



TO: OSBA Board of Directors
FROM: Jim Green, Executive Director
SUBJECT: 2021 Fall Listening Sessions
DATE: December 3, 2021

Introduction

OSBA conducted its first phase of listening sessions in eastern and southern Oregon during October and November. Seven sessions were held, with four in-person and three in a virtual environment. Staff connected with more than 165 board members, superintendents, and other school administrators from 45 school districts and 7 education service districts from the following OSBA regions: Eastern, Gorge, Central, Southeast, Douglas/South Coast, and Southern.

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.

Executive Director Jim Green asked four questions, and attendees were encouraged to let the conversation flow organically. Staff took notes intended to capture common themes but did not take verbatim notes.

Themes

Below each question are the themes that resulted from how often a topic was raised. Themes are ordered by those heard most often, then in descending order. Themes listed below were mentioned at least three times throughout the listening sessions. Comments that were not heard enough to be considered a theme are not included in this report but have been captured for OSBA consideration. Following each theme are comments staff heard that provide context.

Question 1 - What are the biggest leadership challenges you are facing in your district and community?

Staffing Concerns/Issues

Workforce shortages

- Our inability to compete with the salaries of other districts is creating a teacher shortage.
- We can't hire counselors, OT/PT, or SLP. We can't compete with the salaries paid by outside contractors and then have to contract with them for services, which costs us more. We don't have additional funds for that.
- Hiring and retaining bus drivers, specifically, but other classified positions as well.
- Staff shortages are causing stress and a negative impact on programs and other staff.

- Affordable housing in the community is a barrier to hiring/retaining teachers and specialists.

Staff morale, mental and physical health

- The stress level of staff is incredible.
- It is only October and teachers are already exhausted, frustrated and disheartened. How do we reinvigorate them?
- There is a systems drain/strain in the district and staff is fatigued.

The Pandemic

Mandates

- One of the big challenges is the number of mandates and the extent they are constantly changing.
- We have ugliness in community; because, we didn't have ability to ramp up to the mandate/rule changes.
- We face residual anger about decisions the board has made. Mandates are a part of the issue and amplify the anger and displeasure that we continue to deal with.

Lack of Unity

- Eastern Oregon views are different from Western Oregon views, creating lack of unity.
- It's a tough place to be in, when you have been told what to do. Hard to maintain unity.
- There is a lack of unity with everyone going in different directions. This is communitywide, citywide, countywide, and statewide.
- We used to be closer knit and now there are wedges in our community.

Lack of Metrics

- I want to know the metrics community by community with accountability so we can have a sense of the light at the end of the tunnel.
- The challenge is that we are in constant responsive mode as the pandemic continued to change the landscapes. It is a defensive position to be in.

Local Control - One Size Does Not Fit All

- Legislators should not do a one-size-fits-all solution.
- The mandates do not fit everybody. The constant changes get in the way of the social/emotional work we need to do. We are distracted by mandates.
- Something OSBA or ODE does stirs up our constituents. We get beat up from trying to keep politics out of the classroom. Common sense and local control must come back. One size does not fit all.
- One or two problems across the state should not result in punishment for all through new legislation.

Student Achievement

- Students are behind educationally and need multiple social/emotional supports more than ever before.
- We haven't had a conversation about student achievement in months. Our focus has been on COVID issues.
- Student behavior is a major issue and not being talked about enough.
- Staff stress will impact student achievement.

Relationships

- Concerns about community trust moving forward. It is integral to district success to have leaders trusted by our parents and community members. How do we regain that trust for the future?
- State mandates have made rural communities lose trust, and I don't know how we will recover without regional/state support. We all know bonds need community support. Bonds are needed in growing communities.
- Reestablishing our reputation for excellence and communicating this to our community.

Equity

Trust

- There is a lack of trust that we are doing equity work.
- Many of our districts are minority/majority and getting results. OSBA/ODE put out policies and requirements that stop our work and force us to redirect our efforts to meet the requirements they have created.

