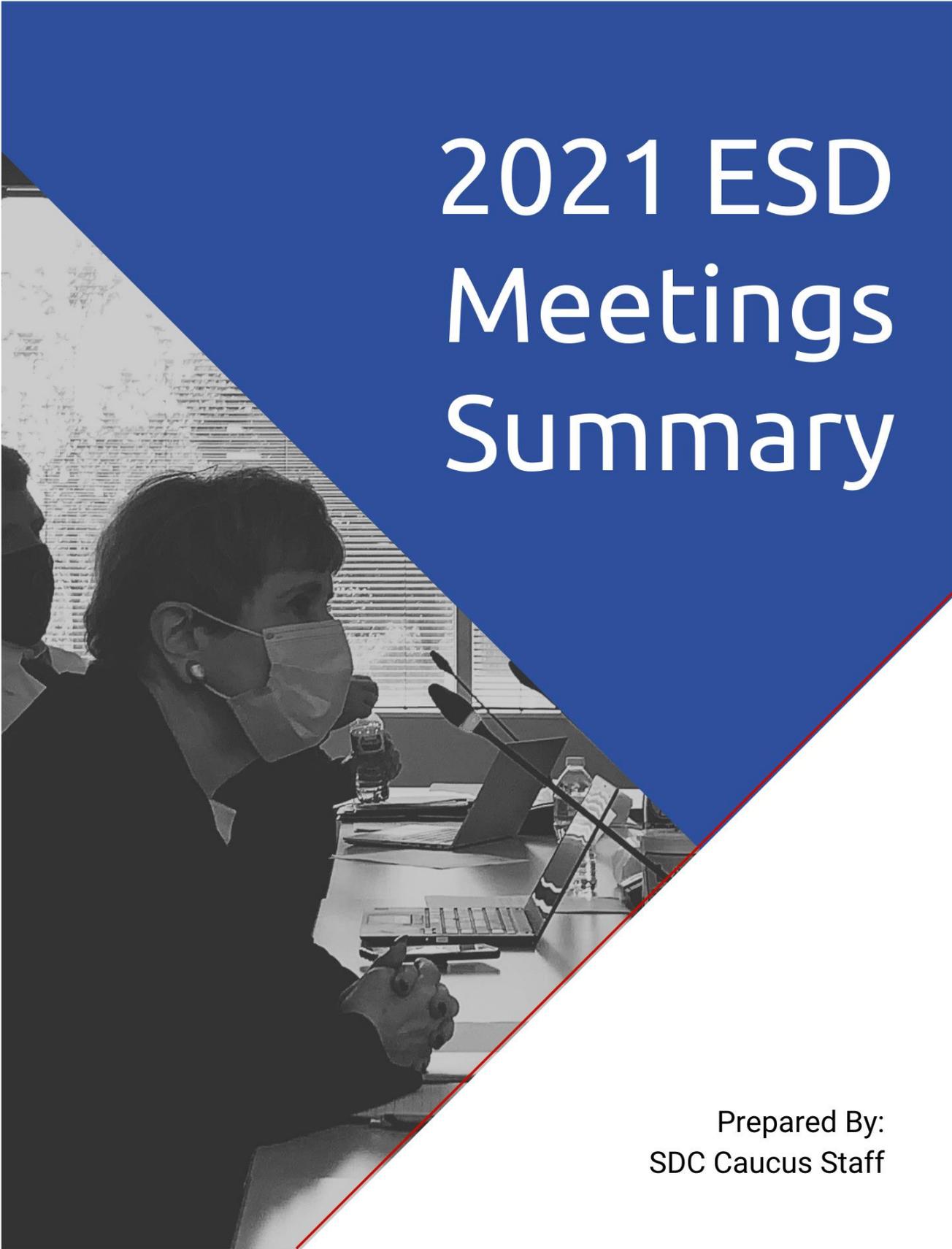# 2021 ESD Meetings Summary

Prepared By:
SDC Caucus Staff

Dates and Locations

- ESD 112: *Vancouver* - Aug. 2
- ESD 101: *Spokane* - Aug. 12
- ESD 114: *Bremerton* - Aug. 18
- ESD 171: *Wenatchee* - Sept. 7
- ESD 105: *Yakima* - Sept. 7
- ESD 123: *Pasco* - Sept. 8
- ESD 189: *Anacortes* - Sept. 10
- ESD 113: *Tumwater* - Sept. 20
- ESD 121: *Renton* - Sept. 24

