

Office of the Education Ombudsman



2007 Annual Report

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STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
OFFICE OF THE EDUCATION OMBUDSMAN

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December 15, 2007

The Honorable Chris O. Gregoire
Honorable Members of the Legislature
State Board of Education

I am pleased to submit the first annual report of the Office of the Education Ombudsman (OEO), as required by RCW 43.06B.050.

Our first year has been dedicated to establishing the first state-level ombudsman office in the nation focused on elementary and secondary public education. This report offers an account of OEO's activities from the date of my appointment, September 20, 2006, to June 30, 2007.

My staff and I feel privileged to have the opportunity to develop this new agency and to serve students and families. Our main goal is to ensure that OEO will contribute to the improvement of the K-12 public education system in Washington State.

Respectfully submitted,

Adie Simmons
Director



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The Education Ombudsman

Authorizing Legislation

The Office of the Education Ombudsman (OEO) was established by House Bill 3127, and approved by the Washington State Legislature in March 2006.

OEO is an agency within the Office of the Governor, independent of the public education system. RCW 43.06B.020 established OEO's purpose as:

- Providing information to students, parents and interested members of the public regarding the state's public elementary and secondary education system.
- Helping resolve complaints made by parents and students with regard to the state's public school system.
- Referring complainants and others to appropriate resources, agencies, or departments.
- Developing parental involvement materials.
- Identifying obstacles to greater parent and community involvement and recommending strategies to help parents and community members participate effectively in education.
- Identifying and recommending strategies for improving the success rates of ethnic and racial student groups with disproportionate student achievement.
- Providing the Governor, the Legislature, and the Board of Education with recommendations that contribute to the improvement of the public education system.

OEO was created to support the academic success of K-12 students. In 2006, there were 1,027,312 students enrolled in K-12 public schools, 2,278 public schools, and 295 school districts in Washington State.



Building the Office of the Education Ombudsman

Vision

OEO envisions Washington State families, students, communities, and educators as empowered partners in a responsive, accountable, and equitable public education system focused on student academic success.

Mission

OEO promotes equity in education and the academic success of all students attending elementary and secondary public schools in the state of Washington.

OEO fulfills its mission by providing information to families, students, and communities regarding the school system, promoting family and community involvement in education, helping resolve conflict between families and schools, and providing recommendations to public officials to improve the public education system.

Advocacy

OEO advocates for fair and equitable processes that support student academic success, and not for any particular individual.

OPERATIONS AND ORGANIZATION

OEO began operating in temporary quarters in the General Administration building in Olympia in October 2006. The first six months were dedicated to finding permanent office space, hiring staff, purchasing office equipment, and developing policies and procedures. Direct service to the public began in February 2007. OEO moved to a permanent office in Olympia in March 2007, and opened a second office in Seattle in May 2007.

Staff

OEO is staffed by a group of multi-cultural professionals who are dedicated to the academic success of students. They have expertise in K-12 education, family involvement in schools, education law, and conflict resolution. Their goal is to provide exceptional customer service and individualized attention to students, families, and educators in need of assistance.

OEO staff consists of three Ombudsmen, one Operations Manager, one Communications and Research Specialist, an Information and Referral Specialist, and a Director. Three staff members are stationed in Olympia and four are stationed in Seattle. All OEO employees are able to work both at the Olympia and the Seattle office locations and travel around the state as necessary to fulfill their duties.

“I was trying everything and I was losing hope, and then I called your office and you were there to help me! Thank you!”

–Parent

Staff training

From February through June 2006, OEO’s multidisciplinary team received over 80 hours of instruction including:

- Mediation training from the Alternative Dispute Resolution Center of King County.
- Ombudsman 101 training from the International Ombudsman Association.
- Alternative Dispute Resolution training for Minority Communities from Ohio State University.
- Conflict resolution training from Sound Options.

Budget

OEO operates with an annual budget of \$900,000 from the state general fund.

The Ombudsman Data System

The Ombudsman Data System (ODS) became operational in May 2007. The system was designed by OEO staff with assistance from OFM. ODS provides OEO with technology to track the number of inquiries and complaints received, issues presented, schools and school districts involved, demographic information, and other pertinent information. Data collected will serve as the basis for OEO’s recommendations.



“I just want to say how glad I am that you are there. You are a great resource to parents and teachers.”

–Teacher

ORGANIZATIONAL TIMELINE

September 2006

- Governor announces appointment of OEO Director.
- Director begins work in Olympia.
- OEO is located in temporary quarters at the General Administration Building in Olympia.

October 2006

- Director begins series of meetings with Governor’s staff, legislators, education officials, parent and community groups, and various Ombudsmen throughout the state.
- Search for permanent office space and staff begins.

November 2006

- OEO receives additional temporary office space in General Administration Building in Olympia.
- Operations Manager hired.
- Preliminary computer and office equipment ordered.
- Ombudsman Data System development begins.

December 2006

- Draft of Ombudsman Data System passed to OFM for further development.
- First of three Ombudsmen hired.
- Call center and toll-free phone number established.

January 2007

- Second and third Ombudsmen hired.
- Communications and Research Specialist hired.
- Development of series of parent brochures regarding public education begins.
- Development of OEO website begins.
- Development of internal policies and procedures begins.

