

Office of the Ombuds

2023-24 Annual Report

with Quarter 4 Summary





History of the Office of the Ombuds

In July 2018, the Office of the Family and Student Ombudsman began its work with the charge of providing “an independent, confidential resource for students, families, and community members, offering informal help to resolve concerns, problems, complaints, and other student-related issues.”

The Office of the Family and Student Ombudsman was established under the principles of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA):

- Confidentiality
- Impartiality
- Independence
- Informality

In August 2019, the Office of the Family and Student Ombudsman expanded its existing staff to include an Assistant Ombudsman for Special Education. The role of the Assistant Ombudsman for Special Education is to serve as a resource, providing information and support to parents and students regarding special education services. The goal is to provide transparency and understanding to families so that children with special needs will receive all the services and supports required to equitably access public education.

In October 2019, the Office of the Family and Student Ombudsman was tasked with also providing support to FCPS employees. As a result, the name of the office was changed to the Office of the Ombudsman. In collaboration with FCPS Leadership and Division Counsel, practices were established to ensure alignment with the IOA principles of Confidentiality, Independence, Impartiality, and Informality. Employees who contact the office are informed it offers confidential support to all staff. Staff within the office do not serve as agents of notice for employee concerns. Exceptions to confidentiality include cases of imminent harm to any individual, suspected child abuse and neglect, and Title IX allegations.

The term “Visitor” is generally accepted to describe those who engage the services of an ombuds. Within the FCPS community, Visitors include parents, students, community members, and staff who contact the office. The term “Contact” refers to a request for support received via letter, email, phone call, text, portal/”Let’s Talk submissions, and in-person requests.

Our Mission and Vision

The Office of the Ombuds is committed to supporting the mission of Fairfax County Public Schools in which all students are inspired and empowered to meet high academic standards, lead healthy, ethical lives, and be responsible and innovative global citizens.

The Office of the Ombuds works to serve students, families, employees, and community members by providing information about resources and how to access them, understanding concerns and providing support to resolve them.

School Year 2023-24 Cumulative Report A Year in Review

The 2023-24 school year was dynamic and fruitful for staff within the Office of the Ombuds. Members served a total of 840 visitors, addressing questions and concerns regarding a myriad of issues. In conjunction with this core work, the office engaged in additional activities meant to enhance awareness among stakeholders and promote an understanding of available supports and services.

This year's highlights include:

- Webpage re-design
- Addition of a text line
- Increase in the number of student-focused outreach events
- Increase in the number of in-person and virtual meetings (*One possible reason for this increase was the initiation of more explicit, consistent invitations for in-person meetings.*)
- Increase in the number of informal employee peer mediation requests. (*One possible reason for this increase was a greater emphasis on PR/outreach about the availability of this service.*)
- Increase in the number of informal employee peer mediations.
 - The Office of the Ombuds staff facilitated 9 such meetings

Outreach Activities

In addition to ongoing support of visitors, one of the major duties of the Office of the Ombuds continues to be outreach. Listed below are activities/events in which staff participated:

- Designed and incorporated usage of various outreach materials
 - One-page flyers
 - Student-focused one-page flyers
 - Stationery
 - Notepads
- Distribution of bags of pretzels to employees
- Shared [VA Proclamation of Ombuds Day](#)
- Manned a table at the following community events:
 - Mothers of Muslims Network (MOM) Family Summer Market Community Event
 - Great Beginnings (for teachers new to FCPS)
 - Sully Community Days
 - FCPS College Fair
 - Dyslexia Open House
 - Woodlawn Garden Apartments Community Meeting to Address Opioid Crisis
 - FCPS Immunization Clinic
- Manned a table at the following FCPS sponsored events:
 - Gatehouse Employee Summer Kickoff
 - Five School/Community Activities
 - Ten Superintendent Community Conversations
 - Five Superintendent Employee Conversations
 - Three Superintendent Family Vision Groups
- Presented to the following groups:
 - Fairfax County Department of Family Services' Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Division
 - FCPS Employee Wellness Office
 - Westfields (Military Connected) Spouses' Group
 - HS- Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) Club
 - Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee
 - *Supporting the Mission Cohort*

Outreach materials for the Office of the Ombuds include a [webpage](#) and brochures in English, Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Korean, Spanish, Urdu, and Vietnamese.

The Office of the Ombuds encourages interested parties to contact the office to schedule an ombuds presentation or manning of a resource table. Such events may be scheduled for schools, civic/homeowners associations, places of worships, etc.

Professional Development

Office staff participated in professional development activities including:

- Obtaining certification as [Certified Organizational Ombuds Practitioner \(CO-OP\)](#)
 - Assistant Ombuds for Special Education
- International Ombuds Association (IOA) in-person [annual conference](#) (March 2024)
- Virtual webinars offered by IOA

Professional Networking and Support

To ensure adherence to best practices, the office—one of approximately 40 K-12 Ombuds offices nationwide—fosters collaborative relationships with other ombuds offices. This includes close cooperation with neighboring districts: Prince William, Loudoun, and Frederick County (Maryland) Public Schools.