Introduction

This interim, Senator Lisa Wellman conducted her annual educator listening tour, a tradition that had been halted in 2020 due to the pandemic. At each of the nine educational service districts (ESDs), she heard from school leaders on their concerns and priorities heading into the 2021 session. Senator Wellman provided main topic areas and corresponding questions to the ESDs in advance of each meeting to help guide discussions and also invited those present to comment on additional issues of importance to them. This year, she is particularly interested in stabilization and recovery beyond the pandemic and asked the ESDs:

1) **Districts use of federal funds**: how are districts using federal funds? What learning recovery practices are districts deploying? And is there other State support needed to continue to support student acceleration and learning recovery?
2) **Equity training** and implementation of SB 5044: what is going well and what are the challenges?
3) **Behavior/mental health supports**: how can ESD safety centers be useful in supporting student behavior and mental health needs? What updates are available on the safety centers' work?
4) What **new practices** might continue post pandemic? Are there elements of distance learning that might become the "new normal"? Do districts anticipate new uses for technology?

The themes that emerged from what ESDs shared are detailed within this report. Some common themes include:

- The unsustainable and limited nature of ESSER funds along with the long-term needs produced by the pandemic. While the temporary federal funds were helpful in meeting some of the immediate needs, districts were hesitant to use the funds on critical ongoing expenses, such as addition staff. Additional state funding will be needed to sustain many of the programs that were implemented to help students in their learning recovery and those programs will likely be needed beyond the few years the federal money is available.
- Districts agree that equity training for educators and students must be a priority. Implementing this equity work in a meaningful way that achieves systemic change work will require additional state funding for both professional development and additional staff.
- Support for social emotional learning and behavioral health in schools is critically important for both students *and* staff. This may be one of the highest priorities and highest needs for districts. The need existed prior to COVID and has been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- The pandemic also forced districts to think creatively about how to provide a valuable educational experience to all students in new ways. Perhaps one positive coming out of the pandemic may be that changes to the educational system that otherwise would have taken years to implement happened almost overnight. The system was forced to adapt to a virtual instructional model and create new ways for students to learn, including providing new technology to support that learning. Mastery based educational practices came to the forefront as valuable models for providing and assessing learning for students during the pandemic.

The purpose of these visits is to engage with schools and listen to what needs they have, understand how past legislation has impacted them and then use this information to inform future legislation. Senator Wellman will continue to work with ESDs, her colleagues in the legislature, and the community at large on addressing the issues raised from these visits.

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ESSER Funding

Districts were asked about the primary ways in which they were using the ESSER funding. Majority of the responses noted the growing need for social/emotional learning (SEL) and behavioral health supports for both students and staff and technology related supports. Other major areas of expenditures included extended learning supports such as before and after school and summer school programs, costs associated with PPE and COVID testing and contact tracing as well as HVAC upgrades or air purification equipment. Most responses noted that they were trying not to spend funding on permanent staffing because they knew that the ESSER funding is temporary. However, everyone was quick to point out that impacts of COVID are going to be long-term and that continued additional state funding is going to be needed especially in the area of behavioral health supports for students.

> ## *Most common uses for ESSER Funds*
> - *Temporary staff for behavioral health & instructional support*
> - *PPE*
> - *HVAC upgrades/air purification equipment*
> - *Summer school programs*
> - *Technology related items (hot spots, devices, training)*

A summary of some of the more common and specific comments related to the use of ESSER funds from the ESD meetings are grouped below:

Supporting Learning Recovery and Accelerated Learning
- A lot of the ESSER funding has gone to extended learning, including free summer camps and jumpstart programs, to both help students make up lost credits as well as get additional learning time. Some districts have even been able to provide transportation to their summer school programs which enables more students to participate. Many of these programs have been project-based learning. In addition to extended day/school year opportunities, funding was also used for new curriculum to support learning recovery and acceleration. Many of the district's learning recovery and acceleration strategies emphasized students in the special education program. Every district noted that summer school programs are expensive and without new funding in the future, districts will not be able to continue offering the same type of programs to as many students. Examples:
  - One district is spending around $230 per kid per day for their summer school program.
  - Some districts were able to use the additional ESSER funding to open summer school sites at all the schools not just elementary as had in past years. They will not be able to continue that without additional funding.