February 2007

- Information and Referral Specialist hired.
- Call center opens and information and referral services begin.
- Conflict resolution services begin. Ombudsmen begin reviewing complaints.

March 2007

- Director, Information and Referral Specialist, and one Ombudsman move into permanent office in Olympia. (Remaining staff stay in temporary office.)
- OEO website goes live.
- OEO Ombudsmen begin providing workshops on family involvement in schools and conflict resolution.

April 2007

- OEO Director and Ombudsmen begin conducting public presentations regarding OEO services in various parts of the state.
- OEO publishes and circulates seven brochures for families in six different languages.
- OEO Director joins the United States Ombudsman Association.

May 2007

- Two Ombudsmen, Operations Manager, and Communications and Research Specialist move into permanent office in Seattle.
- Phone system, data connectivity, and office furniture in Olympia and Seattle.
- Ombudsman Data System becomes operational.

June 2007

- OEO begins consultation and informal conflict resolution services for complainants.
- OEO analyzes data collected for Annual Report.

Reaching Out to the Public

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Informing the public is a critical function of the Office of the Education Ombudsman. During its first year, OEO worked to raise awareness about the importance of preventing and resolving conflict between families and schools. OEO also provided plain-language information to the public regarding its services, family involvement in education, and the public education system. OEO uses the following avenues to deliver information across the state:

- Publications aimed at families whose children attend K-12 public schools, translated into six different languages.
- OEO website.
- Print and broadcast media, including Spanish language media.
- Presentations, forums, and workshops taught by OEO staff.

Website

OEO launched www.waparentslearn.org with technical assistance from OFM. It includes information about OEO services, the elementary and secondary education system, how to resolve conflict with schools, and education-related resources. Website visitors can also download the OEO complaint form and publications.

Publications

OEO produced seven brochures designed to help families understand and navigate the education system. The brochures are written in plain language, and are available in English, Spanish, Somali, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Russian, and Korean. They can be downloaded from OEO's website or can be ordered by calling the OEO office. Brochure titles include:

- **A Voice for Everyone**
A Guide to OEO Services
- **Resolving Conflict with Schools**
A Guide for Families
- **Parent and Student Rights**
Empowering Families with Information
- **Participate in Your Child's Education**
A Guide for Families
- **Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences**
A Guide for Families of Elementary School Students
- **Bullying at School**
What a Family Can Do
- **How Does a School District Work?**
A Guide For Families

Media

- Live Interview with OEO Director, KKMO 1360 AM Radio Sol, Seattle, May 12, 2007.
- Introducing the Office of the Education Ombudsman, The Washington State PTA Child Advocate, May 2007.
- Live Interview with OEO Director, KNDO 23, Yakima News, March 31, 2007.
- Parents Given Tips to Support Their Students, The Olympian, January 12, 2007.
- Parents Key to Kids' Education, Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Opinion Editorial, December 5, 2006.

Outreach to Parents

OEO initiated a partnership with Team Child to better reach parents who want to learn how to advocate for students who are not getting their needs met in public schools. OEO will work with Team Child to update and customize their Education Advocacy Manual and develop complementary advocacy training modules. The manual will include step-by-step instructions, in plain language, about how to get educational services for foster children, special education students, children with disabilities, and more.

Events

OEO delivered information to approximately 1,023 individuals including diverse groups of students, parents, community service providers, educators, administrators, and policymakers at 15 large events around the state. Here are some highlights:

Race Literacy Forum

University of Washington | Seattle, May 2007

OEO presented a session about culturally relevant ways to involve families in schools at the Race Literacy Forum sponsored by the University of Washington's Teachers for a New Era. The forum was provided as a professional development opportunity for educators seeking ways to address racial disparities in their schools.

Pasco Parents Forums

Pasco School District, May 2007

OEO hosted two bilingual forums at the Pasco School District to discuss parents' perspectives on meaningful family involvement in their schools, hear parents' concerns about K-12 education, and provide information about OEO.

WA State PTA Convention

Sea-Tac, May 2007

OEO staff presented workshops regarding conflict resolution and how to involve bilingual families in schools at the Washington State Parent Teacher Association (PTA) annual conference.

“I appreciated learning about the services that your office offers to families and schools. What a unique and different office. I will spread the word...”

– Parent

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians Annual Conference | Squaxin Island, May 2007

OEO staff met with tribal leaders, educators, and families at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians’ annual conference and provided an overview of OEO services and family involvement in education.

WA State Indian Education Association Annual Conference | Kamilche, April 2007

OEO staff met with members of the Washington State Indian Education Association at their annual conference and presented workshops on family involvement strategies for educators attending the conference.

Side by Side: Supporting Student Success Conference | Yakima, March 2007

OEO staff presented strategies to involve diverse families in education to an audience of parents,

educators, and community members attending the OSPI sponsored “Side-by-Side: Supporting Student Success” conference.

Latino Educational Achievement Project (LEAP) Annual Conference | Olympia, February 2007

The Director of OEO spoke about the importance of family involvement in education at LEAP’s annual conference and Legislative Day to an audience of over 400 participants. She also taught workshops for parents and students regarding their rights in public education.