Digital Divide

- Digital divide and connectivity are ongoing concerns. We can buy as many hot spots as we need, but without the infrastructure to support them, they will not work.

Funding

- Concerned about budgets in the coming years based on:
 - Declining enrollment;
 - Loss of one-time funding (ESSR);
 - Less experienced teachers will reduce district's funding through the SSF.

Question 2 – What is a lesson you have learned that we should share with your fellow board members or superintendents across the state?

Communications

- You can't over communicate or over celebrate achievements.
- There is value in two-way conversations with community members.
- Communicating in advance is critical for families to plan.
- Social media clouds issues.

Staff

- We learned to teach in different ways and took on additional responsibilities.
- Amazed at the resilience of all staff to step up. Concerned about when they hit their limits.
- Workforce shortages are just another challenge for teachers.

Student Achievement

Focus on Students

- We can admire this issue forever, but instead, let's focus on improving our rates.
- Masks are a small price to pay to keep kids in schools. Even though we may not all agree on all issues, we can focus on what we can do.
- We have many plusses in these heated times (e.g., student activities, achievements, and awards).

Social/Emotional Needs

- We need academics, but structured play to teach social/emotional may be what is needed right now.
- Discipline and behavior issues have increased. Transitions from Pre-K to elementary school, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school are harder right now.
- Pre-K, first and second grade students are struggling behaviorally, and teachers are desperate to get them up to speed.
- We have some talented specialists working with students, but it is not enough.

Technology

- We have had to embrace technology, and it has kept us connected. We have learned new ways to use technology to maintain continuity of services to students.
- Zoom options for meetings in general have had a positive impact.
- Zoom has improved IEP meetings by pulling people together. Regional staff can make more than one meeting a day without travel.

Question 3 - How can OSBA support your work? What services should OSBA improve upon or begin providing?

Professional Development by OSBA

Requests for Services

- Regional training on this side of the state.
- New board member orientation and mentorships.

Compliments

- Appreciate the OSBA webinars and find them helpful for new board members.
- Virtual conferences have been appreciated.
- Mr. Kelley and his team provide helpful training.

Local Control - One Size Does Not Fit All

- Our ability to get things done is obstructed by the Governor's mandates.
- Recognize that with all our challenges, we are doing it right - give us back control.
- Top down is stifling.
- Continue to recognize how different we are.

Oregon Department of Education - Required Reports/Paperwork

- We need relief on mandated reports as there is not enough staff in small districts to complete all of them.
- ODE processes should be streamlined and their reporting platforms are not user friendly.
- New funding always comes with new mandatory paperwork.

Funding

- Need to make sure the SSF continues to increase, otherwise SSA money will be used to backfill.
- SSA funds are being used to backfill state school fund. Concerned about the impact on the budget. We need a long-term viewpoint not just three years out.
- Schools need funding for social emotional help for students and staff as well as technology, cyber, and AV.
- Districts need help passing bonds. School facility grants are essential to districts struggling with older facilities.

OSBA Communications

- I appreciate the strong communication efforts regarding both local and national issues from OSBA.
- ORedNews is good and helps us by sharing issues across Oregon.
- Strong partnership between OSBA and COSA. Unified messages have been helpful.

Students

- Freshman on-track rates have plummeted. Any thoughts on dialing back grad requirements.
- Third grade reading has suffered. Higher ed not providing the right type of reading curriculum to help Oregon students learn to read.
- Worried about increasing achievement gaps of underrepresented and homeless students.
- Mental health issues of students are long term and need to be planned for.

Trust

- Lack of trust from the state that our boards are doing the right things for students.
- Our county isn't recognized for our work with student achievement.

