

Washington State  
Governor's Office of the

# Education mbuds

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*We listen. We inform. We help solve problems.*



## **Annual Report 2016-2017**

**Promoting equity in education by working with families and schools to remove barriers so that every student can fully participate in and benefit from public education in the State of Washington.**

September 1, 2017

LETTER FROM THE STATE EDUCATION OMBUDS

TO: The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor

Chris Reykdal, Superintendent of Public Instruction

Ben Rarick, Executive Director of the State Board of Education

Members of the Legislature

We are eager to share our work from the 2016-2017 fiscal year. As a team, we continue to grapple with how we can respond to individual concerns that reach our office, while working to reduce opportunity gaps statewide. The data in these pages represent the efforts of a team of less than seven full-time employees working statewide on a budget of less than \$700,000. We are small, but mighty.

This year, we made some significant changes to how we do our work. As the demand for our help with individual concerns has grown over the years, we have been in a tug-of-war internally to give similar time to our other two duties: trainings and policy leadership. Last fall, we looked at our mandates and realized that informal conflict resolution and facilitation had become the bulk of our work, leaving little time for work focused on systemic change. Helping an individual student is vital, as is helping to improve a policy statewide that will affect more students with the same concern. After months of reflection, we implemented a new case pathways approach to prioritize higher impact concerns, balance our workloads, and be clearer with stakeholders about what we do as ombuds. All three aspects of our work—informal conflict resolution, training, and policy—are intertwined and essential.

These decisions were difficult to make, but as a public agency, we need to look at our limited resources and see where we can have an impact. Since implementing these changes, we have been able to increase our outreach and trainings; we held over 110 events this year, reaching over 5000 people. This year, we also launched an “Ask an Ombuds” monthly webinar where families, educators, and community professionals can get questions answered. We offer these webinars in Spanish, too. We began to offer additional webinars on specific topics, such as supports for students in foster care, inclusion, and discipline. Our goal is to spread the reach of our services and build greater community capacity when it comes to education issues. We all benefit when we share best practices and build collaborative relationships to support students before problems arise.

As a policy leader, OEO submitted a report to the legislature last fall on best practices for family and community engagement. We were excited to highlight good work in the state and draw from national models that could strengthen these approaches and support student success. Family-school communication and collaboration are themes in almost every conflict that comes to our team.

Finally, we moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a modern workplace. We embraced videoconferencing and electronic recordkeeping. We also took an even bigger leap: After eleven years as an agency in the same office building, we moved to a tiny space and became a telecommuting team. Downsizing is a transition but we are happy to reduce our environmental impact and spend more time in communities. When faced with limited resources, we will continue to prioritize decisions that help us to reach more areas of the state and develop new relationships with others.

As the Director, I am about to mark my two-year anniversary with OEO. I continue to be grateful for what I learn from my colleagues, families, teachers, and community leaders. OEO serves as a vital connector of people who are passionate about our state’s students and believe in the power of collaboration.

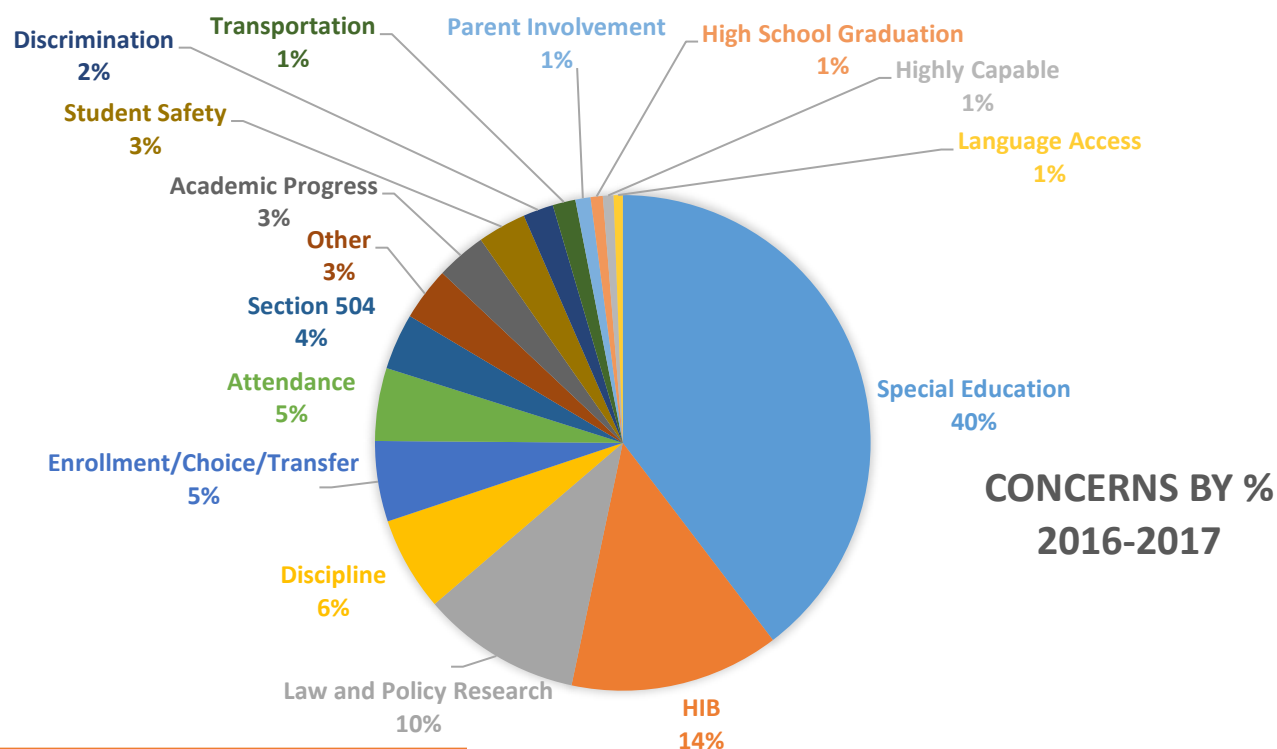
Thanks to our partners and welcome to anyone getting to know OEO for the first time through this report!