Additionally, staff members participate in:

- Monthly meetings with K-12 ombuds, nationwide
- Monthly meetings with fellow ombuds practitioners (Mid-Atlantic Ombuds Network)
- Periodic meetings with University Ombuds (of Virginia and Maryland)
- Collaborations with practitioners seeking to open offices both locally and nationally

Complementing these activities, Ombuds Office staff engaged in:

Workgroups/Committees

- [Family Advocacy Handbook](#)
- AI Framework Advisory Team
- Family Engagement Survey Project Team
- Outstanding Employee Chief Experience and Engagement Office liaison
- Individual Excellence Award Screen Committee
- Willow Oaks Caring Culture Committee (C3)
- [Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities \(ACSD\)](#) (FCPS liaison)
- FCPS Equity Team/Lead

Collaborations with FCPS Offices

- Chief Equity Office
- Department of Special Services
- Division Counsel
- Employee Wellness Team
- Departments within Chief Experience and Engagement Office
 - Family and School Partnerships
 - Educate Fairfax
 - Strategic Communications
 - Community Relations

The Office of the Ombuds received contacts by phone, email, the FCPS District Communication/"Let's Talk" Portal, text communication as well as walk-ins. The typical procedure includes a call, text or email to schedule a consultation with the Ombuds or the Assistant Ombuds. Consultations are scheduled at the visitor's convenience and are offered by phone, virtual or in person at the Willow Oaks Administrative Center (or at a location convenient to the visitor). At the onset of the consultation, the ombuds share their role and the principles of the office: Confidentiality, Independence, Impartiality, and Informality.

The consultation frequently involves an explanation of the question or concern by the visitor, clarifying questions by the ombuds, and an identification of the client's desired outcomes. Upon establishing the desired outcomes, the ombuds works to provide information and possible next steps. These next steps may include offering the visitor access to regulations, links, and staff, or communicating with staff on behalf of the stakeholder. The sharing of information is limited to the permission granted by the visitor. Follow up conversations may be scheduled at the request and convenience of the client. Throughout the process, translation services are offered to visitors who may feel more comfortable communicating in a language other than English.

Due to the confidentiality offered to visitors, only basic trend data is collected. Data includes Contact Method, Date, Region, School Level, Topic, and for employees, job category. Data is presented quarterly through the Board Briefings and at the end of the year through an annual report.

During SY 2023-24, Office of the Ombuds received a **total of 840 cases.**

Number of Contacts per Year by Month

	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	Total
2018-19	N/A	25	37	33	30	30	26	33	54	54	33	19	374
2019-20	16	35	37	66	62	37	62	67	44	30	35	32	523
2020-21	47	80	59	46	46	37	48	87	170	59	71	51	801
2021-22	36	117	105	101	67	63	101	71	88	63	78	58	948
2022-23	24	67	61	68	58	50	62	87	85	61	113	91	827
2023-24	23	78	70	93	73	54	69	93	69	73	86	59	840

The chart above details the total number of contacts by month for SY 2018-19 through SY 2023-24. There were 13 more contacts this year compared to SY 2022-23 (about a 1.6% increase). This is down from the all-time high noted in SY 2021-22. During that year, the Office of the Ombuds received a total of 276 contacts related to COVID-19 from parents, students, employees and community members. Throughout the prior year (SY 2020-21), cases related to COVID-19 and unemployment (largely connected to COVID-19 concerns) totaled 283. During the current school year of 2023-24, there were no calls directly related to COVID-19.

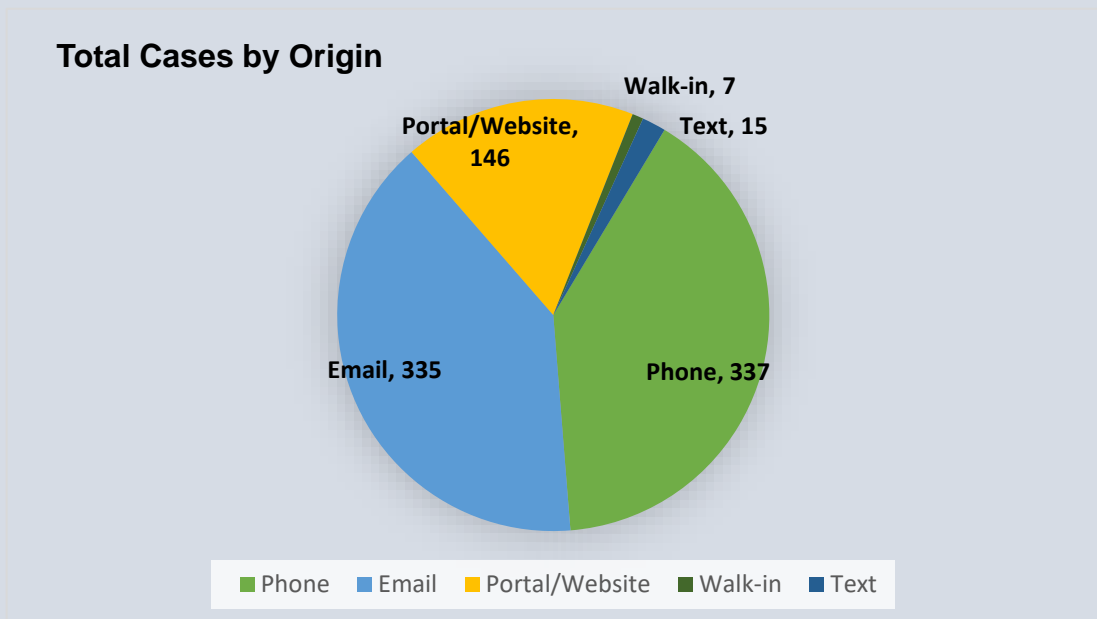
Trend details are included in the section titled *Common Themes* on the following pages.

**Office of the Ombuds
Annual Report
July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024**

Office Data

Total Number of Cases for SY 2023-24: 840

The total number of contacts received by the Office of the Ombuds was 840. The information below is a breakdown of cases, by origin.



This graph indicates the method of initial contact with the Ombuds office. A total of 337 contacts were initiated by phone, 335 by email, 146 via the portal/webpage, 15 by text* and 7 were walk-ins.