Vaccines

- Every district should have the ability to have control over vaccines of students. A mandate would devastate our schools.
- A vaccine mandate will reignite the bonfire.
- Vaccines - consider the different perspectives across the state. Think about what can be put in place to meet the needs of families and what accountability and resources can be used. Local control may require additional resources.

Question 4 - Where do you see achievement gaps among your students, and what can OSBA provide to support your diversity, equity, and inclusion work?

Students

- The achievement gaps have gotten worse. Really worried about the next four years coming out of this pandemic.
- Earliest learners (K-2 kids) - intervention programs are being run by our staff and not specialists.
- Students with little support at home are at least a year behind because of last year.
- Special Ed students are really behind.

Poverty

- Poverty in our district has created gaps. First graders are behind academically and social/emotionally. This is true for all grades that transitioned during COVID (i.e., kindergarten, grade school to middle school, and middle school to high school).
- Poverty has a massive impact on achievement.
- The definition of equity is narrowly defined by the state and does not include poverty, access, or the digital divide. The definition needs to be broadened to reflect differences across the state.

Trust

- We constantly battle the stereotype that eastern Oregon educators are “rednecks” who either don’t do equity or only believe equity is about poverty and special education. We have a diverse student population, and we serve all of our students. We understand equity.
- There is not trust that we are skilled enough to lead.
- There is not trust that our communities value equity.

Local Control

- Rural Oregon needs flexibility and understanding of the difference between districts. One size does not fit all.
- Rural school districts are not asked about their DEI work. We are forced to implement by putting a round peg into a square hole because that is what works in western Oregon.
- What can we do as school board members? All our power has been taken away. How can we have a direct impact on regaining our local control?

Equity - Training

- Any work OSBA can do to help educate board members on what equity means and how to apply an equity lens. It would be helpful to have some expertise on the topic.
- Poverty is a big deal. Small pockets of students are overlooked. Training on how to lead with equity and with an equity lens and see all students.

Next Steps

This report will be shared with the OSBA Board of Directors and made available to the membership.

Additionally, OSBA staff has begun working on the schedule for the Spring Listening Sessions, which will include the regions that were not visited by OSBA staff this Fall. Once the Spring Listening Sessions are complete a similar report will be generated and shared with the OSBA Board of Directors and made available to membership.

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.

Additional Information

Districts and Educational Service Districts represented at the Fall Listening Sessions:

- Eastern Region: Adrian, Baker, Burnt River, Enterprise, InterMountain ESD, La Grande Malheur ESD, North Powder, Nyssa, Ontario and Vale.
- Central Region: Ashwood, Black Butte, Crook County, High Desert ESD, Jefferson ESD, Jefferson 509J, Redmond and Sisters.
- Douglas/South Coast Region: Bandon, Central Curry, Coos Bay, Myrtle Point, North Bend, Port Orford-Langlois, Reedsport and South Coast ESD.
- Gorge Region: Athena-Weston, Echo, Hermiston, Ione, Milton-Freewater, Morrow County, Pendleton, Ukiah and Umatilla.
- Southeast Region: Adel, Lake County, Lake ESD, North Lake, Paisley and Plush.
- Southern Region: Ashland SD, Central Point SD, Eagle Point SD, Grants Pass, Klamath County, Klamath Falls City Schools, Medford, Phoenix-Talent, Prospect, Rogue River and Southern Oregon ESD.

Breakdown of Themes by Question					
Themes	Question				Total Comments
	#1	#2	#3	#4	
Staff	28	12	2	1	43
Students	11	10	6	12	39
Local Control	20	2	9	4	35
OSBA - Training			25		25
Communications		20			20
COVID	16	3			19
Unity	15		1		16
Funding	6		6	1	13
Relationships	10	2			12
Equity	6	1		4	11
ODE	3		8		11
Trust			3	8	11
Technology		10			10
Equity - Poverty				9	9
OSBA - Communications	1		6	1	8
OSBA - Single Topic	2		4	1	7
Technology		7			7
Vaccines	2	1	4		7