Raising the Bar by Reimagining Accountability:

Key takeaways from 13 listening sessions with school district leaders about the challenges and top priorities facing Oregon schools. Participants share their input on key features of an accountability framework.

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Thank you

A sincere and heartfelt thank you to the school, district and education service district leaders who participated and contributed their voice and questions during the listening sessions with ODE staff.

The department holds deep appreciation for your knowledge, lived experiences and willingness to share openly and sometimes vulnerably. We cannot thank you enough for centering students and community, for posing meaningful and probing questions and for asking Oregon education leaders and policymakers to make the right moves so that administrators, teachers and staff can prioritize student achievement, attendance and well-being.

We want you to know that state leaders and policymakers are better informed because of your personal stories and insight about Oregon's education system - including its challenges, barriers and spaces for continued improvement. The summary that follows aims to capture your voices and key takeaways for state leaders and, in particular, for Oregon's Accountability Advisory Committee to consider as recommendations are developed for the 2025 Legislative Session.

Executive Summary

The purpose of engaging with school and district leaders and education partners-- through virtual meetings and in-person discussion -- was to capture their priorities and challenges along with ideas and feedback about improving Oregon's accountability framework, particularly what features of an accountability system ought to be present. At each feedback session, notes were taken to capture general feedback and quotes from participants. The team at ODE reviewed and synthesized the data, identifying patterns of responses and pulling out anecdotal quotes in order to write about and present the information. Key takeaways were presented as five themes:

- **Theme 1:** Number of initiatives and reporting requirements strain the system.
- **Theme 2:** Attracting and retaining high-quality staff is a challenge.
- **Theme 3:** Support needed for attendance and mental health.
- **Theme 4:** Make accountability measures meaningful.
- **Theme 5:** Allow time to make progress.

These themes offer additional context for ODE leaders, policymakers and ODE's Accountability Advisory Committee to consider to better understand the varied conditions impacting Oregons' schools. This report summary represents a snapshot of those experiences, and while the information cannot be generalized, the data presented offers a meaningful and actionable way for state leaders and policymakers to deepen their awareness and take informed and focused next steps to respond to challenges and prioritize support where needed.

Introduction

The Oregon Department of Education (ODE) is taking steps to examine its current accountability framework. Legislation passed in 2023 (House Bill 2656) requires ODE to:

1. **Administer a statewide survey** designed to better understand the experiences of students across the state.
2. **Convene an advisory committee** charged with reviewing accountability programs and making recommendations to ODE's Director on the expansion or revision of Oregon's accountability framework.

As part of a comprehensive effort to inform the Accountability Advisory Committee, ODE staff also planned and facilitated engagement with school, district, and education service district (ESD) leaders.

What Do We Mean When We Say "Accountability?"

Accountability for Oregon education is rooted in systems of public stewardship that transparently guide improvements in economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and credibility of K-12 public education in Oregon in service of all of Oregon's students. Accountability is often perceived as having to deal with the consequences of one's actions. While one aspect of educational accountability includes corrective action, there is a continuum of resources that are part of the spectrum of supports and expectations that ODE leverages to help districts live into accountability.

One aspect of the work of this Accountability Advisory Committee is to determine what we want Accountability to mean in Oregon now.

Shared Responsibility

At the Oregon Department of Education, school and district leaders are seen as trusted partners in determining how policy is implemented and improved over time. Students and families rely on the school system, particularly its leaders and staff who provide daily oversight, care for children, along with diverse skills and expertise. The experiences and insights of educators across the state is a critical piece of input. Activating and elevating their voices is one avenue to inform state-level decision-making and policy.

Engagement with School & District Leaders

Virtual & In-Person Meetings

The purpose of these meetings was to hear directly from school & district leaders and education partners with the goal of providing input to Oregon's Accountability Advisory Committee.

- 13 virtual and in-person meetings were facilitated by ODE leaders and staff during the months of May and June 2024.
- 235 participants were engaged.

Participants Responded to Five Questions

The groups varied in size, and at each meeting, participants were asked the same five questions:

1. What are the highest priorities for your school community?
2. From your perspective, what are the primary challenges that school districts are currently facing?
3. What do you believe constitutes effective accountability for schools and school districts?
4. What key features or characteristics do you desire in an ideal accountability framework?
5. Anything else you want the advisory committee to know?