Carrie Griffin Basas, JD, MEd,

Director

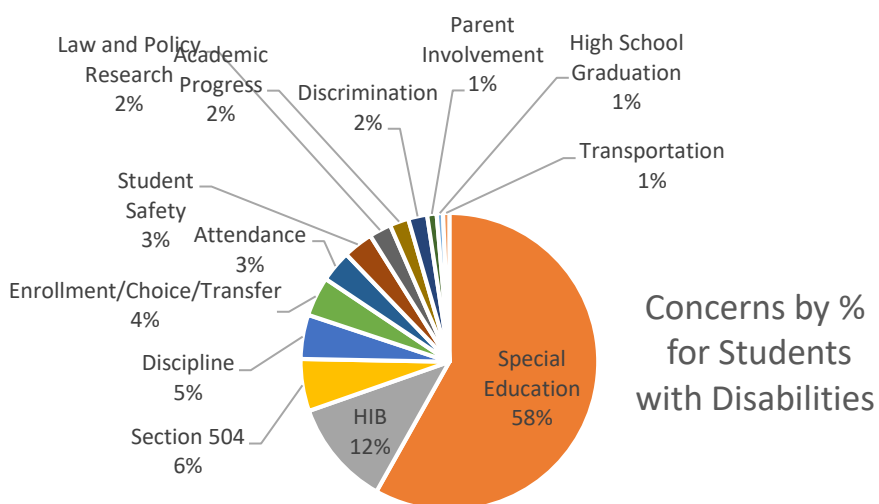
## 2016-2017 Data Overview

Of the 1017 concerns opened during 2016-2017, 590 (58%) involved students with disabilities. Calls regarding Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) increased from 7% last year to 14% this year. These numbers could reflect changes in our internal data collection or represent a spike in HIB calls to our office. Special education and HIB issues were the top two issues across *all* student race/ethnicity groups. Other areas of concern included academic progress, discipline, discrimination, student safety, and questions involving law and policy research.



OEO does not always contact schools or districts directly. This year, in concerns where our office made this contact, the largest issues were:

- 181—Special Education and 504 Plans
- 122—Harassment, Intimidation & Bullying
- 45—Discipline
- 33—Attendance
- 23—Enrollment/Choice/Transfer
- 20—Academic Progress
- 17—Student Safety



Of the 61 calls involving discrimination, 46% of concerns related to disability, 36% were about race and ethnicity, 8% involved national origin, 8% related to gender identity/sexual orientation and 2% related to veteran or military status.

## Assisting Low-Income Students

Over 40% of calls to OEO concerned students that receive free or reduced-priced lunch, as reported by callers.

The number of multi-system youth that OEO assisted increased from 50 last year to 60 this year. Most were homeless (38%) or in foster care (17%). Others were institutionalized (10%) or highly-mobile (8%). OEO continues to work as a collaborative partner with other agencies and organizations supporting youth and families.

### Who called OEO:

- 79% - Parents
- 4% - Grandparents
- 3% - Community Professionals
- 2% - School, District, or ESD staff
- 1% - Other Relatives
- 1% - Students
- 1% - Other

## ***83% of surveys reported the Ombuds were helpful.***

The top ways Ombuds helped were:

- Listening to callers' concerns
- Helping clarify issues and options
- Providing an independent perspective on the situation
- Informing callers about laws, policies, and procedures
- Providing strategies to help resolve the problem

## Number of Issues by Location

Areas with Highest Call Volume to OEO (Yellow)

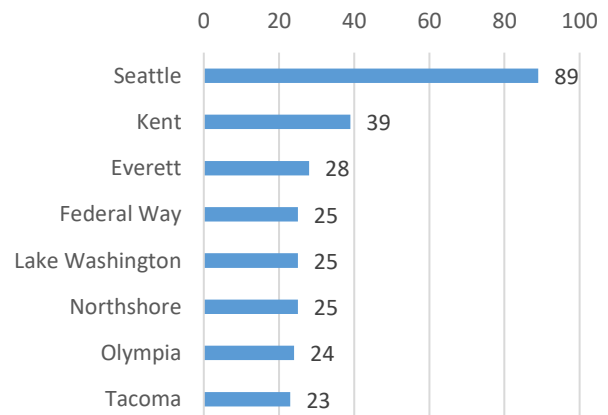


(ESD map provided by OSPI)

Of the 1017 concerns received by OEO, the following addressed lost learning time:

- 19% of students were out of school up to 1 month.
- 6% of students were out of school more than 1 month, but less than 6 months.
- 1% of students were out of school more than 6 months.

### Collaboration by District in 2016-2017 (20+)



Note: School Districts with 20 or fewer concerns were not listed due to space limitations.

# Reaching Racially, Culturally, and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families This Year

In 2016-2017, 9% of callers to OEO spoke a language other than English at home.

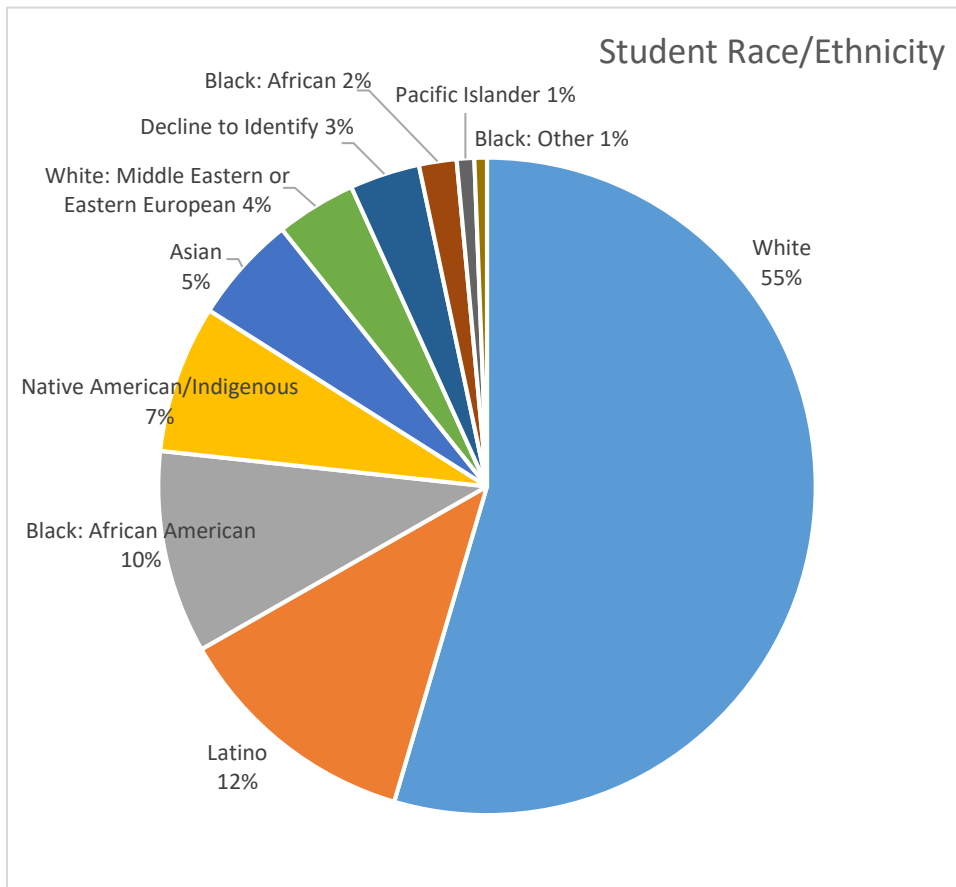
Families requested phone interpretation in the following languages: Arabic, ASL, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