Facility Upgrades for Health and Safety
- Districts have heard that some incorrectly believe that the ESSER funding is expansive enough to fix everything. While ESSER money was helpful, it was not enough to fully cover major cost items, such as new HVAC systems, which will persist as a need for the health and safety of staff and students. One small district gave the example that it received $2 million in ESSER funding but that $1 million of those funds went to fix the HVAC system in only a single hallway in their old building. Additionally, spending funds to fix the HVAC impacts the district's ability for state

modernization funding in the future. This will have a negative impact on their ability to make other necessary renovations in an old building.

Temporary vs Permanent Staffing and Services
- Districts are hesitant to use ESSER money for critical or permanent staff because it is only temporary funding, and ultimately unsustainable. Many districts have used ESSER money for temporary mental/behavioral/social emotional health support staff but they will need permanent state funding so they can keep these staff on permanently and do this work long-term. The social emotional needs of students and staff are going to continue into the future and will likely only grow.
- Districts are hesitant to commit the temporary federal dollars to new great services because they do not want to over-commit to their communities. Districts want to be financially stable after the ESSER funds are gone and so many are being cautious with the money.
- Districts are using funding for air purifiers, PPE etc. and have hired temporary support staff for targeted types of supports such as mental health supports or meal services. Districts have also used funding to help teachers learn how to effectively use dual modes of online and in-classroom teaching.
- One exception to "not hiring permanent staff" was that some districts used the funds to hire additional counselors knowing that the district would be receiving additional state funding next year. The district wanted to hire new counselors now knowing that it will be very competitive to hire later since the need for counselors far exceeds the number of people available to fill these roles.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)/Behavioral Health and Whole Child Supports
- To support the increased behavioral health needs of students, many districts used ESSER funding for wrap-around services for students including additional counseling, tutoring and "navigators" to help families and kids access other community-based wrap-around services or telehealth services.
- Districts noted that community partnerships were critically important during the pandemic for whole child supports, but also noted that establishing and maintaining those partnerships takes significant staffing within the schools in order to effectively utilize those organizations.
- Some districts used ESSER funds to implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), including hiring MTSS coordinators to help with implementation. MTSS allows the district to focus more on individual needs of students better than they had in the past and address SEL and behavioral health needs more effectively.
- Most districts noted that the ESSER dollars are being used to deal with behavioral health related problems that had already existed in the system and were just exacerbated by the pandemic. They also noted that when the ESSER dollars cease, districts are going to hit a cliff unless the state thinks about the long-term needs of the system.

Technology Related Supports and Services
- Technology has always been a critical component of education and the renewed focus and increased funding in this area has been incredibly important and helpful. ESSER funded technology supports have included training, 1:1 devices, and WiFi hotspots as well as WiFi infrastructure within the school buildings. Many of the buildings were not prepared for full

virtual/online learning. Many districts put WiFi on buses to be parked in areas of need but this also had an added expense related to the bus drivers.

- Districts repeatedly noted that the technology expenses are not a one-time expenditure though. One district reported that about 50% of the chrome books returned last year were unusable because of damage and have had to replace them. This damage is often not due to student carelessness with the machines, but rather just the daily wear that they are subjected to.
- Even with the hot spots, many districts still struggled to provide necessary access to students. Some districts used federal funding to also establish remote sites or internet cafes for students to go to for support and for internet connectivity if they couldn't get it at home. Some districts also put paraeducators at those sites to help students and are hoping to continue some of those sites for tutoring services. Though one concern was that districts are having trouble finding enough staff (paraeducators) to support the remote sites.

COVID Testing, PPE, Social Distancing, etc.
- One district noted that it has added about 15 hours of additional support from paraeducators at each school in order to support the cohorts and zoning of students to help with the COVID distancing requirements. The district found that this also helped with reducing bullying and discipline issues and is hoping to continue this practice if they can find the additional funding after the ESSER money is gone.
- Some districts used some of their ESSER funds to open a centralized covid testing center for staff, students and families to reduce burden on the individual school buildings.
- Many districts noted that having enough staff to do the COVID testing and contact tracing is a challenge.
- One district noted that about 45% of the ESSER funds went towards maintaining district operations under the new health and safety requirements: lower class sizes for social distancing, staff for isolation rooms, contract tracing, and COVID testing.

