Q: What is the role of the Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO)?

A: We listen, we inform, and we help solve problems. We were established to reduce the opportunity gap by supporting families, students, educators, and communities in understanding the public K-12 education system and resolving concerns collaboratively. Our services are specific to K-12 public school students. We are contacted by phone or on-line with questions or specific student concerns. We currently have an online intake form available in English and Spanish. (https://oeo.wa.gov/contact/) We triage the requests within 2-3 business days. If the request is aligned with our strategic plan and we think we can help, a senior Ombuds staff member is assigned to the request. Our role is not to formally investigate or advocate for the student, but rather to facilitate an equitable resolution for the student. We often practice “shuttle diplomacy” in an effort to get parents and schools to listen to one another. Some calls outside the scope of our strategic plan are informational and we connect people to other resources.

Q: Given the small size of your staff (7) and the large size of our state, how do you prioritize the requests that come in?

A: Our target initial response time for all inquiries is 2 to 3 business days. Our strategic plan drives the prioritization. We triage the needs, and prioritize situations where the students are not in school. In order to be equitable, we work with families that do not already have an advocate or a lawyer. We have a 4-month time limit on all cases we take, and we can only serve the same child once in a school year. Given our small staff, we occasionally have a wait list for families to work with an Education Ombuds. We make every attempt to provide relevant information and referrals when there is a waitlist, or when issues are outside our strategic plan.

Q: What are the priorities you triage?

A: A current list of our strategic priorities is available on the OEO website, and in the attachment. (https://oeo.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/CaseFlowChartFinal.2017.08.25.pdf)

OEO prioritizes a range of issues including harassment, intimidation, bullying, inclusion, attendance, academic failure, special education transition, graduation, and language access. Other examples of calls that come in and are not currently a priority are school policy concerns or transportation issues. Discrimination cases are passed directly to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).
Q: What tips do you have for working with schools/districts when it comes to students who aren’t in school?

A: Our Senior Ombuds have worked with schools, districts, and families to figure out how to get students to spend more time at school. Communication between schools and families is crucial in understanding barriers to attendance, as well as identifying solutions. It is helpful to find allies at the lowest level possible within schools. For students with disabilities, having an IEP can be helpful and there are options for a facilitated Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. It is also helpful to have documentation of the issue.

Q: Can an Education Ombuds attend an IEP meeting?

A: Yes, occasionally, but it is rarely in person. The office has a very small travel budget as well as a small number of staff. The Education Ombuds cannot advocate for the student – the ombuds is neutral, and involvement is aimed at ensuring a fair IEP process, in which all parties have an opportunity to speak and be heard.

Q: Are there rules about suspending students with an IEP?

A: Students with disabilities are protected by changes in school discipline rules, in addition to the protections in special education rules. If a behavior is the result of a disability then there needs to be an effort to put the brakes on the discipline process so the student is not suspended for his/her disability. There is information about this in our special education manual as well as on the OSPI website at http://www.k12.wa.us/specialed/. Contact our office if you would like further information about disciplining students with IEPs.

Q: It has been noted recently that rates of bullying in schools have doubled. What is driving that?

A: It’s hard to determine all the factors involved in the uptick of bullying. They may include greater awareness, increase in reporting, and increased focus on school security. There are also fears about immigrants and more hostility in general that is playing out in schools.

Q: Because of current federal policy, have immigrant families become afraid to ask for help?

A: We stress that communication with OEO is confidential, and encourage families to contact our office if they have questions. Families can complete an online intake providing only a phone number and email address, if they are concerned about confidentiality. We also provide information on our website about student rights and responsibilities, including the right of all students in Washington to attend school regardless of immigration status.

Q: Have you had more contact from individuals related to gender identity issues?

A: We know schools are struggling to figure out how to deal with these issues, but there is not much data around this yet. Calls may go up.
Q: **How do you connect clients to other resources?**

A: We do referrals, but not to specific legal services, individual lawyers, or direct care providers. We do not offer “warm handoffs” where we contact another professional and introduce the family to the professional. Rather, we provide information about the issue and offer resources that families can contact.

Q: **Are you involved in training teachers about cultural competency and cultural humility? There is also a need for resources for teachers around language and different cultures.**

A: Our office is trying to develop that role, particularly to work with partners who can provide training. We are working with OSPI to determine how to bring cultural understanding to IEP meetings. Three years ago we presented a [language access report](#) to the legislature. We also offer information on working with [phone interpreters](#). We are aware of the many challenges around language access, including inappropriate use of children as translators. We are drafting a language access toolkit and it will be posted on the OEO [Language Access web page](#).

Q: **How do you document your work?**

A: We have a database coordinator. [Intake forms](#) for the Ombuds office are available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#), with other languages in the works, or families can complete an [online intake](#). Families can also call and complete an intake by phone. Phone interpretation is available.

Q: **Do you ever get calls about teachers bullying students?**

A: Yes. Most of the bullying calls we get are about students bullying other students, but sometimes the issue is a staff member bullying a student.