Providing Information to Non-English Speakers

OEO purchased simultaneous interpretation equipment to deliver information to non-English speakers at public events. Simultaneous interpretation equipment allows all participants to listen to the same information, at the same time, regardless of the language they speak. Participants use a headset receiver to listen directly to interpreters. The receivers have six channels, and each transmits information from a different interpreter. This equipment helps OEO engage effectively with a multilingual community. OEO can now provide information to 100 non-English speaking participants at any given event.



Responding to Inquiries

Inquiries are contacts to OEO made by phone or in writing requesting information, referrals to resources, or a complaint form.

When calling OEO's toll-free number, callers from around the state are able to speak with an Information and Referral Specialist to ask questions, obtain information, or consult directly with an Ombudsman regarding a specific situation. The Ombudsmen provide individualized attention and consultation services. OEO staff help prevent complaints by educating callers about ways to resolve conflict, and by providing information about the school system. Callers are sometimes able to resolve conflict by themselves, empowered with the information they receive.

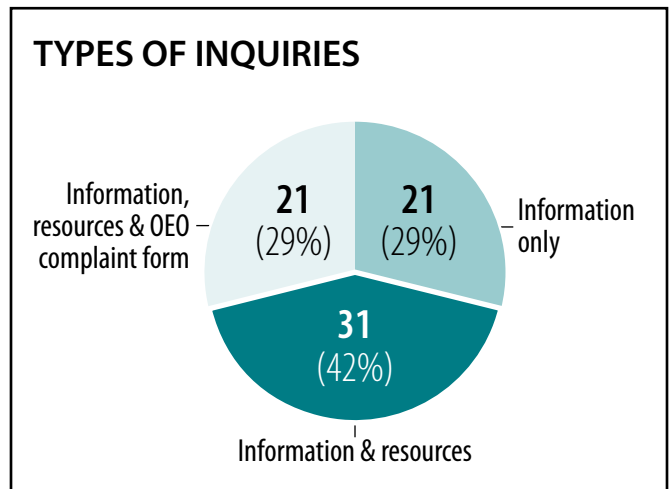
OEO assists parents and students from diverse cultures by providing them with information to help them navigate the public education system. (According to the most recent national census, fourteen percent of Washingtonians spoke a language other than English at home.) To serve callers who struggle with the English language, OEO accesses a phone service that provides immediate phone interpretation for over 100 different languages.

OEO documents inquiry information, with permission from callers, in the Ombudsman Data System.

Inquiry Data

Following is a description of inquiries received during the five-month-period between February 1, 2007, when OEO started to provide direct services, and June 30, 2007, the end of the reporting period.

OEO received a total of 73 inquiries between February 1, 2007 and June 30, 2007.



“This was the best half hour I have ever spent talking to anyone about my kids’ education and schools. I have learned so much! Thank you!”

-Bilingual Parent

BASIS OF INQUIRIES

Bullying/Harassment, Student-to-Student	16
Special Education	15
Discrimination	7
Discipline, Suspension	6
Harassment, Teacher/Student	5
School Safety	3
WASL, Appeal/Retake	3
WASL, General	3
Enrollment, Redistricting, Residency	2
Gifted Program/Highly Capable	2
Attendance	1
Bilingual Education	1
High School Graduation Requirements	1
Home Schooling	1
School Records	1
Other	6
TOTAL	73

WHO INQUIRED

Inquiries by Relationship to Student

Legal Guardian/Parent	60
Mother	45
Father	15
Other Legal Guardian, Grandmother	2
Community Professional	2
OSPI Employee, No Relationship to Student	2
Other Relative, Uncle	2
Other Relationship, Attorney	1
School Employee, School Counselor	1
Teacher	2
Other Relative, Not Legal Guardian, Grandmother	1
TOTAL	73

“I attended your presentation about how schools can partner with parents to increase student achievement and I was hooked. As an experienced principal, I thought there was nothing new under the sun, but you have taught me new strategies that I can implement at my school immediately.”

– Middle School Principal

Inquiries by Race/Ethnicity (Unduplicated Count)*

White	35
Did not disclose	16
Hispanic	5
Black	5
Asian	4
Filipino	1
Japanese	1
Thai	1
Korean	1
Multi-racial	1
African American/White	1
Native American	1
TOTAL RACE/ETHNICITY	67

*Some individuals are counted more than once because they made more than one inquiry. However, OEO reports individual race/ethnicity only once.

How Callers Heard About OEO

In the first months of OEO’s existence, prior to the development of the Ombudsman Data System, detailed information about inquiries was not recorded and is categorized below as “various sources”.

Various sources	26	36%
OSPI	16	22%
Community Professional	12	16%
Previous Contact (repeat caller)	8	11%
School	3	4%
School District	2	3%
Media	2	3%
Governor’s Office	1	1%
Legislator’s Office	1	1%
OEO Website	1	1%
Other	1	1%

Resolving Complaints

The Office of the Education Ombudsman intervenes to resolve complaints, initiates systemic investigations, and makes recommendations in reports to policymakers. It can determine whether a school or school district followed a fair and equitable process, but cannot force a school or school district to take specific actions.