Other Comments Related to ESSER Funding
- Some districts used ESSER funds to backfill other lost revenue instead of supporting new educational needs, such as learning loss. Some districts had local levy failures that had to use ESSER funds to backfill.
- While some districts benefitted over others, all districts had similar increased pandemic needs that hit all at once. Still, many districts felt inequity in the allocation of the ESSER money. In some areas cities also contributed portions of their ESSER funds, causing some schools to doubly benefit. This further contributed to equity issues with the surrounding districts.
- Districts appreciated that the ESSER funds worked through a reimbursement model and having that assurance that they would be reimbursed for what they spent.
  - One example was that districts were able to enter into contracts with community partners to help provide the nonacademic experiences as part of the summer school programs because the district knew that it would be reimbursed for those costs. Having those nonacademic experiences available was extremely beneficial to students as part of those programs.

Technology

In addition to ESDs and school districts noting ESSER funding going to support technology related services, the broader topic of how districts are using and teaching technology was consistently raised. All districts noted that increased professional development will be needed to keep up with the constantly evolving technology demands. Districts also noted the importance of teaching computer science.

> *"20% of the families in our district have needed some sort of support in order to have <u>any</u> connectivity at home because they are starting with nothing at all." - Quilcene School District*

A summary of some of the more common and specific comments related to technology and computer science are below:

- Technology demands are not new. Districts consistently noted that one positive coming out of COVID is that the technology changes that had to be made to deal with the pandemic would probably not have happened as quickly without the pandemic. This last year districts saw an instantaneous and dramatic change in how instruction was delivered directly tied to new technology demands. The professional development to support that change is lagging. Equity training alone takes up all the state paid days for professional development. All districts noted needing additional state funding for professional development so that staff can retool to meet the new demands.

- When districts switched to remote schooling, they found that many families did not have adequate internet (or any internet) to meet the needs of students. Larger families that may have broadband often don't have enough to allow all the kids to do their work at home. Educators are facing similar issues. Getting fiber out to families is still a huge problem in many areas. Additionally, districts noted that often parents don't understand how to use the technology and cannot help their students. In response to this need, many districts also implemented training for parents.

- Districts noted that they have a renewed focus on computer science because they know how critical this skill will be for their students. Districts are trying to focus on the entire K-12 pipeline of computer science programs and have received some grant funding to help provide early computer science opportunities in the elementary grades. AP computer science courses in high schools are growing and there is high interest amongst students. Districts are beginning to explore computer science course availability in middle schools as well as computer programming courses. Districts note though that they have spent a lot on providing the equipment that students need for these courses and it's not always supported entirely by state funding.

- Districts reported that the technology support from ESDs has been incredibly helpful. It has enabled districts to do a lot of professional learning and receive technical support for teachers, districts and parents. Some ESDs created resources that were translated into multiple languages, targeting parents and students and reaching many families. Day-care and child-care training resources were also created. A best-practices training series for teachers has been established on how to effectively teach online/hybrid learning. Districts still feel that there needs to be additional work on how to best provide SEL resources and equity resources that can be used on different learning platforms.

Behavioral Health and Other-Related Health Supports

One of the most consistent messages heard at each ESD was the need for additional behavioral health supports for students. While districts are using ESSER funding to support additional counselors and other mental and behavioral health supports, every district noted that long-term, enhanced funding is critically important in this area. Districts commented that the behavioral health needs coming out of the pandemic will be closer to a 10 year minimum impact. Districts also expressed the need for additional nurses for increasing medical needs of students and the need for emotional support services for staff. The difficulty in finding ways to bill for mental health services and the complexity of the Medicaid system was consistently brought up at each ESD. The ESDs noted that they are currently in process of building a model where all ESDs are licensed and able to bill Medicaid directly. Currently only four ESDs are licensed but all the others are in process.

A summary of some of the more common and specific comments related to the need for health-related supports are below:

- This last year has caused significant stress for everyone. Districts acknowledged that student's behavioral health needs were not being fully met in the past and they are going to be even greater in the future. Districts need more money across the board for nurses and counselors (both mental health and guidance). One district shared that its' students were showing up at school this year already anxious because they feared they were already behind. Other districts pointed out that the social emotional learning skills that students would normally be developing in the early grades have been seriously impacted because they were not in person for an entire year. Districts know that this will be on ongoing, long-term issue that must be addressed and stressed that it needs to be an ongoing priority for the entire state.

