

POLICY	BOARD OF EDUCATION OF FREDERICK COUNTY, MARYLAND
OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS	POLICY 107

I. Purpose

To define the mission, purpose, role, scope, and functions of the Office of the Ombuds to ensure students are provided equitable and equal access to all aspects of Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) educational programs; and families, employees, and community members feel their concerns are processed with fairness and consistency.

II. Definitions

Ombuds: A designated neutral who is appointed or employed by the Board of Education to facilitate the informal options for resolution of concerns of students, families and parents, employees, and Frederick County residents.

Visitors: An individual served by the Office of the Ombuds (i.e. students, parents and families, FCPS employees, Frederick County residents).

III. Policy Statement

The Board of Education (Board) is committed to the provision of relevant, accurate, timely, transparent responses and services to visitors at the highest level of customer service and attentiveness to the respective needs.

It is the Board’s goal to build relationships with visitors and the community to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach to serving students, fostering an educational environment where students thrive, and school-based and systemic programs are strengthened and aligned to school system goals.

The goal of the Office of the Ombuds is to identify and recommend strategies to improve outcomes by engaging in ongoing dialogue and building collaborative, cooperative relationships between and with visitors.

IV. Guiding Principles

The Office of the Ombuds, in alignment with school system strategic goals, operates under several key guiding principles:

- A. Independence
- B. Neutrality and Impartiality
- C. Confidentiality
- D. Commitment to Fairness
- E. Informality
- F. Credible Process (for receipt and review of, and assistance in resolution of issues)

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V. Role and Responsibilities

The Office of the Ombuds is a neutral and independent body that reports directly to the Board. Its role is to proactively facilitate the resolution of issues, concerns, and complaints brought forward by visitors and to identify issues that warrant review, evaluation, and/or changes to system policy or procedures.

The Office of the Ombuds is firmly committed to maintaining the confidentiality of those who use its services and will keep all information confidential to the extent allowed by law and provided no risk of injury is of concern. The Ombuds will not disclose that an individual came to the Office of the Ombuds or any part of confidential communications, unless in the course of discussions with the Ombuds permission is received. If the Ombuds believes that talking with someone may help, the Ombuds will ask for permission before any disclosures are made. The Office of the Ombuds maintains records only to the extent necessary for reporting purposes with the Board.

A. Specific Responsibilities include:

Visitor Services

1. Receives inquiries, concerns, and complaints from the visitors.
2. Provides information and referrals, connects visitors with appropriate staff or resources who can provide further information, assistance, and resolution.
3. Provides confidential guidance, information and individual coaching to help visitors prepare for conversations.
4. Explains policies, regulations, relevant provisions of Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) or negotiated agreements, if applicable, and how they relate to visitors; provides clarity to school system processes; and seeks and provides options for resolution of conflicts or complaints.
5. Proactively facilitates resolution of an issue or complaint, working collaboratively with all parties involved.

B. Resources of the Office

In order to effectively interface, work collaboratively, and communicate with visitors, FCPS staff, and the Board, and to serve in a professional manner to the standards of the International Ombudsman Association, the Ombuds will have access to the following resources:

1. Administrative support and office supplies.
2. Communication services, both internal and external.
3. Support for continued professional development.
4. A dedicated FCPS work space.

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C. Monitoring and Reporting

The Ombuds will:

1. Maintain records limited to the information to meet reporting responsibilities to the Board.
2. Track trends, identify and bring awareness to leadership of system problems or issues.
3. Periodically review case profiles to possible issues that would suggest needed review, evaluation and/or changes to system policy or practice.
4. Report and recommend changes to the Board on a regular basis, either orally or in written report. Any meeting with the Board will be in accordance with Maryland's Open Meetings Act.

D. Limitations

The Ombuds:

1. Does not participate in formal investigations or formal resolution processes.
2. May not serve in any other role that would compromise the neutrality of the Office.
3. Cannot give legal advice or act as an attorney or advocate for a specific position(s) or individual(s).
4. Does not make binding decisions or mandate policies.
5. Does not have the authority to direct FCPS staff or the Board to take a specific course of action.
6. Will not disclose the identity of a complainant or any person who provides information to the Ombuds without the individual's consent.
7. Will not disclose personally identifiable information regarding a student without specific written consent as required by state and federal law.

E. Protections

1. Communications by the Ombuds related to the duties and responsibilities of the Office are confidential communication and only shared with those based on a legitimate professional need associated with execution of duties.
2. The Ombuds cannot be compelled to testify in legal or administrative proceedings.

F. Reporting

1. The Office of the Ombuds reports directly to the Board.
2. Quarterly written reports will include a summary of case number, status, type, and any suggestions for policy or practices that might need review, evaluation and/or changes.
3. The Office will present an annual report to the Board and Superintendent.

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VI. Professional Qualifications and Standards

It is the Board's expectation that the Office be conducted at the highest standards of transparency, professionalism, and fairness. To that end, the Ombuds will, at a minimum, meet the following expectations.

1. Possess a thorough knowledge of the principles and practices of conflict resolution.
2. Have the ability to perform research, administrative, and analytical assignments of a challenging and complex nature.
3. Exercise good judgment and discretion in the performance of duties.
4. Demonstrate strong experience in customer satisfaction/relations, mediation, conflict resolution and complaint management.
5. Possess experience with employee assistance and referral programs.
6. Possess experience in managing effective human resources, public relations, and communications programs.
7. Have a willingness to engage in frequent evening and/or overtime work.
8. Possess knowledge of responsibilities and practices of local boards of education and the respective authority and roles of members of the Board and the Superintendent.
9. Possess excellent oral and written communication, human relations and interpersonal skills.
10. Strive to meet the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association.
11. Have a willingness to obtain and participate in professional development, education and training with the goal of continuous improvement.

Legal Reference			
Policy History	Reviewed: 2019	Adopted: 11/14/18	Revised: 6/12/19