OEO is dedicated to excellence in professional practice and to maintaining the highest standards of professional conduct in fulfilling its duties and responsibilities. OEO standards of professional practice are aligned with the established United States Ombudsman Association's standards for public sector Ombudsmen:

- **Independence**
OEO is independent from the public education system. OEO exercises discretion over how to act regarding individual concerns or a trend of concerns from multiple individuals. It functions as an impartial entity that reports findings and makes recommendations based on a review of data and policy, in the light of reason, fairness, and best practices.
- **Impartial Process**
OEO receives and reviews each complaint in an objective and fair manner. OEO Ombudsmen treat all parties without favor or prejudice and help disputing parties focus on the

academic success of the student involved. OEO Ombudsmen are advocates for fair processes that support students' academic success.

- **Confidentiality**
OEO treats all matters, including the identities of students, complainants, and individuals from whom information is acquired, as confidential except as necessary to perform the duties of the office. Upon receipt of information that by law is confidential and privileged, OEO does not further disclose or disseminate the information except as provided by applicable state or federal law.
- **Privileged Communication**
All communications by OEO or designees, if reasonably related to OEO's duties and responsibilities, and made in good faith, are privileged. That privilege serves as a defense to any action in libel or slander. Privilege is a term that describes a relationship protected by the law from forced disclosure. (Examples of traditional privileges are: client/attorney, doctor/patient, husband/wife.)
- **Neutral Perspective**
OEO does not allow personal views or beliefs regarding subject matter or the parties involved to affect decisions regarding complaint acceptance or intervention. OEO has no predisposed idea or personal interest in the outcome of the complaint process.

“When I received a call from one of the Education Ombudsmen, at first I felt threatened. Then after hearing what your office has to offer, I felt that I could really use your assistance and that you can help me resolve a long-time conflict with a parent that is affecting the achievement of the student in question. I think this can be a win-win situation for all!”

–Principal

Ombudsmen

OEO Ombudsmen are neutral problem solvers who help families and students understand how the state public education system works, how they can get their needs met, and what to do when conflict happens. They rely on the power of facilitation, mediation, and investigative expertise to resolve disputes between parents or legal guardians, students, and public schools.

OEO Ombudsmen may intervene early in disputes to prevent them from escalating and becoming lengthy and costly to schools and families. As neutral third parties, they provide parents or students contemplating filing complaints against schools, with an honest assessment of the situation, information, and guidance to resolve conflict.

Complaint Resolution

OEO brings families and educators together to resolve conflict, focusing on the best interest of the students involved. Parents, legal guardians, or students experiencing conflict with schools or schools districts in the state of Washington can file a written complaint with OEO. Complaint forms are translated into six different languages and can be requested by phone or downloaded from OEO’s website. Complaints are not accepted via e-mail. All complaint-related matters are treated as confidential by OEO.

OEO does not replace existing public school complaint resolution systems or local, state, and federal grievance and appeal procedures, and does not accept or help resolve complaints about elected officials, private schools, or private organizations.

Criteria

OEO accepts complaints regarding students who are currently enrolled or eligible to be enrolled in the Washington State K-12 public school system alleging that:

- The school or school district did not respond when they complained or responded inappropriately;
- the school or school district did not follow federal law, state law, school policy, or school district policy, and
- the student’s or group of students’ learning environment or academic performance has been negatively affected by the school or school district’s action or lack of action.

Process

OEO has developed a complaint resolution process which includes a data collection system. Complaint data is collected and analyzed to become part of OEO’s annual reports.

1. Complaint Analysis

Complaints received are logged into ODS, and

assigned to an Ombudsman who analyzes whether the complaint meets OEO's criteria and contacts the complainant to discuss the allegations. The Ombudsman then makes a recommendation to the Director as to whether the complaint should be accepted. If OEO is unable to accept a complaint, the complainant is contacted and provided with an appropriate referral.

2. Intervention

After a complaint has been accepted, the Ombudsman begins the intervention process by contacting the complainant and school officials to gather further information regarding the allegations. The Ombudsman researches federal and state law, school district policy, and other rules and guidelines that relate to the case.

3. Resolution Methods

To reach resolution, the Ombudsman utilizes one or a combination of the following methods:

- **Coaching** – provides information and advice to one or the other disputing parties to solve the problem.
- **Shuttle diplomacy** – acts as a conduit between the complainant and school staff and negotiates the resolution of the complaint.
- **Informal mediation** – brings disputing parties together and helps them understand options, facts, realities, and focus on the academic success of the student involved.

4. Recommendation

At the end of the resolution process, the Ombudsman determines, in consultation with the Director, if a formal, written recommendation should be made to the school or school district involved in the complaint. In most cases, recommendations suggest changes in policy, procedure, or practice intended to improve educational services or accountability. This benefits all students and parents in the school or district.

5. Closure

A closing letter is sent to the complainant summarizing the intervention process and the results of the Ombudsman's work. The Ombudsman enters pertinent information in the data collection system.