** The office began receiving inquiries by text during Quarter 3.*

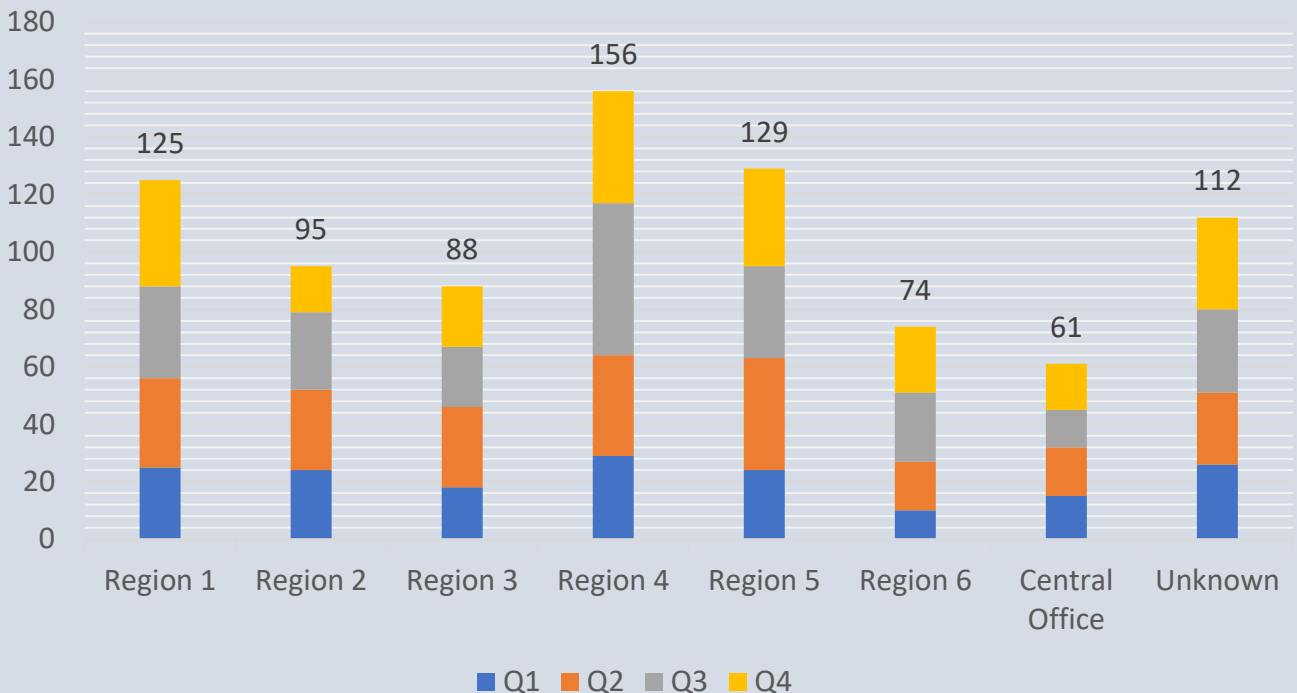
Office of the Ombuds Annual Report July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024

Office Data

Total Number of Cases for SY 2023-24: 840

The total number of contacts received by the Office of the Ombuds was 840. The information below is a breakdown of cases by Region.

Total Cases by Region



The chart above highlights the region in which the Visitor resides or works. Cases are noted as “Unknown” if the client does not provide the information, the school is not assigned to a Region (e.g., Thomas Jefferson HSS&T) or the request is not specific to a Region (e.g., a community member requests information about FCPS policies).

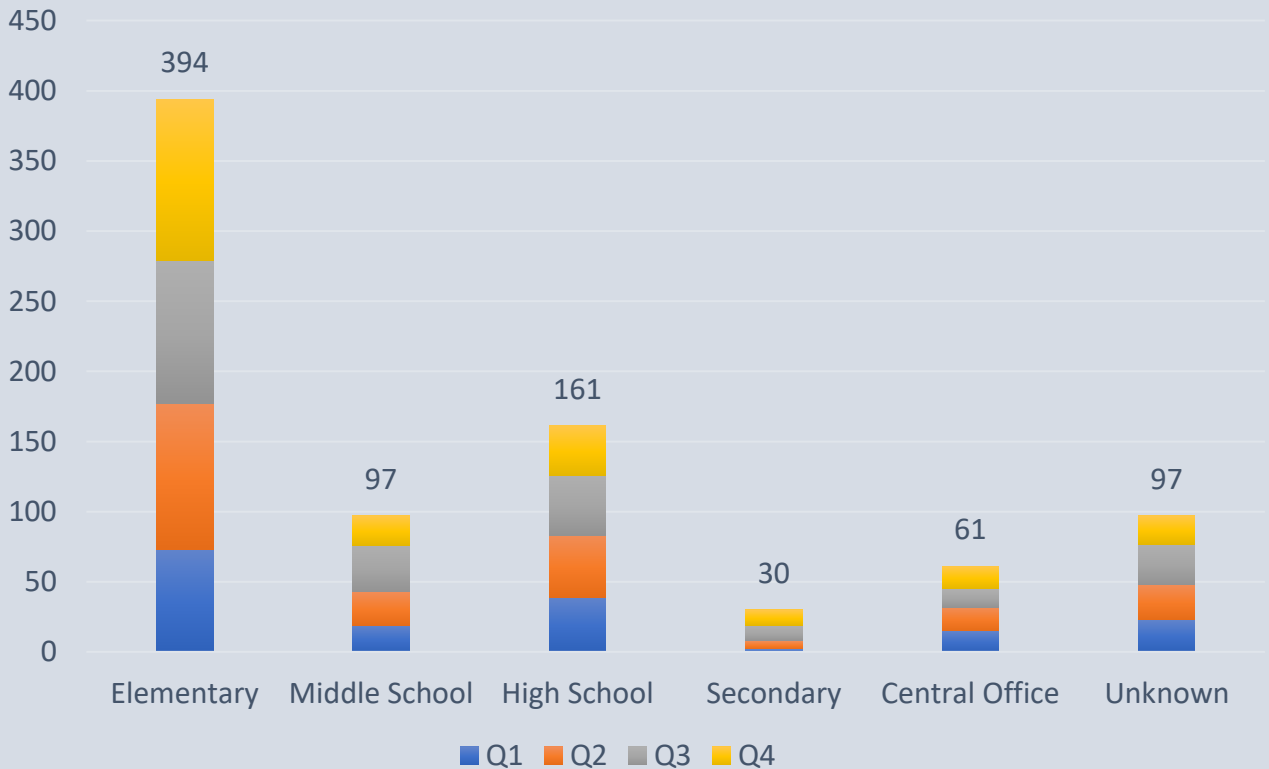
Office of the Ombuds Annual Report July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024

