

## Information for Educators: Working with the Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO)

The Office of the Education Ombuds was established in 2006 to share information with families and others regarding the state public school system, to assist schools and families in improving their relationships, to help resolve conflicts at the lowest level possible, and to identify and recommend strategies to reduce the opportunity gap. The OEO is also charged as the state's lead agency on providing resources and tools to families on school anti-harassment policies.

Our staff of 5 Education Ombuds work statewide to be impartial sounding boards for families, school personnel and others on any issue affecting student achievement, such as enrollment, special education, discipline, reengagement, and attendance.

OEO is independent of OSPI and districts to maintain confidentiality and impartiality.

OEO does not serve as an advocate for individual students or parents, but rather advocates for fairness and access for all students in our state's public schools. We work with families and schools to remove barriers so that every student can fully participate in and benefit from our state's public K-12 system. Educators are invaluable partners in that work. We facilitate communication and collaborative problem-solving, but are not an enforcement agency.

### Education Ombuds Do:

- Listen to understand your questions and concerns relating to students;
- Provide information about public school processes and the rights and responsibilities of students and parents, and make referrals to appropriate resources;
- Ask questions to help you identify, understand and evaluate possible options for resolving concerns;
- Act as a neutral sounding board;
- Offer support and coaching on working through conflict and building effective communication;
- Consult with families, educators and others to clarify issues and facilitate direct communication between families and schools;
- Provide data to schools and districts (in the aggregate) about emerging issues;
- Offer professional development and technical assistance to schools on topics ranging from conflict resolution to the requirements of special education; and
- Share best practices for increasing family engagement in schools.

School personnel can call or email OEO with concerns that they have, either about specific situations, or about policies and practices in general. Similarly, they can refer families and community groups to OEO to facilitate better communication in an existing conflict. Please note that communications with OEO are confidential, and thus, to the extent that the OEO needs more details about a specific student or concern, the agency will need **prior written consent** from a parent or legal guardian or adult student.

OEO is an  
**independent state  
agency.**

Our services are:

- ✓ **FREE**
- ✓ **CONFIDENTIAL**
- ✓ **IMPARTIAL**
- ✓ **COLLABORATIVE**  
and
- ✓ Available to  
**families,  
educators and  
others with  
questions or  
concerns  
impacting  
ANY CHILD  
who attends or  
is eligible to  
attend  
Washington  
State K-12  
public schools.**

### **Education Ombuds Do Not:**

- Provide legal advice or representation;
- Advocate on behalf of any individual or organization, including an individual student or parent;
- Enforce laws or regulations;
- Become involved with professional discipline or misconduct issues;
- Conduct formal investigations or make findings; or
- Have authority to require schools or districts to take or not take any particular action.

OEO cannot guarantee particular outcomes but we will always work to understand your concerns, share relevant and accurate information, and identify options for collaborative problem-solving to support students. As a small state agency, we attempt to operate fairly within our resources. Ombuds cannot provide indefinite or long-term assistance in individual matters or attend school meetings with regularity.

**We encourage educators to call us to address issues preventatively.**

**We are happy to share best practices or brainstorm strategies for supporting students.**

OEO has a brief intake process where we collect contact information, demographic information regarding the caller and student (optional), and a brief description of the question or issue. Callers are then scheduled to talk with the next available Ombuds.

#### **Educators Should Call For:**

- ✓ **Impartial Advice**
- ✓ **Resources for Families**
- ✓ **Assistance with Reducing Conflict**
- ✓ **Trainings**
- ✓ **Speaking Requests**
- ✓ **Sharing Their Best Practices to Expand OEO's Information Library**

You can contact us by phone or through our online intake at <http://oeo.wa.gov>.

For general information sharing (e.g., best practices, resources for OEO to share, data inquiries, requests for training or materials), you can contact us through [OEOinfo@gov.wa.gov](mailto:OEOinfo@gov.wa.gov).

### **Examples of Our Work:**

*The Office of the Education Ombuds can field questions about any concern affecting student achievement in the state's K-12 public schools. These topics range from discipline to special education, discrimination to enrollment. The following examples provide a snapshot of how we work to facilitate improved school-family relationships:*

#### **Improved Communication and Family-School Engagement**

At the closing of a complex concern, the Ombuds shared with a school leader involved in its resolution that OEO is intended to be a resource for educators and families and invited him to contact her if future issues, with this student or another, arose. A year later, the Ombuds received a phone call from the school leader. He described an ongoing challenging situation and asked whether the family could contact OEO directly. Once the family began working with OEO, the Ombuds facilitated communication among the school, district, and family to clarify goals for the student.

### **Student Safety, Discrimination, and Enrollment/Transfer**

A Limited English Proficient parent contacted OEO about what he felt to be discrimination towards his daughter at school; the father had already transferred her to another school to get away from the environment that had felt threatening and hostile to her. The Ombuds learned that the district had gone through a fair process in addressing these concerns. After the Ombuds conveyed this information to the parent, the parent decided that he would like his daughter to return to the neighborhood school. Working with the school team, the Ombuds helped to shape and convey guidelines for the student's safe return to the neighborhood school. The principal, student, and family approached the return with openness, clarifying their expectations to ensure ongoing collaboration and mutual trust.

### **Special Education and Language Access**

For three years, a migrant family requested a one-one para educator for their son and were denied. For interpretation at IEP meetings, the district relied on a paid staff member. The Ombuds was asked by the family to facilitate an IEP meeting, and in doing so, realized that the school interpreter was embellishing words because she was not a trained interpreter. This lack of expertise had aggravated the situation, especially the school's refusal to approve a one-to-one para educator. The Ombuds, who was bilingual in Spanish, was able to clarify some concerns and misunderstanding based on poor communication and the school approved a one-to-one paraeducator for the student.

### **Discipline**

A mother called OEO after her kindergartener had been suspended for a day and a half, seeking ideas for how to help avoid further suspensions. She had anticipated that her daughter, a strong self-advocate and one of the youngest in the class, might struggle with classroom expectations. Earlier in the year, the mother had shared those concerns with the teacher and had gotten reassurance, but her daughter continued to be disciplined. The Ombuds talked with the mother to help her identify potential next steps, including reviewing the process for grieving short-term suspensions, discussing state-wide efforts aimed at reviewing the use of exclusionary discipline, and ideas for collaborating with the teacher and counselor on a positive behavior intervention plan. The mother decided she would both ask to meet with an administrator to share her concerns regarding the use of suspension, and request a meeting with the counselor and teacher to explore alternative, positive interventions to address classroom behavior.

### **Truancy and Absenteeism**

A student had struggled over the years with regular attendance, and in the fall of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year she stopped going to school. After more than 20 days of absence, she was un-enrolled from the high school she had previously attended. Her parent received notice that the district was planning to file a petition in truancy court. The parent contacted the school to see if they could help with getting the student re-engaged but was told the student was not registered there. The parent called OEO. An Ombuds worked with the parent to identify staff at the school and the district office who could help address the situation. The Ombuds also helped the parent identify issues to explore with the school as part of a plan for supporting re-engagement, including reviewing the student's credits earned and options for catching up with classes already underway, and discerning the reasons for the lack of attendance. With that information, the parent reached out to the school again and set up a meeting. Working with the school, the family developed a plan for getting the student back in school, with some tutoring to help catch up on classes and a referral to counseling services.