Case Example

Ombudsman Helps Students, Parents, and Educators Address Bullying

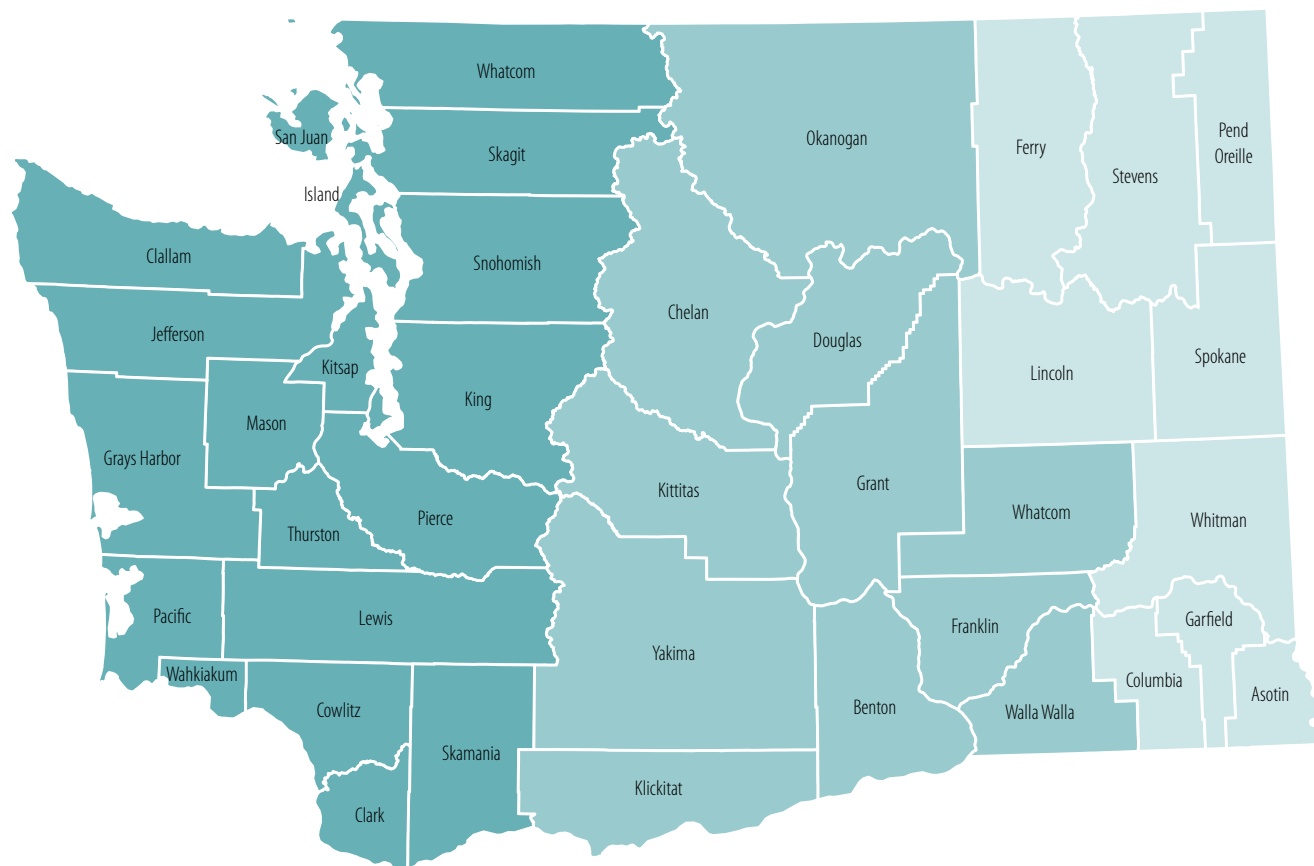
OEO received a complaint from a parent whose child had been the target of multiple bullying incidents. The parent and student filed several harassment complaints with the school and school district prior to contacting OEO. The parent alleged the school and school district did not fully investigate the bullying incidents as required by the school's harassment policy, and that the ongoing bullying had a negative effect on the student's learning environment. The parent reported that the ongoing bullying had socially isolated the student, and alleged that the school officials' inaction made the student reluctant to communicate about ongoing bullying.

School officials claimed that the bullying incidents were thoroughly addressed, but could not provide written documentation of the investigation. The ombudsman found that the school district had policies regarding hazing and sexual harassment, but did not have a policy directly addressing bullying.

The omission of an explicit bullying policy is significant. In 2002, the Washington State Legislature enacted a law requiring every public school district to adopt a policy prohibiting the harassment, intimidation, and bullying of any student. The ombudsman discussed the issue with the superintendent and presented him with a model anti-bullying policy and procedure, provided by the Washington State School Directors Association. The local school board reviewed the model policy and procedure and adopted a version of each. The superintendent reported that training would be provided to students, staff, and the community members regarding bullying prevention and the new school district policy.

Later, in the course of closing the complaint, both the parent and school district requested further assistance to resolve ongoing communication difficulties. The ombudsman facilitated a discussion between the parent and school officials where the parties created a communication plan to establish ways for the family and school officials to communicate with each other.

Contacts and Complaints by Region*



Western Washington

- 67%, or 58 contacts
- 79%, or 11 complaints

Central Washington

- 15%, or 13 contacts
- 14%, or 2 complaints

Eastern Washington

- 8%, or 7 contacts
- 7%, or 1 complaints

*Regions have been designated by OEO for reporting purposes.

COMPLAINT DATA

Below is summary data regarding complaints received by OEO between February 1, 2007, when OEO began direct service, and June 30, 2007, the end of the reporting period.

OEO received 87 contacts (inquiries and complaints).