Office Data

Total Number of Cases for SY 2023-24: 840

The total number of contacts received by the Office of the Ombuds was 840. The information below is a breakdown of cases, by grade level.

Cases by Grade Level



As noted above, most contacts were related to issues at the elementary level.

Again, cases are noted as “Unknown” if the client does not provide the information, the school is not assigned to a region (e.g., Thomas Jefferson HSS&T) or the request is not specific to a region (e.g., a community member requests information about FCPS policies).

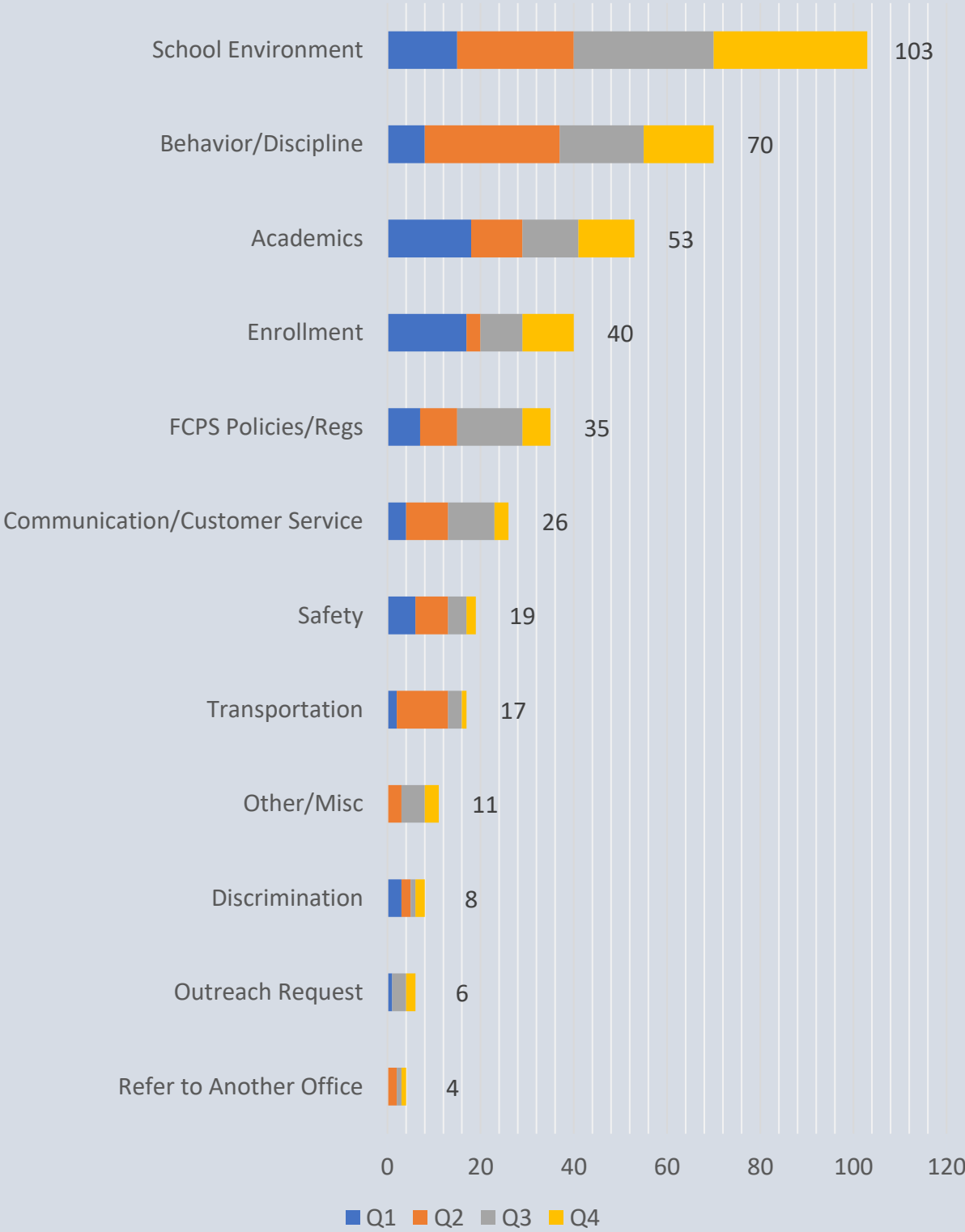
Common Themes

It is important to note the difficulty in classifying contacts under one category, as often, more than one topic may be shared in a single contact. As trend data is collected, it is office practice to identify the primary topic of concern. For example, a parent may contact our office to request assistance resolving their concern over the safety of a bus stop. While their student may have an IEP, their contact is primarily identified as transportation. In contrast, if the parent was interested in obtaining behavioral support for their child during the bus ride, this would be identified as a Special Education issue.

