with Region 18 ESD

Superintendent Michael Lasher, Board Secretary Veronica Van Drimmelen, and Event Planner Cindy Doyle with Douglas ESD

Superintendent Larry Didway and Board Secretary Laurel Roth with Clackamas ESD

Superintendent Tony Scurto and Board Secretary Julie Simmonds with Lane ESD

Superintendent Paul Coakley and Board Secretary Heather Severns with Multnomah ESD

Superintendent Pat Sublette and Board Secretary Susan Vallie with Columbia Gorge ESD

Superintendent Penny Fender, Board Secretary Kim Domenighini, and Event Planner Mercedes Herrera with North Central ESD