- 16%, or 14 were **written complaints**
- 84%, or 73 were **inquiries**

Contacts by Region

- 67%, or 58 contacts were from Western Washington
- 15%, or 13 contacts were from Central Washington
- 8%, or 7 contacts were from Eastern Washington

Complaints by Region

- 79%, or 11 complaints were from Western Washington
- 14%, or 2 complaints were from Central Washington
- 7%, or 1 complaint was from Eastern Washington

Who Complained

Relationship to Student

All complaints received by OEO were filed by a parent or legal guardian.

- 71%, or 10 complaints were filed by the student's mother
- 29%, or 4 complaints were filed by the student's father

Race/Ethnicity of complainant

- 78%, or 11 White
- 14%, or 2 White/Hispanic
- 8%, or 1 declined to identify race/ethnicity

Language of complainant

- 86%, or 12 spoke English as a first language
- 14%, or 2 spoke Spanish as a first language
- 14%, or 2 spoke Spanish as a second language

Students Involved in Complaints

Gender of student

- 64%, or 9 complaints, involved male students
- 36%, or 5 complaints, involved female students

Race/Ethnicity of student

- 64%, or 9 students were White
- 14%, or 2 students were White/Hispanic
- 14%, or 2 students declined to identify race/ethnicity
- 8%, or 1 student was Black/Hispanic

Language of student

- 100%, or 14 students spoke English as a first language
- 7%, or 1 student spoke Spanish as a second language

Students' Educational Programs

- 36%, or 5 students were part of Special Education Programs

Age of Students

Years of Age	# of Students
19	1
17	2
16	1
15	1
14	1
13	1
11	3
9	3
6	1

Customer Satisfaction

After complaints are closed, OEO surveys complainants to assess their level of satisfaction with the services they received. At the end of the reporting period, all OEO complaints were still open.

What Causes Conflict?

We all face various degrees of conflict at different times in our lives – conflict is a natural part of the human experience. Conflict between parents and educators produces stressful environments that directly affect students and their ability to learn. When conflict is not resolved at the lowest level, it can escalate into full-blown disputes that lead to expensive and time consuming litigation.

In the process of resolving complaints, OEO has identified frequent causes of conflict between parents and educators:

- Lack of clear communication between parents and educators.
- Conflict avoidance from either party.
- Parents or educators do not do what they said they would do.
- Educators dismiss parents' concerns or input about their children's education.
- Apologies are not offered when mistakes are made.
- Parents or educators make excuses instead of assuming responsibility for their actions.
- Parents do not assume responsibility for their children's actions.
- Educators do not comply with their own school or school district policy.
- Parents do not believe that educators have their children's best interest in mind.

Promoting Family Involvement in Education

Family involvement in education is a key element in student achievement and when parents and educators work in partnership, schools, students, and communities reap substantial rewards. Yet, research has shown that some families make the deliberate and intentional choice not to participate in the education of their children, because they are not clear about their role and responsibilities, do not understand the education system, and do not believe they have much to contribute to the academic achievement of their children.

A 2006 study by Washington Appleseed Center for Law in the Public System reported that many Washington families disengage themselves from schools because they are challenged to understand a system of education standards and assessments

that is very different from their school days. To help children succeed in school, families today must have a clear understanding of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and Grade Level Expectations (GLE). They must understand student performance data, know how to advocate for their children, and learn how to partner with schools. This is a tall order for most families regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status.

PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING

In conversations with parents from rural and urban areas, OEO has found that parents and family members are an untapped educational resource in the state of Washington. Many parents report being ready to step up to the plate and become more engaged in the education system, but they need information, skills, and support.

Parent leadership training is a nationally recognized method to provide parents with the necessary skills and knowledge to become involved in the education system. It is particularly promising for ethnically diverse and low income families who have an urgent need to understand the education system and better advocate for their children.

The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL) based in Lexington, Kentucky, is nationally known for its effective training model. CIPL has been



“I appreciated learning that your office offers conflict resolution services ... such a crucial component. Conflicts are inevitable, how we deal with them is what matters.”

–Parent

in existence for over two decades and has trained over 2,000 parents nationally. Parents are trained to advocate for their children, understand the school system and achievement data, and define the roles they play in public education. Trainees attend a six-day institute and become “CIPL Fellows” upon graduation. They commit to go back to their schools and plan to organize academic-centered projects, become involved in decision-making committees, and involve other parents. CIPL notifies schools and school districts that CIPL Fellows are now in their communities, and are ready to partner with educators.

CIPL graduates continue to receive coaching, and technical assistance from CIPL two years after graduation. CIPL Fellows typically go on to form parent groups, participate in state education advocacy committees, lead school decision-making committees, and successfully run for school board positions.

Exploring the CIPL Model

In March 2007, OEO sponsored a visit by CIPL to our state in order to learn more about their model and explore local replication possibilities. OEO and the Commission on African American Affairs co-hosted a special event where CIPL Director, Bev Raimondo, and trained parent leader, Jessica Berry, introduced the model.

In attendance were parents, educators, members of the African American Education Roundtable, and representatives of the Washington Education Association, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Partnership for Learning, the Governor’s Office, Communities in Schools, the Commission on Hispanic Affairs, and Community and Parents for Public Schools (CPPS), Seattle chapter.

As a result of this event, the African American Education Roundtable voted to support the development of the CIPL parent leadership training model in Washington State. Community and Parents for Public Schools (CPPS), a non-profit organization formed by parents of Seattle Public Schools students, ramped up their fund-raising efforts to replicate this model in the Seattle school district.