  > *A* survey of students at one district found that 35% of secondary students that completed the survey reported that they had "seriously contemplated" taking their lives during the pandemic.

- Districts stated that they need enhanced resources to help students and staff navigate the mental health services that are available in the community as well as staffing support in the schools that can do follow-up to make sure kids are actually accessing the services that are available.
- Districts also noted that state should not forget that staff have behavioral health needs as well. Staff are experiencing a lot of burnout and emotional strain.
- Every district needs assistance in providing mental health services for all students. Currently districts are reliant on Medicaid to pay for many of those services. Finding a way to streamline a billing process for private insurance regarding mental health services in schools would be helpful because it would eliminate the need to first determine if a student is eligible for services. One district noted that ESD's did receive funding from OSPI to help with mental health supports but that funding only made services available for six school districts in their region. This support has been very helpful especially for small rural districts that may not have access to the necessary resources in their community. However, the support from the ESDs isn't enough. All districts need access to that type of support and even more. Currently ESDs are deploying the resources to the schools that have the highest need - looking at students with highest ACES scores, etc. Additionally, the grant funding that went to the ESDs to support these services is only for two years and districts stress that the state will need a way to sustain this program and expand it.

- With the ESD support, districts have hired student assistance program professionals that go out to the schools and provide substance abuse and mental health prevention and intervention services at the school. Regionally, nine behavioral health coordinators have also been hired to assist districts along with nine student assistance advocates. See the model [linked here](#).
- One district noted that Washington does not have reciprocity for counselor's licenses from other states and suggested that altering those rules could help find people to provide additional services to students in need.
- Districts commented that while they are thankful for the additional funds for counselors, they are struggling to actually find counselors to hire, an issue that persists when districts have the funding. Additionally, while districts support the legislation requiring counselors to spend the majority of their time doing counseling duties, they pointed out that it has created other problems. Those other duties that counselors were doing still have to get done and now districts will just have to find additional coverage elsewhere. As an example, districts stated that often counselors were helping cover what are normally vice principal duties and now the districts will have to find additional money to hire another vice principal.
- School nurses were also brought up as an area where districts are struggling. Districts noted that it is difficult to find nurses to hire and yet students are needing more and more care on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, districts consistently stated that each school needs its own school-specific nurse.
- Districts noted that while telehealth services can help in some areas, students want an in-person contact for behavioral health services. Districts are working on a way to have a combination of telehealth and in-person contact to best address student needs.

Equity

One of the questions posed to the groups at each meeting was related to how implementation of the new equity training requirements is progressing and what challenges districts may be facing. Districts were extremely supportive of the new equity training requirements and repeatedly noted that equity is critically important to ensuring students can be successful at school. Districts also acknowledged that systemic changes are needed to move towards a truly equitable educational system that supports all students. Districts repeatedly reported struggling with misinformation that parents and the community have received. An additional challenge raised by most districts was that the current prototypical funding formula does not acknowledge or support this new focus on equity and diversity work, despite state requirements. While districts want to participate in equity work, it takes additional staff and additional training, which is not addressed in the current formula.

A summary of some of the more common and specific comments related to creating a more equitable educational system are below:

> *"Our students are going to hold us accountable for this work - they are already asking when they will start seeing the effects of these new equity standards and equity training." - Puget Sound ESD*