In this report, there is focus on three categories of contacts: **General**, contacts initiated by parents, students, or community members about any topic except Special Education; **Special Education**, those initiated by parents, students, or community members which focus primarily on the topic of Special Education; and **Employees**: those contacts initiated by FCPS employees involving any topic.

Across all categories, when a significant number of contacts were received and noted as a pattern or “trend”, this information was shared with applicable department or county leadership. To maintain the anonymity of clients, while sharing, no identifiable information is given.

General Cases by Category SY 2023-24



Total: 392

General Category Cases

Of the 840 cases received during the 2023-24 school year, 392 (46.7%) were comprised of parents, students and community members on a variety of topics excluding special education. The most numerous were found to be School Environment, Behavior/Discipline and Academics.

School Environment

The office received 103 (26.3%) contacts characterized as School Environment. Topics that fell within this category included communication concerns and lack of trust in school staff, allegations of staff mistreating family/students, and complaints of a bullying culture within the school. Issues of staff behavior included concerns about a wide range of employees, including administration (principals and assistant principals), teachers, counselors, front office staff, custodians, and coaches. Visitors were provided a variety of options (both informal and formal) to address their concerns. These options might include, depending upon the specific situation, suggesting that the visitor could communicate their challenges directly with the principal or supervisor, communicating with the Region administrators, and/or assistance from the ombuds to elevate a concern anonymously. When applicable, option(s) for making a formal complaint might be discussed. Informational resources might be provided to the visitor to assist with their questions and concerns. Additionally, the ombuds often coached visitors in ways to most effectively communicate their concerns to appropriate parties.

