

## What is an Ombudsman?

### History

The Special Education Ombudsman position at OSPI was established by the Washington State Legislature during the 2005 session. The purpose of the Ombudsman is to provide support to parents, guardians, educators, and students with disabilities. The Ombudsman provides information to help families and educators understand state and federal laws, rules, regulations, and to access training and support, technical information services, and mediation services, as appropriate.

### Overview

The term Ombudsman means citizen's representative. The creation of the Special Education Ombudsman Program at OSPI demonstrates Washington's on-going commitment to providing quality educational services to all students. The Ombudsman works neutrally and objectively with all parties to help make sure that eligible students receive services and supports necessary for them to benefit from public education, as guaranteed under federal and state laws.

Some questions and answers are provided below to help explain the concept of the Special Education Ombudsman and how it is intended to operate in our state. For further information and assistance, please contact Kristin Hennessey by phone at (360) 725- 6075 or by email at [kristin.hennessey@k12.wa.us](mailto:kristin.hennessey@k12.wa.us).

### What is an Ombudsman?

An Ombudsman is a neutral party that works to ensure that bureaucracies function fairly and provide services equitably. All Ombudsman work independently, *not* on behalf of any one party. Personally identifiable information shared with the Special Education Ombudsman is not revealed to a third party without permission.

### How are Ombudsman services beneficial to citizens?

Government is complex. Ombudsman services exist to address individual concerns about bureaucratic systems.

### Can Ombudsman Programs be set up in different ways and vary in their responsibilities?

Yes, the role of an Ombudsman can be defined in different ways, depending on the needs of an organization. The role of the Special Education Ombudsman at OSPI is to help parents resolve disagreements with school districts about special education

services quickly and at the lowest level possible. The Special Education Ombudsman does this by:

- Helping parents and educators better understand special education processes and regulations
- Acting as a neutral facilitator between citizens and school districts to help solve problems related to special education
- Clarifying the roles of parents, as well as educators, related to special education services
- Acting as a neutral and confidential sounding board to explore options for resolving special education related disagreements
- Advising callers about communication strategies that help to support a team approach to a child's educational program
- Explaining options for formally resolving a special education disagreement or complaint
- Advocating for a fair process
- Working to prevent individual concerns from being overlooked by the system
- Making recommendations to OSPI based upon patterns of complaints, if patterns emerge
- Serving as a resource for disability related information and referral

### **The Special Education Ombudsman located within OSPI:**

- Does not act as an attorney
- Does not provide legal advice
- Does not determine special education or OSPI policy
- Does not conduct investigations and/or write reports
- Does not advocate on behalf of any one party or organization
- Is not a defender of OSPI practices
- Is not someone who can order a public agency to fix your problem

### **How can I contact the Special Education Ombudsman?**

Kristin Hennessey can be reached by phone at (360) 725- 6075 or by email at [kristin.hennessey@k12.wa.us](mailto:kristin.hennessey@k12.wa.us).

[Printable version of this question and answer document](#) (pdf)

[Link to Dispute Resolution Mechanisms](#)

Note: If you have a dispute under the Early Intervention Section (Part C) of the IDEA, it can be sent to:

Department of Social and Health Services

Infant Toddler Early Intervention Program

P.O. Box 45201

Olympia, WA 98504-5201

(360) 902-8488

<http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/iteip/>