Case Example

Ombudsman Helps Student with Disabilities

OEO received a parent complaint alleging that a school and school district failed to provide their child, who struggles with learning disabilities, with appropriate accommodations to take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The parent reported that the student's Section 504 Plan outlined specific accommodations for testing, including the provision of a scribe. The parent claimed that denying the student a scribe effectively denied the student the opportunity to complete the WASL which impacted his academic success.

Upon investigation, the Ombudsman found that existing provisions in student's Section 504 Plan were not well written and did not comply with federal and state guidelines.

The Ombudsman recommended that the parent meet with the school counselor to revise the Section 504 plan so that it follows OSPI guidelines regarding WASL student accommodations. The Ombudsman clarified information for the parent about retaking the WASL during the summer, specific testing requirements, testing timelines, and details about administration of the test. She also recommended corrective measures to school officials.

The Ombudsman's intervention resulted in the successful revision of the student's Section 504 plan. The student registered to retake the WASL and enrolled in a test preparation program. The school and school district provided a scribe for the WASL retake, and the student completed test. The Ombudsman also provided the school district with recommendations to improve the administration of the WASL, including improvement in parent and student re-take information, and training for school counselors and test administrators regarding 504 Plans.

Building Family Involvement Capacity

In its first year, OEO co-sponsored and hosted events and activities aimed at building capacity for family involvement in education across Washington State.

“Partnering for Student Success”

Parent Conference

In January 2007, OEO co-sponsored and co-hosted a statewide conference for parents whose children attend Washington State public schools. OEO and the Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL) jointly organized the “Partnering for Student Success” conference in Seattle, attracting over 175 parents from as far as Spokane and Toppenish.

Parents participated in workshops about supporting math learning at home, understanding high school graduation requirements, and how to become more involved in the education of their children. OEO’s sponsorship made it possible for many parents to attend the conference at no cost, receive vouchers for transportation, and have free parking and free childcare at the event.

“Opening Paths with Education”

Latino Parent Conference

OEO co-sponsored a conference for Latino parents, hosted by Tacoma Community College in April 2007. Parents and youth attended educational workshops, cultural performances, activities, and a resource fair

that provided health, social services, and educational resources in the community. OEO staff presented workshops on parent and student rights and family involvement in education both in English and Spanish.

“Reclaiming Our Resilient Native Past for Our Future Generations,” Washington State Indian Education Association Annual Conference

OEO provided scholarships for Native American parents to participate in the Washington State Indian Education Association Annual Conference in April 2007. OEO staff presented workshops on parent and student rights in education and how to become involved in schools. Parents participated in workshops and discussions about federal and state legislation, literacy, student leadership, effective programs and practices for working with Native youth, and the future of Native American education in the state.

Improving the System

AREAS OF CONCERN

In the course of fielding inquiries, resolving complaints, and conducting public outreach, OEO identifies missing links and disconnected processes that exist within the public education system that impact the academic success of Washington State students. In its first year, OEO identified the following areas of concern:

- **Washington Parents Lack a “Bill of Rights in Education”**

Washington State does not have a “Bill of Parents’ Rights” regarding public education. A “Bill of Rights” can help Washington families understand what they can expect from public schools and the role they play in education.

- **School Districts Lack Complaint Resolution Policies and Procedures**

Many Washington school districts have not developed their own complaint resolution policies and procedures aside from the prescribed Special Education grievance process. Families experiencing conflict with schools express frustration at the lack of guidelines and unclear processes that exist in school districts.

- **Families Left Out of Truancy Proceedings**

RCW 28A.225.020, also known as the “Becca Bill,” requires schools to meet with families of truant students to address unexcused absences before

filing a truancy petition. Some school districts do not address unexcused absences with families prior to filing truancy cases in juvenile court. In some parts of the state, students and parents are not represented by legal counsel at the initial truancy hearing and are encouraged to sign agreements without sufficient opportunity to have their rights explained to them.

- **Lack of Disaggregated Student Data**

The WASL scores of Asian students are not disaggregated to identify the various Asian ethnic groups that form the sum total. Each group speaks a different language and has a distinctive culture and history. The lack of classification makes it nearly impossible for communities and educators to identify which Asian groups are not succeeding academically and provide assistance. This also holds true for the Black racial category, which includes both African American students and African student groups. These groups have different backgrounds and cultures, and need tailored educational programs to succeed.

- **WASL Retake System Leaving Families and Students Behind**

State timelines for releasing annual WASL test results do not provide adequate lead time for parents or students to register for summer test retakes and remedial coursework. Some school districts and schools do not alert parents and

Thank you for being there...listening and helping me problem-solve. Now I know what to say when I talk to my daughter's principal.

–Parent

students of the tight timeline to sign up for WASL retake and remediation opportunities.

- **Bullying Policies Inadequate**

RCW 28A.300.285 requires all school districts to adopt policies that prohibit bullying. Many districts have developed anti-bullying policies but many do not include clear guidelines for implementation. Other school districts do not have established policies and deal with bullying on a case-by-case basis.

During the next year, OEO will look further into these issues and their impact on student achievement. Based on its findings, OEO will issue appropriate recommendations for systemic improvement.