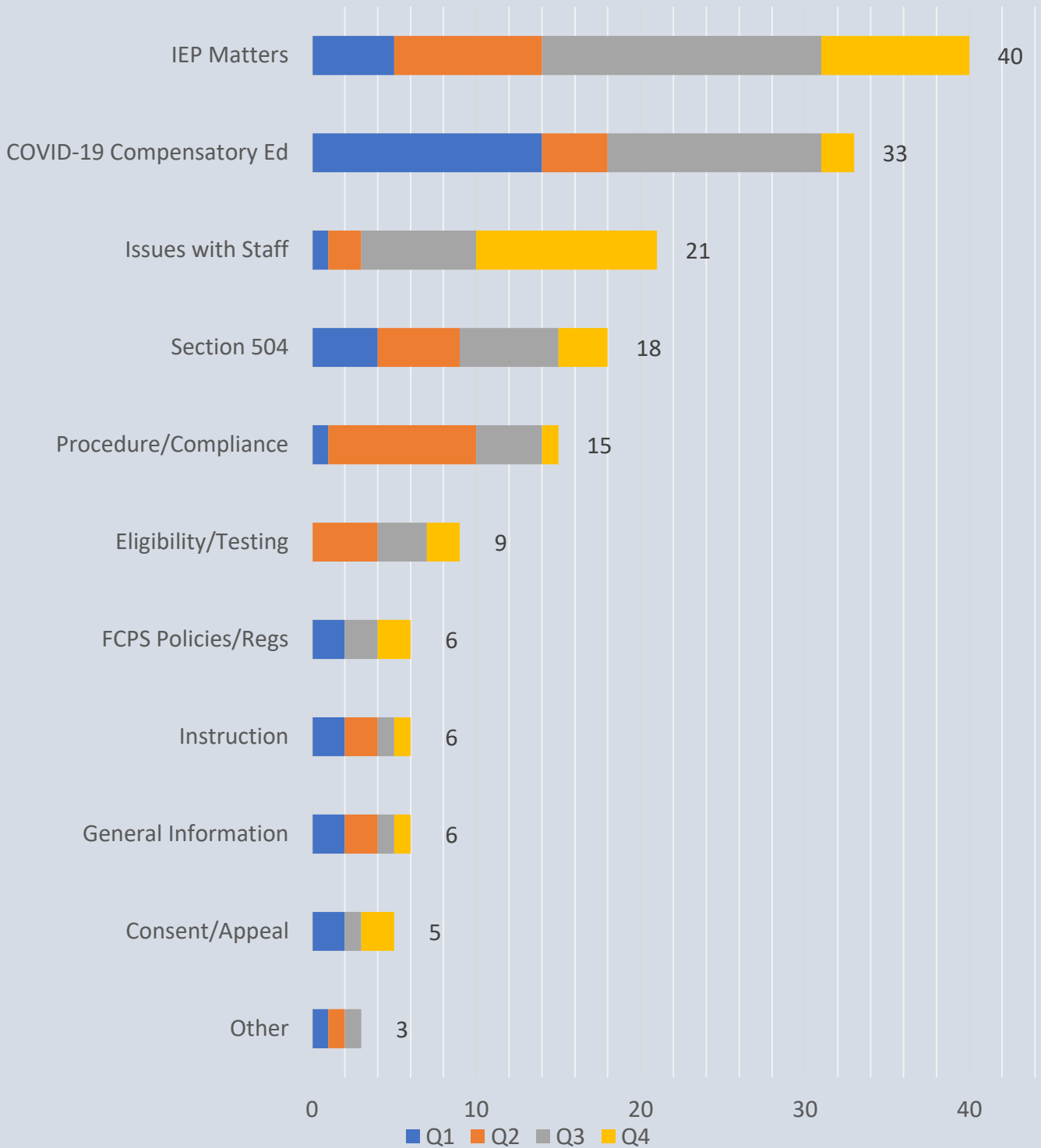
Behavior/Discipline

Staff recorded 70 (17.9%) contacts within this area. Concerns in the Behavior/Discipline category include complaints of students being bullied, along with concerns about the adequacy of bullying investigations and a perception of lack of follow-through, once an investigation was completed. It was not uncommon for parents to cite their frustration about their child being bullied and feel as though not enough was being done to address the situation. Some parents shared their concern about behavioral allegations against their child that they believed were unfounded. Again, both informal and formal options for redress were discussed with visitors for their awareness. Aspects of appropriate bullying investigations and responses, as stated in policy and included in the [Student Rights and Responsibilities](#) booklet, were also among the resources discussed with visitors.

Academics

Within the Academics section, 53 (13.5%) inquires were noted. Here, visitor issues included grading implementation and fairness, a desire to qualify for more advanced coursework/AAP, issues with transferring or switching classes or teachers, and the provision of disability-related accommodations as this applied to student achievement. In some cases, the ombuds was able to connect a visitor with an existing policy; in other cases, a visitor benefitted from knowing more about established procedures and key personnel to address their concerns.

Special Education Cases by Category SY 2023-24



Total 162

Special Education Category Cases

Of the 840 cases received during the 2023-24 school year, 162 (19.3%) were related to special education or Section 504 matters. The topics receiving the most contacts included: IEP Matters, COVID-19 Compensatory Education, and Issues with Staff.

IEP Matters

Forty visitors (24.7%) had questions and concerns about their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Parents and guardians expressed a variety of concerns about the IEP process, including questions about services and placement proposals, queries about how their child's disability-related needs were being supported during a suspension, mental health issues and school engagement, and how the IEP services and accommodations might be adjusted to better support children experiencing bullying and other types of traumatic situations. Within some of the discussions related to IEP matters, questions were posed regarding twice exceptional (2E) concerns, communication issues, school refusal, and data collection. The ombuds were able to provide options, resources, and coaching assistance to visitors regarding their IEP concerns.