In 2016-2017, OEO made changes to its database to allow for disaggregated reporting of race and ethnicity. The following is a breakdown of issues by student race/ethnicity.

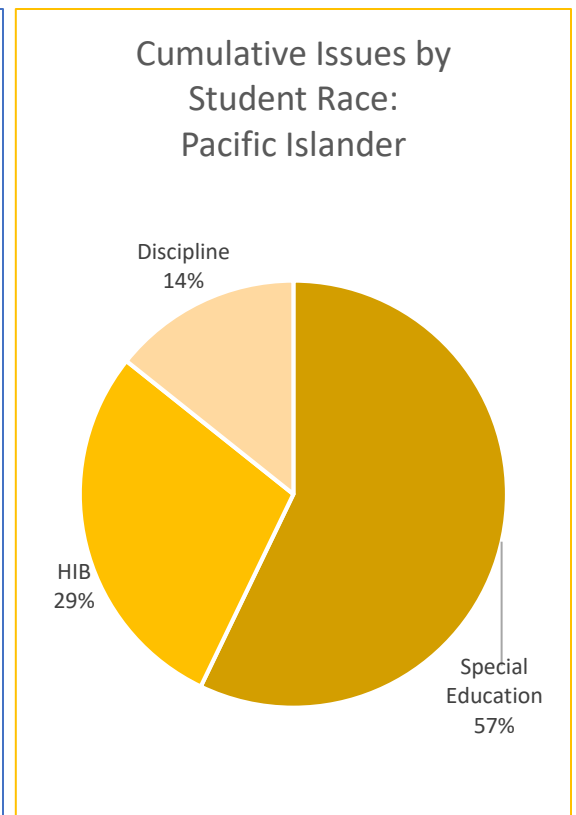
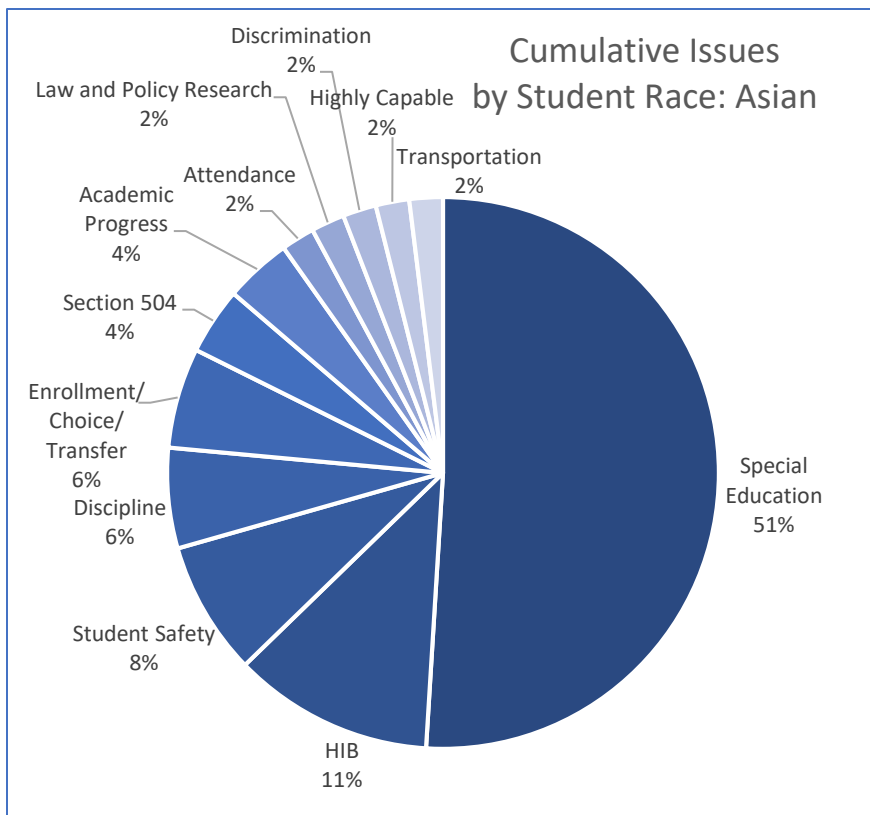
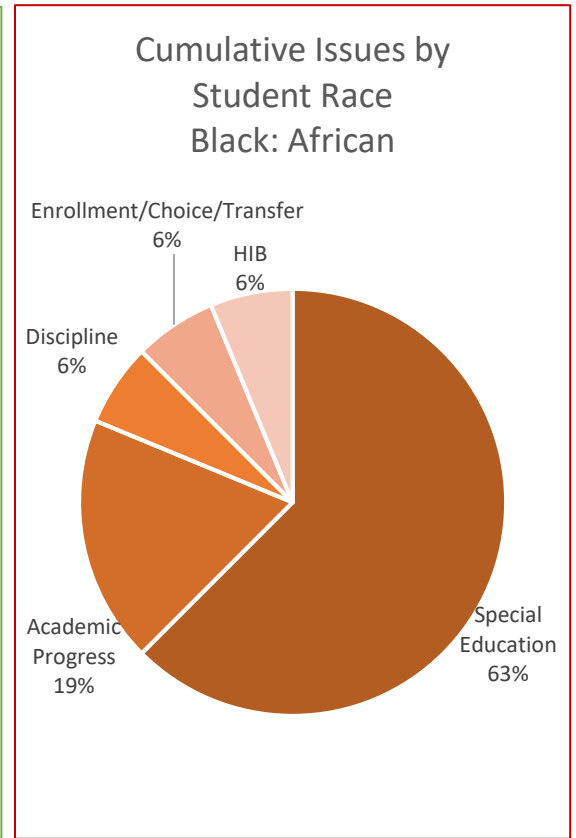
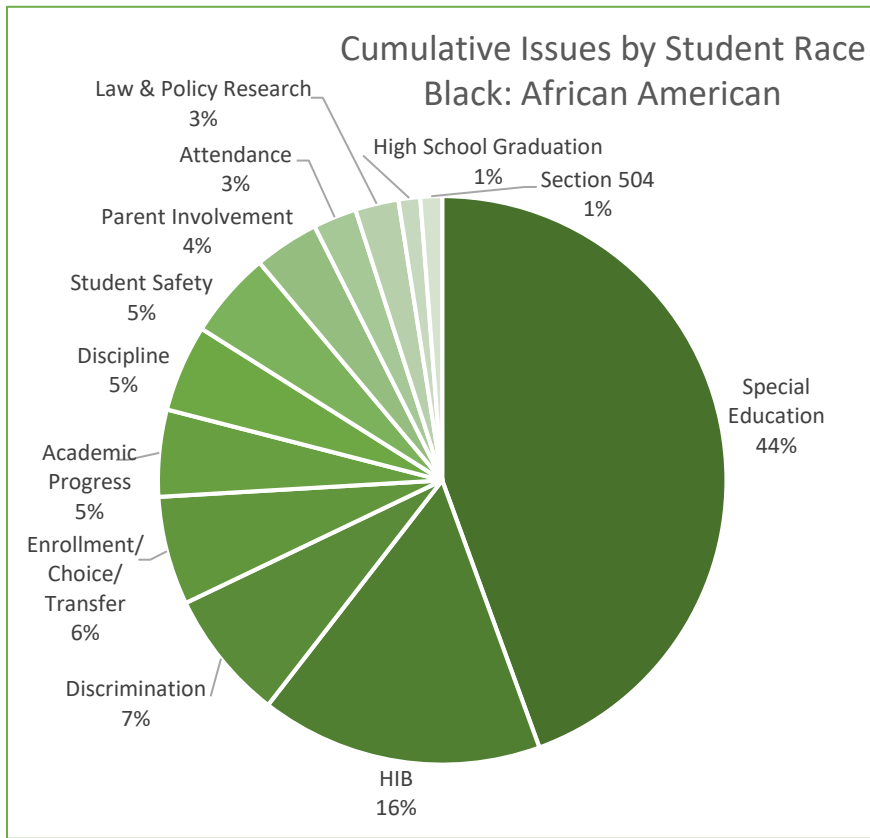
Across all race/ethnicity groups, **special education** was the primary concern. **Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB)** was of particular concern for Latino, Native American/Indigenous, and Pacific Islander students.