RECOMMENDING SOLUTIONS

During its first year, OEO provided several recommendations to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction that will contribute to the improvement of the K-12 education system, and to the involvement of families in education:

- Provided input on the development of OSPI's website re-design to better present information to students and families.
- Recommended the inclusion of family and community involvement practices to the Professional Education Standards Board in the revision of State Teacher Certification Standards.

OEO's recommendations were included in the Standard V 5.3: *Knowledge of Learners and their Development in Social Contexts*. State Teacher Certification Standards guide Washington colleges and universities' teacher preparation programs.

- Contributed to the expanded and enhanced family involvement chapter of the OSPI publication titled "*Nine Characteristics of Highly Effective Schools*." This document is widely used and quoted by schools and community organizations.
- Assisted the Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs (CAPAA) in requesting to OSPI that WASL score data be disaggregated to help identify the academic needs of specific Asian student groups and develop tailored instructional programs.

CAPAA was provided with a customized WASL scores report of Asian students enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) programs, disaggregated by ethnicity by OSPI officials. Due to current data constraints, disaggregated WASL score reports for general education students can not be obtained.

Improving OSPI's Customer Service

In the course of responding to inquiries and resolving complaints, parents reported to OEO staff that getting information or answers to questions from OSPI staff can be difficult, and at times, frustrating. Phone messages are sometimes left unreturned or forwarded to staff or departments that do not have pertinent information.

In June 2007, OEO brought this issue to the attention of Dr. Terry Bergeson, Superintendent of Public Instruction, who responded constructively by agreeing to review the matter. At OEO's urging, Superintendent Bergeson identified OSPI's "customer" as "anyone who calls on the phone, walks in the door or sends an e-mail."

Later, in a July 2007 memorandum to OEO, OSPI reported that a customer service team was formed to develop an improved system where "customers can get answers that are always prompt, accurate, complete, and provided in a courteous and respectful manner." The team will focus on agency-wide priorities that include: enhancing and clarifying customer service expectations; developing customer service policy and procedures; enforcing consistent customer service practices across the agency; holding management and staff accountable over time; and incorporating customer service instruction into employee training curricula.

Consulting with Partners in Education

RCW 43.068.010 requires OEO to consult with various stakeholder groups regarding its work. To that effect, OEO convened a group of decision makers from various education-related organizations to form the Partners in Education Committee (PiEC). PiEC members will help OEO make recommendations to improve the K-12 education system in Washington State.



Looking Ahead

GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

OEO has created broad long-term goals to guide its development toward becoming a model K-12 public education Ombudsman office. The objectives and strategies outlined below will contribute to reaching OEO's long-term goals. Progress towards meeting these goals will be described in future annual reports.

1. Long-term Goal: Become a trusted and valued source of education-related information for students, families, and diverse communities across the state.

Objective for 2007-08: Disseminate information about OEO services, the public education system, student and parent rights, and family and community involvement in education to students, families, and communities across the state.

Strategies for 2007-08

- Design and implement a communication plan to disseminate information statewide using a variety of communication channels, which include presentations, workshops, print, broadcast and digital media, and community partnerships.
- Implement culturally relevant strategies to inform ethnically diverse groups about OEO services, the K-12 public education system, student and parent rights, and family and community involvement in education.

Performance measures

- Number of presentations, workshops, items in print, and broadcast media spots.
- Number of partner organizations.
- Increase number of total contacts to OEO.
- Increase number of contacts from diverse community members.

2. Long-term Goal: Become a recognized leader in family-school conflict prevention and resolution.

Objective for 2007-08: Raise awareness of OEO's role in family-school conflict prevention and resolution in the state.

Strategies for 2007-08

- Provide information to students/families, educators and community based organizations about OEO's conflict prevention and resolution services.
- Provide coaching services to students, families, and educators to teach techniques to prevent and resolve conflict.
- Work with state partner organizations to develop sample conflict resolution policy and procedures for school districts.

Performance measures

- Increase number of OEO clients provided with consultation and coaching services.

- Increase number of workshops on conflict prevention/resolution taught by OEO staff.
- Increase number of school districts adopting conflict resolution policy and procedures.

3. Long-term Goal: Contribute to student academic success by promoting family and community involvement in education across Washington State.

Objective for 2007-08: Increase public awareness of the positive relationship between family and community involvement in education and student academic achievement.

Strategies for 2007-08

- Provide workshops and presentations on family and community involvement in education.
- Identify and recommend successful models and strategies of family and community involvement in education.
- Coordinate family and community involvement in education public awareness efforts with the public education system, families, and diverse community groups across the state.
- Work to develop model family involvement policy for school districts.

Performance measures

- Number of family and community involvement workshops and presentations.
- Number of school districts adopting family involvement policy and procedures.

4. Long-term Goal: Contribute to student academic success by providing the Governor, Legislature, and State Board of Education with recommendations to improve the public education system.

Objective for 2007-08: Provide innovative and actionable recommendations to improve the education system in Washington State.

Strategies for 2007-08

- Collect data from students, families, diverse communities, and educators across the state to identify issues in the public education system.
- Identify and recommend educational practices to public officials based on data collected from families, educators, and diverse community partners.

Performance measures

- Ratio of recommendations issued to and acted on by the Governor, Legislature, and State Board of Education.

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