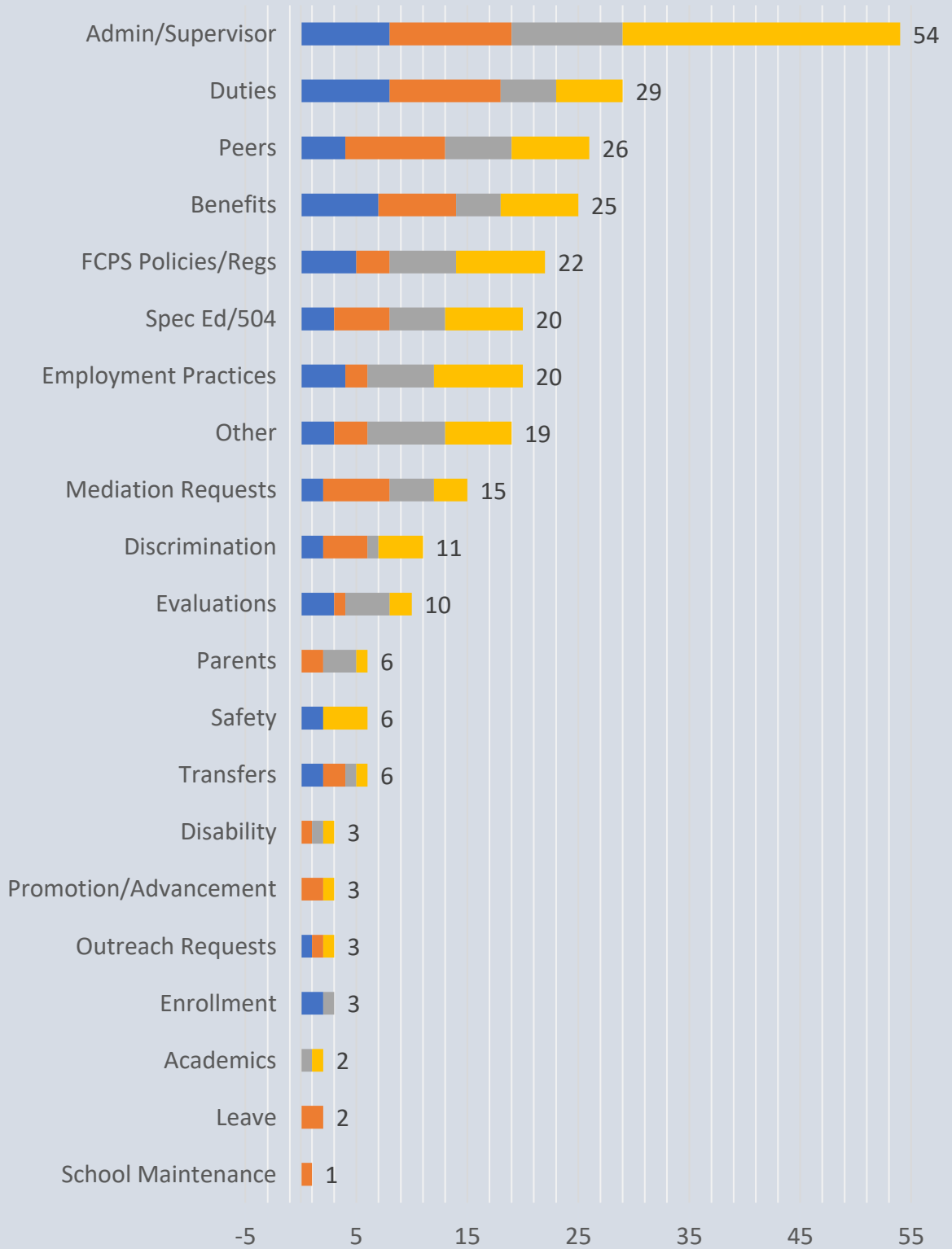
COVID-19 Compensatory Education

Thirty-three visitors (20.4%) shared their concerns regarding the C-19 compensatory education process. Unlike questions posed by visitors during the 2022-23 school year, in which the primary focus was on the provision of compensatory education services, virtually all this year's C-19 compensatory education concerns centered on the provision of compensatory education reimbursement to families who had purchased services for their children with disabilities during the pandemic period. Parents typically were extremely frustrated with the lack of clear, timely communication from central office staff regarding the status of their reimbursement. Many families expressed disappointment that they had not received the promised reimbursement of funds even many months after the submission of paperwork from the IEP/Section 504 Plan team to central office. For those visitors who gave permission to share their identity, the ombuds office was able to elevate concerns to leadership to help facilitate appropriate communication/action.

Issues with Staff

Here, 21 visitors (13%) relayed concerns about school staff's behavior toward their children with disabilities. Among the concerns shared by parents and guardians include worries that teachers were unable to keep their child safe, issues related to how staff disciplined their child, and other situations related to communication and actions taken by staff in response to their child's behavior. Other times parents shared their belief that school or central office-based staff served as "gate-keepers" (keeping their child from receiving needed supports and/or services). Ombuds discussed options available to the caregiver (including reaching out to the supervisor of the employee or sharing Due Process processes).

Employee Cases by Category SY 2023-24



Total: 286

Employee Cases Category

Of the 840 cases received during the 2023-24 school year, 286 (34%) were received from employees regarding a myriad of topics. The most numerous topics were Administrators/Supervisors, Duties, Peers and Benefits.

Admin/Supervisor

Among the 286 employee contacts received, 54 (18.9%) specifically detailed problems with an administrator or supervisor. Common complaints centered around unprofessional communication, concerns over the supervisor's judgment, instances of favoritism, and the creation of a hostile work environment. Some employees also reported being bullied by their supervisor or experiencing a lack of response when addressing these concerns with management. Employees expressed significant frustration and disappointment over the apparent absence of accountability for superiors exhibiting such negative behaviors.

Duties

Twenty-nine individuals (10.1%) raised concerns about their job descriptions and expectations. These employees reported being assigned tasks that fell outside the scope of their defined job roles (e.g., instructional assistants asked to serve as teachers; class monitors expected to cover classes for an extended time). Others shared concerns of being expected to work beyond their allotted contracted days. Central office staffers were dismayed by the requirement to return to schools (due to unfilled teacher positions).

Peers

Twenty-six (9.1%) employees contacted the office regarding challenges they had with co-workers. These concerns ranged from disagreements and mistreatment, to hurtful comments and remarks. Some shared that colleagues were seeking inappropriate relationships, while others requested to know options that may be available when their supervisors were "friends" with the perpetrator(s). Instructors shared they have difficulties with staff, with whom they are expected to co-teach, or interface directly. Depending on the situation and desired outcome, the ombuds may offer to coach the client on ways to more effectively communicate with the co-worker and reminded them of the option of mediation.

Benefits

Twenty-five employees (8.7%) reached out regarding Benefits. Many had questions regarding various types of leave: short/long-term disability, sick leave, annual leave. Some were perplexed why their leave was not approved or requested assistance on how to apply for certain benefits. Others, working as hourly employees for many years, shared frustrations of not accruing benefits. Coverage offered (or not offered) by Cigna was also a topic visitors raised.