Callers' languages in 2016-2017 included:

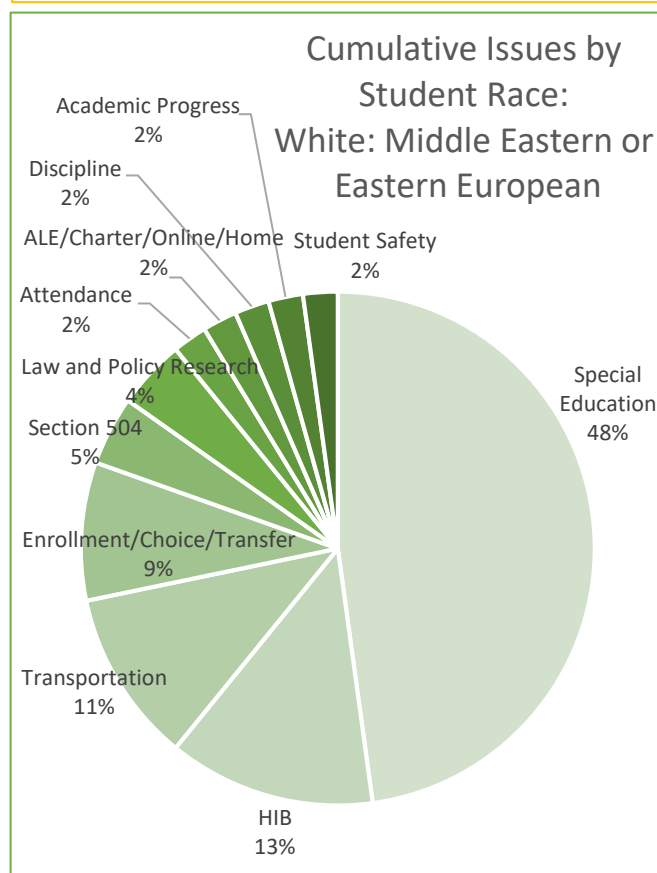
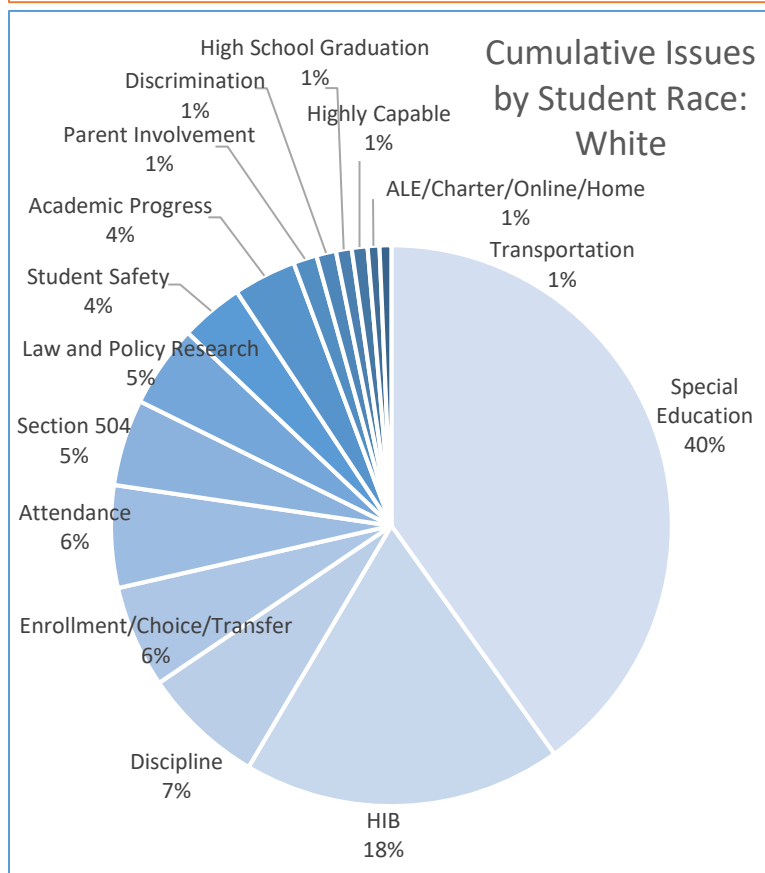
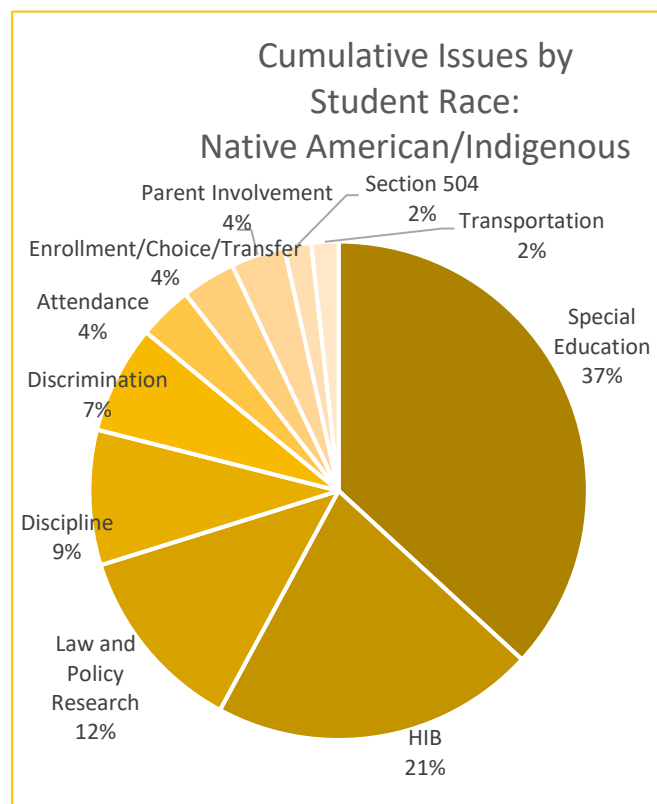
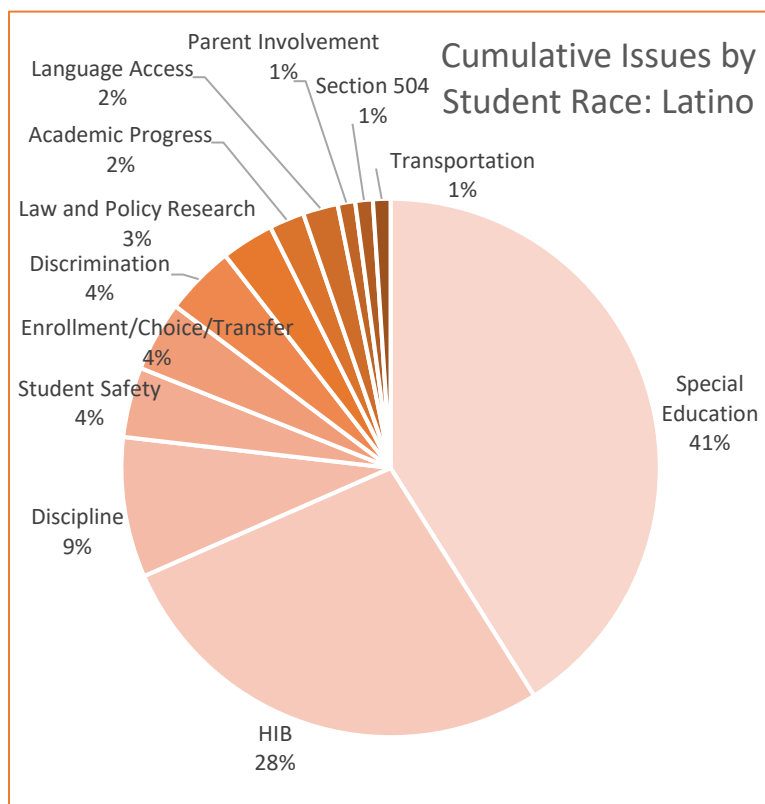
- Spanish
- Somali
- Cantonese
- Russian
- Amharic
- Vietnamese
- ASL
- Japanese
- Korean
- Thai
- Arabic
- Hindi
- Portuguese
- Mandarin
- Oromo
- Farsi
- Nepalese
- Tagalog



# Issues by Student Race/Ethnicity:



# Issues by Student Race/Ethnicity, Continued





## Policy Recommendations

Each year, OEO makes recommendations to Washington State’s policymakers on ways to reduce opportunity gaps, foster family and school collaboration and shared-decision making, and improve outcomes for every student.

This year, each of our specific recommendations connects to a larger goal of **fostering inclusive school environments** where students, families and educators can thrive together—navigating challenges and differences in a way that strengthens student learning and shows adults’ commitment to their own learning and growth.

What are inclusive school environments? They are communities that reflect an ongoing commitment to welcoming and growing from differences. This commitment extends from the top down and the ground up in policies and daily practices. Our collective differences must shape buildings, physical spaces, expectations, trainings, communication, events, and curricula. Difference drives solutions and innovation.