Collecting Input

Participants provided their input through verbal comments as ODE staff took notes. Staff captured direct quotes, general comments and made note of when specific sentiments or areas of feedback were strongly agreed upon or raised multiple times by many members of a session.

Table 1

Date & Time	Group / Location	Number of Participants
March 20, 2024	Small Schools Meeting	30+
May 3, 2024	Multnomah ESD	15
May 14, 2024	North Central ESD Supt. meeting	8-10
May 15, 2024	Wallowa ESD Supt Meeting	5
May 16, 2024	Lake ESD	12
May 22, 2024	Oregon Association of School Business Officials	60+
May 28, 2024	Grant ESD Superintendents	10
May 29, 2024	Southern Oregon ESD	25
May 30, 2024	Clackamas ESD	3
May 31, 2024	Willamette ESD	26
June 4, 2024	Lane ESD	25
June 11, 2024	YCEP / JDEP	2
June 12, 2024	InterMountain ESD	12
		TOTAL: 235

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary source of data used in this analysis includes notes collected from each engagement. For the purpose of this summary report, the qualitative data from participants' responses was reviewed, analyzed and summarized first by question, and then holistically into themes to inform the key takeaways below.

Key Takeaways

From the data collected - including what participants shared verbally in their responses to the questions posed - five themes emerged. These themes represent responses from all five of the questions posed.

5 Themes

1. The number of initiatives and reporting requirements strain the system.

2. Attracting and retaining high-quality staff is a challenge.

3. Increased support is needed for attendance and mental health.

4. Accountability measures must be meaningful.

5. Allow time to make/show progress.

It is important to note: participants shared their experiences and feedback in a setting that encouraged equity of voice, with opportunities to share personal experiences and anecdotes.

> # Theme 1:
> # Number of Initiatives & Reporting Requirements Strain the System

Applying for and Reporting on Grant Funds Needs a Streamlined Approach

Participants in every session discussed initiative fatigue (referring to the number of state programs initiated in the last five years and the number of reporting requirements each grant upholds).

When asked about challenges they experience, the most common answer was the unique process of applying for and reporting on grants; some discussed having to report on grant funds prior to implementation; others discussed the separate and complicated processes and different systems or software needed for different grants. Additional discussion included:

- **Feelings of information overload:** The quantity and frequency of communication is at an all-time high, according to participants who receive information from ODE. They talked about the pace of information and likened it to Oregon's COVID-19 response when daily

updates and guidance changes were complex and critical to carrying out day-to-day school operations. Current information about grants are plentiful: from resources, emails, forms, newsletters and more - all of which must be reviewed and understood in order to apply.

- **Impact on small and rural schools:** School and district leaders across every input session mentioned small and rural school districts and the number of jobs and responsibilities a single person holds. Participants complimented ODE for many of its efforts to begin consolidation; however, they proposed reducing the number of grants the state offers, creating greater flexibility with funding, and streamlining the process for applying and reporting.
- **Growing number of state initiatives:** Participants describe initiative fatigue and a plea to legislators and state leaders to cast a vision, focus on a handful of priorities and allow time to make progress.

> "The state has put us into Initiative overload. We can't keep up."
> "It's difficult to be nimble in addressing needs of our community when they arise due to the earmarked funds."

> "Grants are amazing, but more does not equal better."
> "Anything to make the reporting side more reasonable would be incredibly helpful."

Theme 2:
Attracting & Retaining High-Quality Staff a Challenge

School Districts want to Hire, Retain and Support Quality Teachers and Personnel

Participants described the challenges in attracting and retaining quality educators and staff. For many small school districts, they report difficulty in hiring for special services and supports, including special education, English Language Development (ELD), and contracting with

professionals to provide services to students experiencing disabilities - such as speech language pathology and occupational therapy. In addition to the challenges of hiring, participants discussed:

- **Aging teaching staff:** The number of professional educators and staff who are retiring or close to retirement age. They talked about attrition and the importance of having a plan for hiring.
- **Coherence among teacher preparation programs and classroom experience:** Recognizing some disconnect between how new teachers are prepared and their ability to adequately support the students they serve. Participants talked about this from the local perspective as well as a statewide system of support: encouraging greater alignment and continuity between ODE, Teacher Standards Practices Commission (TSPC) and the Educator Advancement Council (EAC).
- **Professional Learning:** Participants talked about how the needs of students have increased (particularly pertaining to mental health and well-being) and in order to deliver instruction, provide day-to-day curriculum and instruction, differentiation is key. Their priority is to ensure teachers and staff have timely and meaningful professional development that supports these needs.