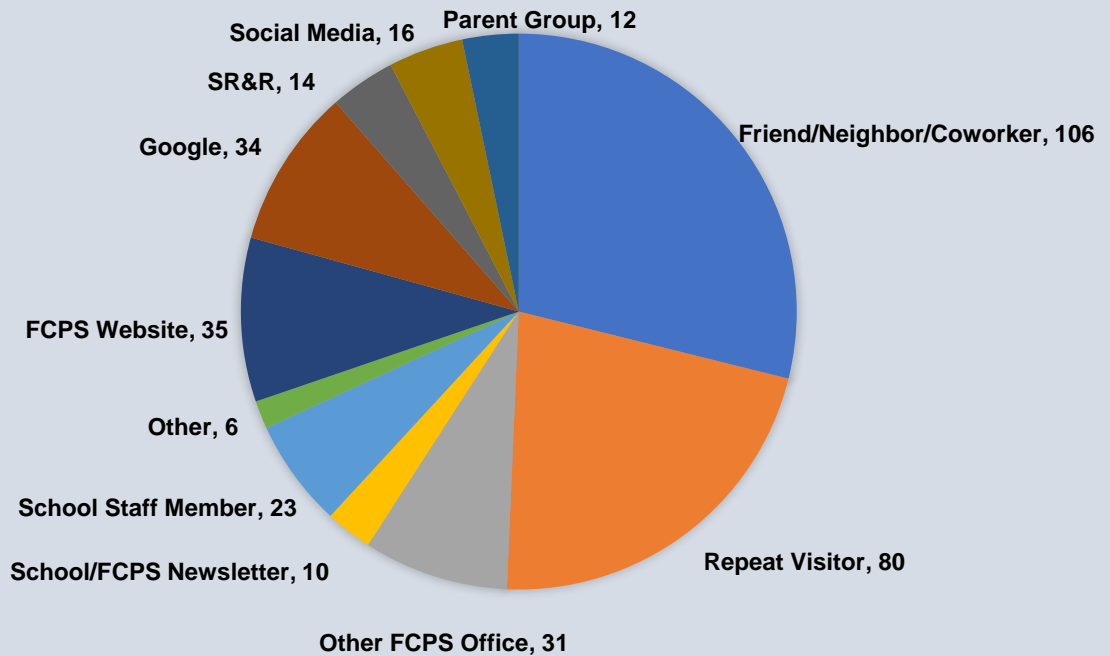
Employee Category Case Outcomes

In response to employee trends, the Office of the Ombuds regularly communicated with staff across various departments and locations, including but not limited to Human Resources, Benefits, the Chief Experience and Engagement Office, Region Offices, Special Services, as well as program and school administrators. When appropriate and with necessary permissions, Region Leadership was informed of relevant matters within their assigned schools.

Mediation

Staff within Office of the Ombuds provided mediation support to 9 groups/pairs of employees at 7 schools/offices.

The graph below reflects responses of visitors asked, “How did you hear about our office?”.



REFERRAL SOURCE

Of the Visitors polled, the referral sources were:

Friend/Neighbor/Coworker	28.90%
Repeat Visitor	21.80%
County Webpage	9.50%
Google	9.30%
Other FCPS Office	8.40%
School Staff	6.30%
Social Media	4.40%
SR&R	3.80%
Parent Groups	3.30%
FCPS/School Newsletters	2.70%
Other	1.60%

2023-2024 Quarter 4 Summary April 1 – June 30, 2024

Quarter 4 Summary

As noted in the title, this page shares data on contacts received by the Office of the Ombuds from April 1, 2024, through June 30, 2024.

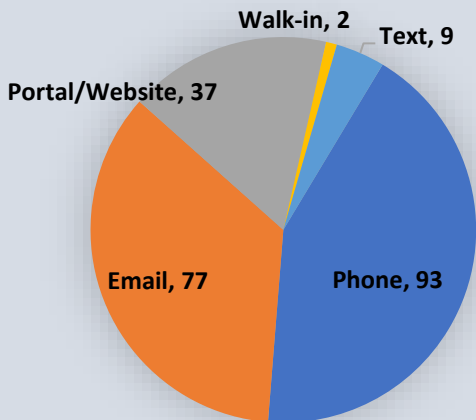
Office Data

Total Number of Cases for Quarter 4: 218

Month	April 2024	May 2024	June 2024
Cases	73	86	59

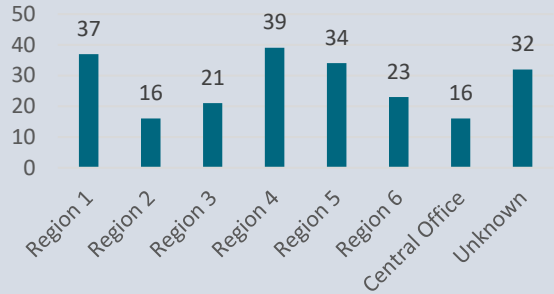
As the above table reflects, the Office of the Ombuds received 218 cases during Quarter 4 of SY 2023-24: 73 inquiries during the month of April, 86 in May and 59 in June.

Total Cases by Origin



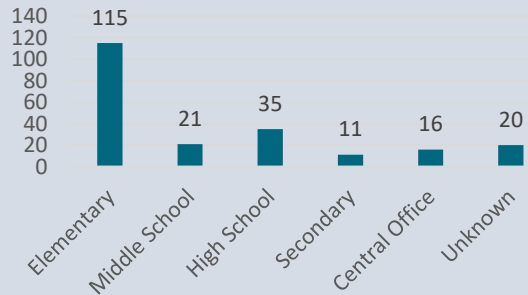
This graph indicates the method of initial contact with the Ombuds office. 93 contacts were initiated by phone, 37 via the portal on our webpage, 77 by email, 9 via text and 2 were walk-ins.

Total Cases by Region



The graph above highlights the Region in which the client resides or works. *

Cases by Grade Level



As noted above, most contacts were related to issues at the elementary level.*

*Cases are noted as “Unknown” if the Visitor does not provide the information, the school is not assigned to a Region (e.g., Thomas Jefferson HSS&T) or the request is not specific to a Region (e.g., a community member requests information about FCPS policies).

Every aspect of the conversation was extremely helpful, even therapeutic. ... I really appreciated being able to talk to someone who was actively listening ... It was also helpful to learn some new strategies for moving past this situation and for alternatives to explore that better serve my professional strengths. Thank you!

Thank you for the work you do. I felt heard and valued. It was a genuine relief to be able to tell my story and ask questions in a confidential space.

Testimonials

I didn't even know this office existed before I was told about it from another parent. What an incredible resource and wealth of information your office and staff have!

Thank you for the professional and empathic support. I appreciated the preparedness and information about the organization that helped me understand more about the situation. The suggestions given were relevant and would help me to continue to advocate for myself and others in FCPS that may be facing the same situation.

I tell other FCPS employees to contact your office when they are having difficulties.

My overall impression of the Office of Ombuds is very positive. Each of my interactions with Ombuds staff, from intake through conversations with senior Ombuds personnel were very professional and productive. All around great listeners who took the time to really understand and validate my concerns before providing reasonable options to move forward.

Look forward to seeing the Office of the Ombuds being more discovered by FCPS employees. As the #1 employer in Virginia, this office and concept is a great one!

[The ombuds] was extremely responsive and helpful. After multiple emails to other departments without a response, it was wonderful to have someone follow up with me so quickly. Her assistance was invaluable.