Ombudsperson Offices in California Public School Districts

Introduction

In 2009, the ACUS (the Administrative Conference of the United States) advocated “broad U.S. use of ombuds by agencies with significant public dealings”. The ACUS was established by statute as an independent agency of the federal government in 1964, and its purpose is to promote the “improvement in the efficiency, adequacy, and fairness of procedures by which federal agencies conduct regulatory programs, administer grants and benefits, and perform related governmental functions”. Their recommendation applies not only to federal agencies but all agencies with significant public dealings. The ACUS published “The Ombudsman: A Primer for Federal Agencies” in 1991. The document is freely available on the web and is a good beginning resource for learning about the general purpose and mission of Ombuds offices.

Districts with Ombudsperson Offices


The budget for the position varies by school district and problem domain served.

Oakland Unified School District Overview
- 2013-2014 ADA 34,978 [1]
- 2013-2014 Unduplicated Student count 37,014 [1]
- 2013-2014 Foster Youth count 206 [1]

San Diego Unified School District Overview
- 2013-2014 ADA 105,528 [1]
- 2013-2014 Unduplicated Student count 82,793 [1]
- 2013-2014 Foster Youth Count 422 [1]

Fresno Unified School District Overview
- 2013-2014 ADA 65,542 [1]
- 2013-2014 Unduplicated Student count 63,099 [1]
- 2013-2014 Foster Youth count 470 [1]
Riverside Unified School District Overview
- 2013-2014 ADA 40,198 [1]
- 2013-2014 Unduplicated Student count 28,204 [1]
- 2013-2014 Foster Youth count 208 [1]

Sacramento Unified School District Overview
- 2013-2014 Unduplicated Student count 35,467 [1]
- 2013-2014 Foster Youth count 244 [1]
Cost Impact

Oakland USD has one Ombudsperson, and an Administrative Assistant. Their total compensation is about $215k/yr ($135,968.69/$80,545.54) [3]

San Diego USD has two Ombudspersons. Their total compensation is about $185k/year ($99,818.00/$83,940.00) [3]

Fresno USD has one Ombudsperson. Their total compensation is about $120k/year ($119,214.76) [3]

Riverside USD has one Ombudsperson. Their total compensation is about $94k/year ($93,335.00) [3]

Sacramento USD has three Ombudspersons. Their combined total compensation is about $150k/year ($57,571.18/$51,442.26/$45,146.16) [3]

The data on cost reduction is not readily available. Since many of the positions were originally created as result of a legal challenge, it just may simply be the case that the need to measure and document cost savings to the district in question was not part of their office mandate. Gabriel Valenzuela, Ombudsperson for Oakland USD, responded in part via email:

"I do not have any data to share on how many lawsuits have been avoided or prevented. I am sure that the work of my office has done has prevented the district from being sued. Parents and staff have the right to pursue their civil law remedies, but often times they do so because they feel ignored and/or disrespected. They often just need someone to listen to their concerns and are very reasonable. Parents/staff need someone to listen to their concerns who they feel is unbiased and is not going to take the side of the person they are complaining about.

..."

We have been tracking the total number of complaints by school, by school network and by types of complaints in order to see patterns and what kind of professional development is needed by our staff. I often see my role as breaking through the bureaucracy to help parents/staff get the information and/or services they need.

However, I do believe having an Ombudsperson at the district office who can help problem solve parent's and employee's concerns is very useful. My office helps to de-
escalate constituent concerns and we serve as a neutral party. In this role, you need to be familiar with district policies and procedures."

History of Office

The history of the position varies by district.

Oakland USD's Ombudsperson office was originally created as part of a legal settlement with the English Learner community in Oakland. Since its creation, it has expanded to include district complaints in other problem domains, and is now also the Title IX Coordinator and the Williams Complaint Officer for the district, as well as being responsible for Customer Service Training for district staff. The Oakland USD Ombuds office is a classified position and it reports to the Superintendent. [4]

San Diego's Ombudsperson office was also created as part of a response to a legal challenge, in this case from the Special Education community. The San Diego Unified School District web site lists the two Ombudsperson offices as part of the Special Education branch of the district organization chart. They report to the Deputy Superintendent of Academics, and they appear to cover only Special Education-related community complaint issues. [5] [6]

Fresno USD's Ombudsperson office was originally also under the Special Education branch of the organizational chart. In 2005, the position was reported as to be eliminated from that branch of the organization as part of an institutional reorganization. Board members expressed strong support for the office, and the Superintendent clarified in a following meeting that the position was not being eliminated entirely, but moved out of the Special Ed department to report directly to the Superintendent. The position was then occupied as a part-time position which was expanded to full-time. [7] [8] [9]

Riverside USD's Ombudsperson office was established in 2013. Information about the decision leading up to the creation of the position is not readily accessible via the RUSD web site nor is generally reported upon in the Riverside Examiner.

Sacramento USD's Ombudsperson office date of establishment is difficult to ascertain via their district web site. The Ombuds officers have been contacted via email but as of this date have not responded. Again, information about this particular office is not generally reported on in the Sacramento Bee.

Other General Reading:
The following documents related to Ombuds offices and are suggested further reading. Electronic copies can be made available to the Board members or the district administration.

Since the position of the Ombudsman was originally from a European perspective, this includes some articles specific to the European Union or member countries, but the concepts generalize to the United States as well.

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Abraham, Ann "Good Administration: Why We Need It More Than Ever", The Political Quarterly, Vol 80, No 1, Jan-Mar 2009


Gadlin, Howard, "In Practice: The Many, Different, and Complex Roles Played by Ombudsmen in Dispute Resolution", Negotiation Journal, Vol 16, No 1, Jan 2000


Gwyn, William, "The Ombudsman in Britain: A Qualified Success in Government Reform", Public Administration, Vol 60, Summer 1982

Hazell, Robert, "Freedom of Information: The Implications for the Ombudsman", Public Administration, Vol 73, Summer 1995


Murphy, John, "Children in Need: The Limits of Local Authority Accountability", Legal Studies, Vol 23, No 1, Mar 2003


Sabine, Carl "Toward a Definition and Taxonomy of Public Sector Ombudsmen", Canadian Public Administration, Vol 55, No 2, Jun 2012

Wagner, Marsha "The Organizational Ombudsman as Change Agent", Negotiation Journal, Vol 16, No 1, Jan 2000

Footnotes


[3] Total Compensation figures from transparentcalifornia.org


The Riverside position was established in 2013 [6]