- Districts will continue to fight to implement these policies because they believe it is what is best for students; however, districts acknowledged concerns that in some areas community support will decline and levies will fail, resulting in a loss of funds
- Some districts are dealing with organized groups, like Patriot Prayer, coming onto school property and creating additional stress on district staff and posing additional safety concerns.
- The three main areas districts find that there is misinformation about include: sex education, "critical race theory" and mask mandates.
- Districts acknowledged there is a need for a systemic approach to equity for all students rather than focusing on a single individual equity program.
- Districts noted that there is a need for a state level messaging on broad, statewide support for equity work. State support for equity programs is helpful when community members call in with anger. Districts want to be doing this training and having state back up is important.
- Districts know that the businesses in their community support equity work and believe it would be helpful to have the business community deliver that messaging. In some areas of the state, the messaging would be better received from the business community rather than other elected officials or Supt. Reykdal. Districts stated that there is a need to get "politics" out of the messaging because it creates more division. Many districts also noted the benefits of the local business community talking about how equity issues are economically important and that messaging should be visible, such as in a formal media/public relations campaign. For example, in Vancouver the district noted that people in Vancouver and eastern Washington don't care as much about Amazon and instead need local businesses, such as the ports or the agriculture sector, to be speaking out. Districts also noted that any messaging done needs to also include some sense of hope that things are going to get better. People need some positive messaging about the future.
- As we move towards an educational system that is equitable for all, districts commented that the state will also need to think about what kind of management system will be needed to support this work. There is a shift towards creating a system where more data will inform individualized instruction and the social emotional needs of each student. A different management system will be necessary. Small districts don't have the resources to create or staff that type of management system on their own. ESDs are also trying to help districts navigate this new need. OSPI gave districts options of management systems to choose from and it was up to each district to learn how to use and navigate its implementation. Additional staff and time will be necessary to input, collect, and analyze data. Some districts noted that may need a separate day each week to focus on the data entry and for implementation. Districts acknowledge that the data shows there are significant equity issues in districts, such as disproportionately high discipline rates for black male students. Districts want to continue this work and continue using data to make sure are making improvements.
- One challenge noted is that some districts are using ESSER funds to support an equity coordinator and once the ESSER funds are gone, they are not sure where to get the funding for that staff person. Equity work takes more staffing and more professional development but that increased staffing is not supported in the prototypical funding model. Equity should be embedded in staff support and continual training is a key component to that.
- Districts want to stay focused on this work because students have asked for it. Districts know this work will impact students positively but that it is not going to happen overnight. Students

tell districts that they want to see curriculum that is representative of all cultures and to have staff that are reflective of the diversity of the students. Those pieces are crucial for the social emotional health of our students and for implementing a system of student-centered learning.

- The ESDs have been helpful to many school districts in the area of equity. Some ESDs have been actively involved in this work for a long time and are able to provide technical support to districts.
- One suggestion was that the state should re-examine the teacher/principal evaluation system and make sure equity is front and center in that system of evaluations.

Early Learning

Early learning issues were addressed at a few of the ESD meetings. The primary message was that ESDs and districts are thankful for the recent work done by the Legislature but that they are having issues finding staff to expand their early learning programs in some areas.

A summary of some of the more common and specific comments related to early learning are below:

- The renewed focus on early learning is greatly appreciated and districts know it will have a positive impact for students. The FAIR Start Act was a huge positive. Many districts saw ECEAP slots expanded and new jobs created. However, it is still difficult to fill openings. Many districts are even having a hard time finding substitutes for early learning providers. While the money is there, districts can't find the staff to hire in some places. Enrollment is also down for many ECEAP programs.
- Some districts are hoping to start up outdoor only early learning programs if they can get the funding and partnerships set up.
- Districts have some concerns related to transitional kindergarten. Implementation has been problematic.
- Districts used a lot of ESSER money for chrome books to help put pre-school kids and staff online. Despite that, districts know that kids still missed out on basic motor skill and social emotional learning work, which will have a lasting impact on students.

Vaccine Mandate

Half-way through the ESD listening tour the Governor announced a mandate, which required educators to be vaccinated by October 18th to maintain employment. Many districts expressed concerns that this new mandate would impact their already problematic staffing.

A summary of the comments related to the vaccination requirement are below:

Statewide School District Employee Vaccination & Exemption Status
- *Fully vaccinated: 89.2%*
- *Partially vaccinated: 0.5%*
- *Obtained medical exemption: 0.7%*
- *Obtained religious exemption: 9.6%*
- *Did not obtain exemption or vaccination: 0.3%*
  -OSPI Data as of 10/28/2021

- In eastern Washington, districts range from reporting around 10% to 30% of staff requesting religious exemptions. Bus drivers and nutrition workers are the two largest categories of staff potentially facing staffing issues. While most

districts will not be losing too much staff, they will have to do a lot of accommodations. Districts remain concerned about persistent staffing issues beyond the mandate.

