

OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

Quarterly Report October 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020



PWCS Office of the Ombudsman

The PWCS Office of the Ombudsman www.pwcs.edu/ombuds began offering ombuds services to employees, parents/guardians, students, and members of the community in August 2019. Pursuant to PWCS Policy 180, the Office of the Ombudsman provides confidential, impartial, and informal assistance in resolving Division-related concerns, conflicts, and issues.

Services include:

- Listening and helping to clarify underlying interests;
- Providing information and exploring options available to visitors;
- Facilitating discussions and/or mediating disputes to resolve issues, as appropriate;
- Collecting data on emerging trends and patterns while safeguarding anonymity;
- Utilizing data to make quarterly and annual reports to the School Board and the Division Superintendent, including annual recommendations for systemic and organizational change.

Informality: The Office of the Ombudsman, “is an informal resource, [and] does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention.”

**The Office of the Ombudsman is not affiliated with any compliance function and does NOT serve as an agent of notice.*

Office Activity- Visitors & Concerns

During the first two quarters of Fiscal Year 2021, there were 83 visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman. Between October 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020 (the second quarter of Fiscal Year 2021), there were 47 visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman, 43 of which were employee visitors and 4 of which were parents or members of the community. These visitors are in addition to the 36 visitors who first contacted the Office of the Ombudsman in the first quarter of Fiscal Year (July 1, 2020 – September 30, 2020).

Visitor Concerns

During the second quarter, 29 visitors expressed concerns primarily related to the elementary school level, five visitors expressed concerns related to the middle school level, and eight visitors expressed concerns related to the high school level. The remaining visitors expressed concerns primarily associated with central administration offices/functions.

To promote uniformity and protect anonymity, visitor concerns are categorized into the nine uniform reporting categories suggested by the IOA, as follows: (1) Compensation and Benefits; (2) Evaluative Relationships; (3) Peer and Colleague Relationships; (4) Career Progression and Development; (5) Legal, Regulatory, Financial, and Compliance; (6) Safety, Health, and Physical Environment; (7) Services/Administrative Issues; (8) Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related; and (9) Values, Ethics, and Standards. Additionally, there are numerous subcategories associated with each category. Visitors often express concerns related to more than one category.

The Office of the Ombudsman operates in accordance with the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Code of Ethics, including:



Confidentiality: The Office of the Ombudsman “holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so” to the extent permissible by law.* The exception is where the ombudsman believes there is a risk of serious harm. The ombudsman is a mandated reporter of suspected child abuse/neglect.

Impartiality: “The Ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial.”

Independence: The Office of the Ombudsman “is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.” The Office of the Ombudsman reports to the School Board and Division Superintendent.



Visitor Concerns by Category



The most prevalent categories of concerns involved *evaluative (supervisory/employee) relationships* and *safety, health, and physical environment*. Twenty-eight visitors expressed concerns related to *evaluative (supervisory/employee) relationships*. The often-most expressed related sub-categories were: *retaliation or fear of retaliation (punitive behaviors for previous actions or comments)*; *communication* (quality and/or quantity of communication); and *departmental climate* (prevailing behaviors, norms, or attitudes within a department for which supervisor have responsibility). Twenty-eight visitors also expressed concerns related to the category of *safety, health, and physical environment* (questions, concerns, issues or inquiries about safety, health and infrastructure-related issues). The often-most expressed related sub-categories were: *safety* (physical safety, injury, medical evacuation, meeting federal and state requirements for training and equipment); and *telework* (ability to work from home or other location because of a business or personal need, e.g., in case of emergency conditions).

The next most prevalent categories of concerns involved *legal, regulatory, financial and compliance* and *values, ethics, and standards*. Fifteen visitors expressed concerns related to the category of *legal, regulatory, financial and compliance*. The often-most expressed related sub-category was *disability, temporary or permanent, reasonable accommodation* (including questions on policies for people with disabilities). Fifteen visitors also expressed concerns related to the category of *values, ethics, and standards*. The often-most expressed

related sub-category was *values and culture* (questions, concerns or issues about the values or culture of the organization).

Division-Wide Pattern of Concern

In reviewing the data collected by the Office of the Ombudsman from July 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020, employees with underlying medical conditions at increased risk for severe illness in the event they contract COVID-19 (“Tier One” employees) raised concerns about the processes employed and determinations made related to virtual assignments. Specifically, visitors expressed concerns related to the manner in which the Division engages in the interactive process to determine reasonable accommodation, the lack of virtual assignments (with visitors perceiving and sharing ways in which they could perform the responsibilities of their positions virtually but those options are rejected by their administrator and human resources), and perceived inequities between those teachers and school-based staff provided virtual assignments and those who are not offered such assignments, both within certain schools and in comparison with other schools. Many of these visitors also expressed their perceptions that the Division does not value their contributions or health.

Compilation of Concerns Related to Specific Schools/Offices

In reviewing the data collected by the Office of the Ombudsman from July 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020, compilations of concerns related to two specific schools were identified. These compilations were brought to the attention of Division leadership, while protecting the anonymity of the visitors.

Concern One involves an elementary school where employee and parent visitors expressed concerns related to school leadership, lack of clear and timely communication, and perceived lack of transparency in relation to budget and staffing decisions. Visitors also shared that they feared retaliation and/or believed they had been retaliated against as a result of expressing concerns.

Concern Two involves a middle school where employee visitors expressed concerns related to supervisory effectiveness, favoritism, and lack of clear and timely communication. Visitors also shared they feared retaliation and/or believed they had been retaliated against as a result of expressing concerns.