

TIPS/TOOLS FOR FAMILIES -- Complaints regarding School or District Staff or Programs

Even when everyone is working with the best interest of the student(s) in mind, disagreements, misunderstandings and conflicts can arise. If you have a concern about the actions of a school or district staff person, the following are some steps you can take to try to address the issue.

Start by communicating directly with the person:

In order to set the stage for effective communication, when raising a concern with a school or district staff person:

- Confirm that the person has time to talk with you about the issue, or schedule a time when they do;
- Assume that the person is acting with good intentions and try to frame your concern in terms of what you would like to see happen differently;
- Be ready to explain why the issue matters and how it impacts your child (and/or other students); and
- Be open to different ways of addressing the underlying concern.

What if talking with the person directly doesn't resolve the issue?

If you feel the issue is not resolved by talking directly with the person or their supervisor, and you are concerned about a continuing impact on your child and/or other students, consider submitting a written complaint.

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Formal Complaint Options

[Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education \(OCR\)](#)

OCR enforces several federal civil rights laws which prohibit discrimination in public schools on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age. OCR has information about filing a discrimination complaint and an online complaint form:

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>

[OSPI Office of Equity and Civil Rights](#)

OSPI enforces state civil rights laws in public schools and has a complaint procedure for reviewing complaints of alleged discrimination. OSPI requires that complaints first be raised with the school district:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/Equity/Complaints.aspx>.

[Washington State Human Rights Commission \(WSHRC\)](#)

WSHRC enforces the Washington Law Against Discrimination (RCW 49.60), which prohibits discrimination in employment and in places of public accommodation, including schools:

<https://www.hum.wa.gov/file-complaint>

[U.S. Department of Justice \(DOJ\), Educational Opportunities Section](#)

DOJ enforces federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and religion in public schools:

www.justice.gov/crt/about/edu

Is there a specific process for submitting a written complaint?

Depending on the nature of your complaint, there may be a specific complaint process. For example, specific complaint processes exist for:

- Complaints related to special education and Section 504;
- Discrimination complaints; and
- Complaints relating to federal programs (including Title I).

In addition, many districts have a more general policy and procedure for “Complaints Regarding Staff or Programs,” that should be available on the district’s website or upon request to the district office.

Is there an option for appealing or seeking an investigation of my complaint by someone outside the school district?

It depends on the nature of the complaint. For general complaints regarding school or district staff, the School Board typically serves as the final level of review.

There are state and federal agencies charged with investigating certain types of complaints relating to public schools, and more information about their scope and requirements for filing complaints can be found at the links in the resource boxes on both sides of this sheet.

Can OEO intervene to address concerns about school or district staff?

OEO does not conduct formal investigations or make findings on any issue, including complaints about staff or allegations of professional misconduct.

If there is an ongoing impact on a student’s access to education, we can help identify options and strategies for problem-solving. Read about OEO’s strategic plan case pathways at:

[https://www.oeo.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/OEO Strategic Plan 2020 2023 English.pdf](https://www.oeo.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/OEO%20Strategic%20Plan%202020%202023%20English.pdf)

Formal Complaint Options, continued:

OSPI Special Education—Dispute Resolution

There are three formal dispute resolution options for complaints about identification, evaluation, educational placement, and provision of Free Appropriate Public Education under the special education laws - mediation, citizen complaints and due process hearings: <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/special-education/dispute-resolution>

OSPI Office of Professional Practices (OPP)

The OPP has authority to investigate complaints that a teacher or other certificated educator has committed an act of unprofessional conduct or lacks good moral character or personal fitness. With narrow exception, OPP can open investigations **only** when the complaint is made by a School District or Educational Service District (ESD) superintendent. Parents and others should review OPP’s guidelines and raise complaints first with the [School District](https://www.k12.wa.us/educator-support/investigations) or [ESD](https://www.k12.wa.us/educator-support/investigations): <https://www.k12.wa.us/educator-support/investigations>

Federal Programs—Citizen Complaint

This complaint process applies to alleged violations of a state or federal rule, law, or regulation that applies to a federal program under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/grants-grant-management/closing-educational-achievement-gaps-title-i-part/citizen-complaints-federal-programs>