### OEO’s Service on Policy Committees and Participation in Stakeholder Groups 2016-2017:

[Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee](#)

[Results WA: Goal 1 Council \(World Class Education\)](#)

[Every Students Succeeds Act \(ESSA\) Consolidated Plan Team](#)

[Race and Ethnicity Student Data Task Force](#)

[OSPI’s Graduation: a Team Effort \(GATE\) Workgroup](#)

[OSPI Student Discipline Task Force](#)

[Social Emotional Learning Advisory Workgroup](#)

[Becca Task Force](#)

[Washington State Coalition for Language Access \(WASCLA\)](#)

[South King County Discipline Coalition](#)

[Kittitas County Transition Council](#)

[ESD 105 Youth Advocates](#)

[Kittitas County Parent to Parent](#)





## #1: Culturally Responsive School Systems

Building on our recommendations from last year, we believe that creating and sustaining inclusive school communities will require increased investments and intention. One necessary investment is time and resources for increasing the cultural competency and responsiveness of our public school system, by:

- Providing ongoing cultural responsiveness training and practice opportunities for school administrators, teachers, and all of the other individuals who do the daily work of making our public schools run;
- Increasing collaboration time between school and district staff and families to review policies and practices for cultural responsiveness; and
- Increasing the capacity and readiness of education leaders to engage in crucial conversations with families and community stakeholders around data, disparities, and root cause analyses to identify strategies to address persistent and pervasive opportunity gaps.

**Establishing culturally responsive school and professional climates requires ongoing intention and effort.** It takes time and resources to incorporate family and community input in the development of policies and learning standards. Failing to take the time or invest the resources to engage diverse stakeholders from the outset sets us up to repeat mistakes that have contributed to the existing opportunity gaps.

For its part, **OEO will continue to invest time and resources to build the cultural responsiveness of our staff.** We have re-designed our customer service surveys as part of our effort to hear from those we serve about how we are doing. We will continue to ensure that in our daily work and strategic planning, we make time and space for input from families, community leaders, and other stakeholders.



### What the OEO will do in the next year:

Continue to build the cultural responsiveness of our staff through professional development;

Solicit feedback on how we are doing from those we serve through redesigned customer service surveys;

Ensure opportunities for families, community leaders, and other stakeholders to give input into our strategic planning and day to day work.

Resources needed to sustain and expand these efforts:

Funding to support ongoing professional development of staff;

Continued access to technical expertise and support on best practices for engaging consumers in feedback;

Funding and collaborative opportunities to support ongoing outreach and relationship-building.

## #2: Language Access

Language access is part of inclusion. Inclusive practices require districts to communicate with families in different languages and with accessible technologies.

- Educators, who are able to communicate only in English, will need access to qualified interpreters and translators to engage *all* families in supporting their children's academic progress and receiving feedback about the school-family relationship.
- School leaders with a commitment to making schools places where students want to be every day will also need access to adequate interpretation and translation services to be inclusive of families who speak another language at home or in the community.
- Districts that want families to reach out directly to school staff with questions or concerns before they escalate will need supports that allow families with limited English proficiency to *initiate* communication with their schools and know that interpretation will be available.

Planning is critical to ensure that school and district staff and families can communicate across language differences, in a timely and effective manner. Washington State took an important step in July 2016 toward supporting districts by making available a [model Language Access Policy and Procedure](#). We know that **districts large and small across our state are working to expand and improve language access services**. In just one year, already at least 136 school district boards have reviewed and adopted the new model policy.

The state can support these efforts by funding pilot projects to facilitate sharing best practices and common resources among districts. The legislature should also invest in developing and expanding districts' effective training materials for school staff in using interpretation and translation services, including developing professional standards for individuals who provide interpretation services in schools. To make this system sustainable, OSPI's Office of Equity and Civil Rights will need sufficient funding to provide technical support and oversight as districts implement their language access plans and policies.

For its part, **OEO will continue to invest** in translation and interpretation of outreach and informational materials, and highlight and share school district efforts that facilitate inclusive, effective two-way communication between schools and families with limited English proficiency.

### What the OEO will do in the next year:

**Continue to invest** in translation and interpretation of outreach and informational materials;

Highlight and share districts' best practices for language access;

Continue our participation in language access workgroups;

Continue producing *Ask an Ombuds* webinars in Spanish every third month;

Continue our relationship with the Commission on Hispanic Affairs to share the word about OEO through radio programs;

Increase our presence on our Spanish Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/OmbudsdeEducacion/>

Resources needed to sustain and expand these efforts:

Funding to support interpretation and translation of materials;

Funding and time to participate meaningfully in ongoing workgroups;

Expanded relationships with other language communities.

### **#3: Data-Informed, Crucial Conversations to Support Shared Decision-Making in Tackling Opportunity Gaps**

**Conversations around data need to be inclusive of diverse perspectives of families, educators, and other stakeholders.** In the past 10 years, our state’s ability to use existing data to “see” how districts, schools, and students are faring has improved dramatically. Data will always provide only one part of a complex picture of what is happening in our schools and how well we as a state are doing to provide a foundational education to each child. Families and community stakeholders now have access to more detailed data about such issues as attendance, course selection and passage rates, school discipline, special education, graduation, and career trajectories—which is a positive step toward using the data to improve student and family experiences.

Sometimes, we characterize data as objective and neutral, free from emotions, but its effects are far from that. Patterns and gaps can trigger crucial conversations that we need to have in the state and will require thoughtful facilitation. For example, educators might fear that legislators or families will use data to make unfair judgments about how hard they are working, or how well they are educating *all* students. Families might fear that educators and legislators will use data to further stigmatize them or their children and draw unfair conclusions about how good they are as parents or how much they value school. What can appear to be a simple conversation about addressing chronic absenteeism can lead to a deeper conversation about structural racism, the history of Native boarding schools in the state, or unmet health and housing needs. These **seemingly simple conversations need to be difficult** because that is the only way to create authentic, community-driven solutions to help eliminate opportunity gaps.

The state can provide leadership and support in these efforts by encouraging all district leadership teams engaging in **ongoing training and professional development** around how to use this data to **expand their data teams to include families and community stakeholders**. Preparing professionals for these processes needs to begin early. OEO recommends that **teacher, principal, and superintendent education programs incorporate more opportunities for working collaboratively with data and coaching future leaders on effective communication in conflict situations**.