"We have an aging teaching staff. We must find ways to bring in fresh talent and create internal systems to retain and support teachers."

"It's hard to do all of the things without quality staff. The needs continue to increase for our students and we simply don't have the staff or access to services needed."

Regular Attendance is a Challenge & School Districts Need Increased Capacity to Support Mental Health & Well-Being

Participants in all 13 sessions mentioned attendance and mental health. Attendance was commonly discussed as a school district priority, where leaders talked about elevating the importance of regular attendance to students, parents and families.

When talking about attendance, participants highlighted:

- **Working with families** - In order to increase awareness. elevate the overall importance of consistent and regular attendance, and ensure kids are attending school regularly, school leaders recognize parents and families as integral pieces to reaching their goals. They mentioned their attempts at various strategies, such as emails, social media and newsletter reminders without much change in outcomes.
- **Desire for greater state support** - School leaders are requesting support from the state to work together to close the persistent gaps in attendance. Conversations with participants focused on shared responsibility and questions like: "how can the state help pivot the public perception of Oregon schools?"

Mental Health is a topic that came up in response to priorities and challenges.

- **Students coming to school with increased needs related to feelings of belonging, well-being and connectedness.** Participants, particularly school leaders, had limited access to resources to support the breadth of needs and requested greater support in the form of resources for hiring staff who can provide counseling, care and attention to students they serve.

"One of our highest priorities is attendance. We have a broken system. Absenteeism is at an all-time high."

"Family and community engagement helps. We are working really hard at encouraging regular attendance."

Theme 4:
Make Accountability Measures Meaningful

Effective & Meaningful Accountability for Schools and Districts

Participants talked about accountability indirectly and directly. When prompted to talk (directly) about what they believe constitutes effective accountability they responded that they needed to have a shared definition. They wanted a common and clear foundation for understanding that would be simple enough to explain to the community: school board, students and families. As a part of the shared definition, participants talked about:

- Differentiated approach for small school districts (use enrollment).
- Trust between state and local systems.
- Alignment to values.
- Fair(er) role of assessment data.
- Measures growth; student progress.
- Relies on multiple measures.

Participants also shared their experiences and opinions related to Oregon's statewide assessment system. Leaders across all sessions discussed low participation by students and perceived lack of valuation by parents and families. They desired a more well-rounded system; one that could provide actionable and meaningful feedback to teachers.

Indirectly, participants mentioned accountability related to student progress and teacher training. They wondered if there are better tools to measure and use local data.

Theme 5:
Allow Time to Make Progress

Focused Priorities for Oregon's Schools & Time to Make Progress

Participants suggested the state and policymakers agree on 3-4 priority areas. They emphasized focusing on student growth with a few central ideas:

- Provide personalized and differentiated framework for accountability.
- Continue to raise the bar and elevate expectations for school leaders.
- Consider how equity can be a lever for change and applied uniquely throughout the state of Oregon depending on different contexts.

Opportunities for Action

From the data collected, analyzed and shared, the following points serve as key considerations or opportunities for action:

1. Address initiative fatigue and how the rollout of dozens of new state programs has impacted school districts (particularly small and rural areas).
2. Reduce the number of state grants and program applications, platforms for submission, and reporting requirements.
3. Increase clarity and understanding of funding processes (competitive and non-competitive grants, release of funds, state school fund). Streamline school funding so schools can maximize resources.
4. Reimagine the state assessment system so that it is meaningful to students, families and teachers.
5. Create a robust statewide system to prepare, hire, support and retain high-quality staff.
6. Improve use, access and understanding of state and local data.
7. Allow time to make progress.