- The Delta variant has caused rising infection rates. In eastern Washington the infection rate is off the charts and districts are worried they may have to go back to remote learning. Without more funding many districts are not ready to go back to fully remote. In many places the infection rates are higher now than they were last year when they were fully remote. Districts voiced a desire for a way to elevate the seriousness of the variant for those in the community that are still not vaccinated or supportive of masks. Eastern Washington rates have dropped significantly since the visit.

General Funding Formula Concerns

Many of the districts noted that the pandemic has highlighted the ongoing problems and inadequacies in the existing prototypical funding formula. All districts appreciated enrollment stabilization funding authorized in the 2021 session and noted that additional enrollment stabilization will be needed again this year. Districts also continued to note that the funding formula simply does not provide enough staff to adequately serve all the needs of students, highlighted problems with regionalization funding and pointed to problems with how facilities are funded. Many districts also suggested that there is a need to rethink how ALE programs are funded.

A summary of the comments related to the general funding inadequacies and enrollment stabilization needs are below:

- Without stabilization funding, many districts don't know how they would have provided quality educational services to their students. However, overall districts still want more stability in the funding model. Districts are still very concerned about continued declining enrollment and its impact on future funding. In some areas of the state there are concerns that the mask mandates will contribute to increased enrollment loss. Enrollment uncertainty for the future will also have impacts on calculating levy amounts. Adding to the enrollment uncertainty is that families may have changed their plans for this school year because of the Delta variant. Districts staffed based on what parents originally said and if enrollment doesn't rebound, many will be facing significant staffing cuts next year - some worried it will be as high as 5%. Large districts acknowledged that they can somewhat adapt to enrollment changes but that small districts really struggle.
- Districts also noted that funding stability for those programs that rely on free and reduced price lunch counts will be needed in order to prevent dramatic funding loss for those programs.
- Central Kitsap school district noted that it had an enrollment decline because saw a decrease in military students. Military families lost their support system at home when the pandemic hit so many went to stay with extended families that were often outside of the district.
- Many parents decided to delay their child starting kindergarten last year, which caused a significant drop in enrollment. Now, larger than normal kindergarten classes will be made up of 6 year-olds rather than 5 year-olds. This change is going to have an impact in the future. Kindergarten grades are bursting right now, but other grade levels are not. It is hard adjusting staffing for these situations in a small district.

- The prototypical model is still not addressing the true needs of small schools and funding is inadequate. This funding inadequacy is an equity issue. There is need for an updated staffing model, including more adults in the schools. Districts noted that every student needs to have an individual connection with an adult to be successful. That relationship is what helps identify the kids that need more individualized attention and support.
- Regionalization continues to still cause issues and create more inequities for some districts. Every district has a little different opinion about regionalization. Districts with lower regionalization continue to lose teachers to neighboring districts that can pay more. While this issue needs to be revisited, districts acknowledge that they are unsure of how to fix the problem.
- Districts noted that the transportation formula also still needs work stating that "it didn't work before the pandemic and it really isn't working now." Staff and fuel costs are up and there has not been a corresponding increase in state funding. A new formula is needed that better represents the actual costs.
- Facilities issues continue to be an equity issue between large and small schools. Small school districts have older buildings and because of the super majority requirement for bonds, smaller school districts cannot afford to build new schools. Districts stressed the need for a simple majority for bonds. Additional support for the rural modernization grants for small rural school buildings would also be helpful. Small districts asserted that schools are state infrastructure and should not have to be funded by and reliant on local dollars. Some small school districts are considering a potential lawsuit over this issue.
- Districts believe that there needs to be a statewide discussion about ways to change ALE funding and create more programs. After this last year it is clear that ALE programs are essential, as opposed to an alternative. ALE programs are simply another pathway for students in our new reality. The funding model for ALE, however, needs revisiting. Districts are finding that some parents definitely still want an online option for their students and are trying to respond by creating new virtual options/online schools. However, creating these new programs is extremely expensive.
  - o Some districts would like to see a CTE enhancement for alternative learning experience (ALE) students.
  - o Some districts suggested that there needs to be some base level of ALE funding that automatically adjusts upward like the rest of basic education funding.
  - o Small schools have a hard time providing robust online programs and there are barriers to working with larger districts. Some districts suggested there is a need to relax some of the ALE restrictions in order to allow districts to collaborate more fully. Districts would like to find a way to provide more equitable access for students in small schools that doesn't negatively impact small school funding. One ESD mentioned having an ALE collaborative that was available to small school districts but still allowed the district to retain the FTEs. Small districts noted that their students want to stay engaged with their community school for some things while still having access to online class opportunities that may not be available in the district.
- The special education funding formula is still not working for some districts. Many districts specifically pointed to the 13.5% cap as problematic. Some districts noted that they have become a "homestead" region for military families which means that families with students with