OEO will **expand its workshops and outreach** to families, community organizations, and educators to make sure that stakeholders are aware of available data and how to understand it and engage collaboratively with community stakeholders to address opportunity gaps. **OEO, whenever possible, will increase its role as a facilitator to support schools, families, and communities in engaging in these conversations.**

**What the OEO will do in the next year:**

**Expand its workshops and outreach** to families, community organizations, and educators to make sure that stakeholders are aware of available data and how to both understand it and engage with others to address opportunity gaps;

**Whenever possible, increase our availability as a facilitator to support schools, families, and communities in engaging in these conversations.**

Resources needed to sustain and expand these efforts:

Funding to support interpretation and translation for outreach to limited English proficient families;

Additional staff resources to make access to trainings and facilitation equitable and timely.

## #4: Amplifying the Dialogue about Disability and Inclusion

We want to celebrate the great work happening in classrooms where we have seen many students with disabilities thriving and experiencing a welcoming, stimulating environment. We see teams sitting at conference tables to draft, review, and revise students' Individualized Education Programs and 504 plans, and learning from one another's perspectives to create challenging, meaningful goals for students. We know that in some of those meetings, students are taking the lead, articulating their own needs and interests, and mapping out paths toward graduation and beyond.

At the same time, we see that students with disabilities in our public schools are disproportionately suspended and expelled. In 2016, students receiving special education services in our state were suspended or expelled at a rate more than twice that of students not receiving special education services (7.5% compared to 3.0%).<sup>1</sup> Our state's "least restrictive environment" data for 2016 shows that students with disabilities experienced more restrictive educational environments (meaning less time spent in general education settings) if they were also students of color.<sup>2</sup> We cannot forget the stories shared by students, families and educators who describe the:

- Disappointment of students with disabilities when programs or opportunities identified as for "all" students do not turn out to include them
- Frustration when a child who has not received effective reading instruction, and has not gotten access to audio books, is blamed for acting out in a class or missing school when reading intensifies
- Challenge in helping a child develop a sense of disability identity that is positive, even in the face of great societal stigma and ongoing perceptions that *disability* means being "less than" someone else or having *no* abilities

**We know that teachers, families and district administrators are working daily to improve experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities.** From thinking about how to incorporate principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#) into more classrooms (visit [www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org) to read about Universal Design) to looking at data on post-secondary outcomes and identifying ways to support more students transitioning to independent living, employment, and post-secondary education.

**As that work continues, we want to send the call out to students, families, educators and state policy makers to help us coordinate a conversation about disability and inclusion. The legislature should invite the experiences of students with disabilities in making any education policy changes that affect them—from statewide policy committees to legislative testimony.**

<sup>1</sup> Data accessed at: <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/PerformanceIndicators/DisciplineRates.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> See LRE Data for November 2016, page 3 (ages 6-21), accessed at: <http://www.k12.wa.us/SpecialEd/Data/Childcount-Placement.aspx#1>.

### What are Disabilities?

**Disability can mean different things to different people.** For one brief perspective on [What are Disabilities?](#) visit [www.rootedinrights.org/videos/explainers](http://www.rootedinrights.org/videos/explainers).)

### What the OEO will do in the next year:

Collaborate with educators and families to bring youth voices to the center of the conversation about disability identity and inclusive school practices;

Ask students, families, educators and state policymakers to engage with us in a conversation about disability and inclusion.

### Resources needed to sustain and expand these efforts:

Adequate funding to support staff travel to engage with youth with disabilities from different communities and experiences and capture their experiences of inclusion and identity;

Technical resources to record and share youth voices on disability identity and inclusion and volunteer assistance to develop a curriculum.



#### **#4: Amplifying the Dialogue about Disability and Inclusion, continued.**

We extend this invitation to deepen the statewide conversation about inclusion not because we have a particular definition or vision that we want to see implemented. Indeed, the words “inclusion” and “disability” mean different things to different people. For example, legal definitions of “disability” carry great significance in determining instruction or accommodations but general understandings (or misunderstandings) of disability can carry even greater significance. They affect not only how students are viewed and treated by adults and peers, but also how they view themselves and their futures.

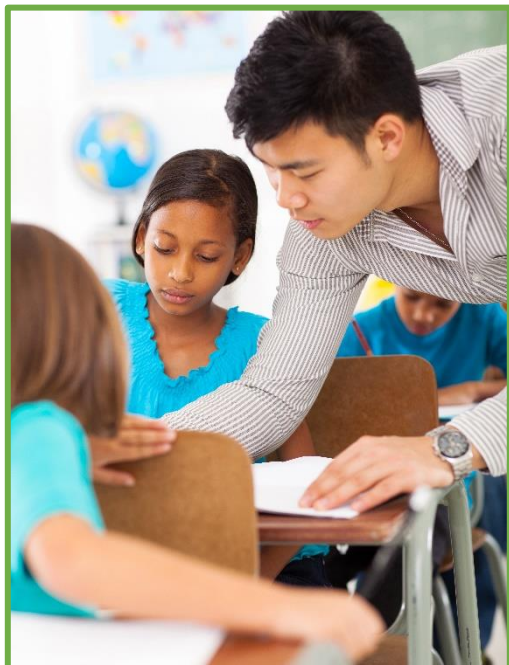
We will only begin to make greater progress in our conversations about inclusion by beginning with student voice. Students with disabilities and adults with disabilities have a variety of perspectives that cross over communities, language groups, and other identities. They are invaluable teachers to non-disabled adults, educators, and families about what identity means and how others can begin to unpack and dismantle their bias and stigma around disability (ableism).

For its part, OEO will collaborate with families, educators, students, and community professionals to re-center conversations about disability and inclusion around the voices of students with disabilities in our state. We hope to expand the conversation from our [Disability Identity Webinar, “Nothing About Us Without Us”](#) to build on Washington’s earlier commitment to honoring every October as Disability History Month.<sup>3</sup> We plan to collaborate with districts and Disability Rights Washington to develop a video and curriculum focused on student voice.

