

Information for Community Advocates and Organizations: 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 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. We facilitate communication and collaborative problem-solving, but are not an enforcement agency.

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. Community advocates and organizations are often partners in this work—consulting with OEO on options for supporting students, referring families and others to our services, providing opportunities for us to reach new community audiences, and partnering in trainings by and with OEO to strengthen their own base of knowledge about the technical aspects of the education system (e.g., special education, English Learner services), as well as the relationships within schools (e.g., conflict resolution strategies, best practices for family engagement).

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.**

Before contacting us or referring to our office, you might find it helpful to understand what we do and do not do.

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 an impartial 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;
- Work with families in their native language, using a phone interpretation service and leveraging our staff's language skills in Spanish;
- Offer training and technical assistance to community advocates and organizations on topics ranging from conflict resolution to the requirements of special education; and
- Share best practices for increasing family engagement in schools.

Community partners can call or email OEO with questions or concerns that they have, either about specific situations, or about policies and practices in general. Similarly, they can refer families and schools to OEO to facilitate better communication in an existing conflict. Please note that communications with OEO are confidential, including the identity of individuals who contact us and we do not share that information without consent. In limited cases, it may be helpful and appropriate for OEO to contact schools or districts directly to help clarify issues and facilitate communication, but OEO can only contact a school or district about a particular student *after* receiving **prior written consent** from the parent or legal guardian or adult student.

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 welcome Community Advocates and Organizations to call us for:

- Information, insights and an impartial sounding board on topics relating to public education;
- Resources for families;
- Further information about OEO's intake process;
- Requests for OEO to partner in providing trainings for staff or community groups (e.g., conflict resolution, special education, bullying);
- Requests for OEO staff to present at conferences or events;
- Collaboration opportunities (e.g., community education clinics, listening sessions); and
- Sharing emerging needs that they are seeing in their work.

Please visit <http://www.oeo.wa.gov> for copies of our publications and toolkits, many available in multiple languages.