special needs can choose to stay rather than be moved around like other military families. This has caused the district to get more and more special needs students. Some districts commented that the safety net still takes a lot of staff time and is not a guarantee that the district will get the full funding applied for. Some noted that they sometimes don't fill out the safety net forms because they feel it is not worth the staff time. Districts acknowledged that while the process has gotten better, it is still burdensome.

Other Issues and Concerns

- Community Support: Communities are upset at the state mandates and local school district boards are often the only outlet to vent for many people. Districts are getting negative pressure from parents and community members on a broad range of topics at board meetings. School boards and superintendents are feeling beat up and some have received threats from people in their community. Districts are trying to do what is right for students during this pandemic but are facing push-back from their communities and concerned about the time it will take to mend those relationships. Districts expressed their thanks for the support of Senator Wellman and others. They noted the importance of hearing support for schools because of so much negative messaging by the opposition.
- Graduation Requirements: Districts stated that more flexibility in graduation requirements would be helpful in addressing the unique needs of each student effectively. Districts repeatedly stated that one size does not fit all and that they need flexibility to help students be successful.
- Early Literacy: One district noted that early literacy is the foundational piece that all kids need to be successful and that ensuring all students have these early literacy skills is a still a problem, especially for students of color and students in poverty. It was noted that teacher prep programs need more resources on how to teach literacy and programs are not adequately preparing future teachers at every level on how to teach reading. Having this coursework in pre-service training is more effective than providing professional development after the fact and costs less.
- Staffing: Staffing is among the biggest concern for principals - both from the vaccine requirements fall-out as well having to quarantine staff when a COVID exposure occurs. Principals feel like they are just barely managing the chaos right now. Finding substitute teachers, bus drivers and paraprofessionals continues to be their biggest challenge. An example was that in one small district they had to have a school close entirely for the duration of quarantine because of a positive COVID test for a teacher and the quarantining of staff. They simply could not find enough substitutes to keep the school open.
- Virtual Learning Policies & Snow Days: Districts pointed out that currently all the policies and procedures that have been developed for virtual learning are only available for COVID/pandemic related uses. Districts would like to see the policies expanded and allowed to be used for snow days.
- Local vs State Assessments: Districts are doing more local assessments of kids than in the past so that they can continue to assess student needs. Many districts are shifting their focus from the state tests to the diagnostic local assessments. These tools are helping teachers diagnose what interventions and supports kids are needing right now. Districts also noted that they are shifting back to focusing on real world skills rather than placing emphasis on the state level tests. That has also meant a shift in conversations and changing the community's mindsets.

Districts pointed out that for years they have been highlighting the need and value of the state tests and ability to compare with other districts, but now they are highlighting local assessments that help determine how each individual student is doing as compared to how they were doing earlier. That shift has been hard for districts and communities.

- Continued Virtual Learning: One idea that districts are discussing in some regions is a virtual day to allow staff could focus on professional development, collaboration, etc. and students could do self-directed learning at home. Districts wonder if that model may take legislation to create and implement. Furthermore, they wonder if the virtual day could count towards the basic education minimum hour and day requirements. Districts would like to see a continued use of digital platforms in some way as we move forward with changing the system to be more mastery-based education. Remote learning, like any other skill, needs to be practiced and maintained. Some flexibility to continue hybrid schedules that work for students and school districts would be valuable.
- New State Mandates: Districts have requested the state not add new mandates. Districts pointed out that they are dealing with a lot on their plates: new funding system, a new levy system, a new salary system, the pandemic, new equity training, new discipline requirements, etc. Additionally, new mandates always come with new reporting requirements. Small districts struggle because of the lack of additional funding for staff to help with those reporting requirements. Districts continue to ask for no new mandates without more funding.
- Discipline: Districts also noted they have increased discipline issues and believe it stems from students not attending in person for over a year and simultaneously have experienced incredible stress during that time - the result is that many are acting out in school.