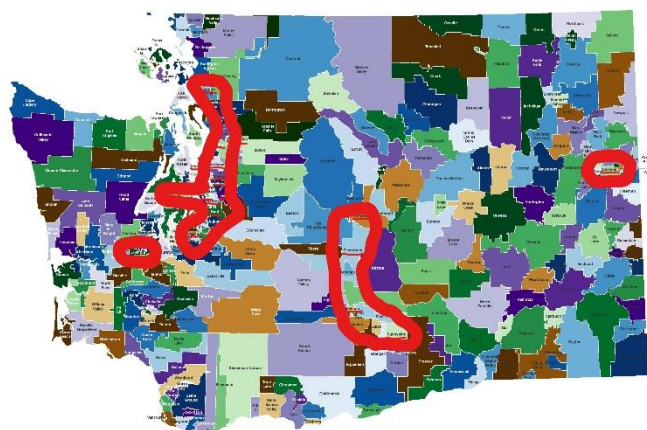
<sup>3</sup> RCW 28A.230.158 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=28A.230.158>).



# Outreach to Families, Students, Educators, and Community Stakeholders 2016-2017

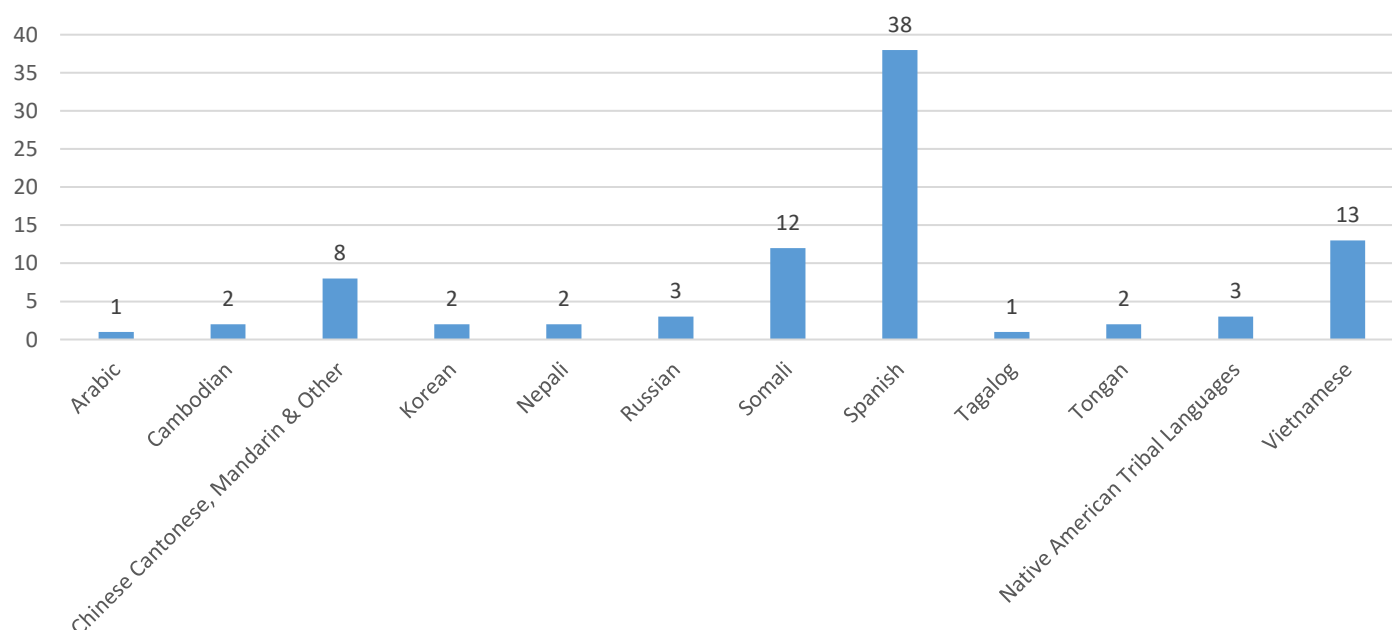


*OEO conducted workshops, trainings, panels, and outreach tables for 116 events this year, reaching more than 5036 attendees.* Red areas show locations of trainings and workshops. Photo courtesy of OSPI.



This year, OEO participated in 52 separate events with participants speaking languages other than English. The chart below shows the main interpretation languages at events.

Interpretation Languages at Events





## Building Relationships through Information-Sharing and Communication Facilitation

In 2016-2017, OEO continued its efforts to engage with diverse communities and increase the utility and accessibility of our own resources. Last year, OEO:

- Continued to offer guidance and facilitation for listening sessions in collaboration with families and school districts in the Puget Sound region.
- Continued and expanded community clinics, partnering with Open Doors for Multicultural Families in the Puget Sound region and organizations in Spokane, Wenatchee, Sunnyside, Yakima, and Walla to offer face-to-face support for families in their primary languages.
- Continued partnerships and information-sharing with the state's ethnic Commissions.
- Launched a new monthly lunchtime *Ask an Ombuds* webinar series – also accessible by telephone – to answer questions from families and community professionals about issues affecting students in our k-12 public schools.
- Took OEO's workshops online, offering – content-area webinars in collaboration with partners from OSPI, school districts, and community organizations.
- Partnered with the Commission on Hispanic Affairs (CHA) to bring information about OEO and hot topics (attendance, discipline, immigration and education, language access) in Spanish to listeners of CHA's *Know Your Government* radio program.
- Initiated an update and redesign of OEO's website aimed at increasing accessibility and ease of navigation.
- Added closed captioning to OEO's recorded webinars.
- Initiated and facilitated quarterly calls of individuals and organizations working to support students with disabilities.

### Ask An Ombuds OEO Lunchtime Webinars

Join us online the Second Tuesday  
of Every Month  
from 12pm-1pm!

To register in advance for an  
*Ask an Ombuds* Webinar:  
<http://bit.ly/askanombuds>

To view recordings of *Ask an Ombuds* webinars:  
<http://www.oeo.wa.gov/publications-reports/webinars/>



OEO continues to be an organization that models collaboration as an essential skill in supporting students. We thank every family, educator, and community member that entrusted us with an important, difficult question or concern. We are also grateful to the many agencies and community-based organizations that invited us to events, asked for input, or shared feedback that improved our work.

Questions and/or comments about this report can be sent to:

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Seattle, WA 98103

Or emailed to: [oeoinfo@gov.wa.gov](mailto:oeoinfo@gov.wa.gov)

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