

# Virginia Ombudsman for Special Education

## **What is an Ombudsman?**

"Ombudsman" is a citizen representative or advocate. An ombudsman is a person who serves as a 'designated neutral' who advocates for a fair process.

## **What does an Ombudsman do?**

The ombudsman acts as a source of information and referral, aids in answering individuals' questions, and assists in the resolution of concerns and issues. The ombudsman serves as a resource to parents in non-legal special education matters.

## **Does the Ombudsman represent the parents in issues with local education agencies?**

No, the ombudsman is neither an advocate for any individual or organization but, rather, an advocate for fairness. In considering any given instance or concern, the interests and rights of all parties who might be involved are taken into account.

## **How is the ombudsman different from a mediator?**

The role of the ombudsman is an informal one in which there is a focus on listening and providing information and a discussion of issues and options, as well as referral to other services including mediation. Part of the function of the ombudsman is to encourage the parties to resolve issues at the lowest level in an organization through appropriate dispute resolution processes, by formal and informal means.

## **What are the key features of an ombudsman's position?**

The four key features of the ombudsman position are confidentiality, neutrality, informality and independence. The ombudsman does not disclose personal information, discussions and interactions; the ombudsman is an advocate for a fair process; there is no formal complaint form or documentation; and the ombudsman is independent.

## **What are the skills of the ombudsman?**

The ombudsman should be skilled in communication, judgment/decision making, problem-solving/conflict resolution, agency organization and professionalism.

## **How do I contact the ombudsman?**

Gloria Dalton, Parent Ombudsman  
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