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May 3, 2021

Honorable Chair and Education and Cultural Affairs Committee Members:

I am Carrie Basas, the Director of Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO). We support LD 1512. The bill ensures that families, students, and educators know where to go for support and avoid costly, disruptive formal processes that take the focus away from student-centered problem-solving. We are excited to see Maine make this move, as other states and districts have established education and other kinds of ombuds offices to ensure equitable, fair government.

OEO was the first statewide education ombuds in the nation. Founded by the Washington State legislature in 2006, we were established from needs identified in statewide surveys and focus groups of the most marginalized families and students in Washington. Those efforts, coordinated by our state's race and ethnicity commissions, identified that families and students needed an impartial, confidential, and independent resource that would help them navigate complex education processes and promote trusting relationships with families and schools. When problems arose in schools, they often felt that their concerns were dismissed or that if they raised them, they would face retaliation.

The heart of our work is building family engagement capacities while also resolving individual concerns—from bullying to graduation—collaboratively. Relationships are key. We partner with districts, educators, families, community leaders, students, and others to ensure education equity in our school systems. OEO works to close opportunity gaps by focusing on three areas: informal conflict resolution, outreach and training about K-12 and transition issues, and policy leadership. Situated under the Governor's Office, but operating independently as a small cabinet agency, we look at individual issues, empower families and students with information about how schools work, bring family and student voice to policymaking, and share annual recommendations with the legislature.

Briefly, here are our three areas of work:

Conflict resolution: We are a team of 8 employees working statewide. We receive as many as 1400 concerns each year, from educators to families, community health professionals to students. The top concerns are generally related to special education, academic progress, attendance/truancy, discipline, and bullying. More than half of the calls we receive each year involve students who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and/or students with disabilities. The need for our services grows, especially during this time of COVID where, with more than 295 locally controlled school districts, families encounter a web of services and points of confusion about school.

The satisfaction rates for our supports is very high—with more than 90% of people feeling like our intervention made a difference. We most often hear that OEO listens and that it is a rare offering in state and local systems. When we designed our strategic plan with communities last year, we heard that we could most improve our services by raising awareness about our office. Educators had similar feedback, which demonstrates the relationship-building that is ongoing between OEO and schools, too.

Training and Outreach: OEO is often asked to present workshops or create materials related to common concerns in the school system—ranging from supports for homeless students to inclusion for students with disabilities. Last year, through combination of in-person relationship-building and online



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workshops (during COVID), we were able to expand our outreach to more than 170,000 people. As Washington becomes a more diverse state with increasing refugee and immigrant families, families for whom English is not a first language, and families of color and Native families who have experienced historical marginalization in education, we respond to what we hear from communities through our casework, listening sessions, community partnerships, and interagency collaborations. We have also established partnerships with organizations supporting homeless students, students in foster and kinship care, incarcerated parents, and students in the juvenile justice system.

Policy Leadership: OEO serves on a range of policy committees from the state's language access workgroup to the ongoing educational opportunity gap committee. OEO has become a trusted state agency partner and expert in family engagement that is consulted often by our legislature (across parties), State Board of Education, and independently elected Superintendent of Public Instruction. We see our policy leadership as both bringing family and student perspectives to policy decisions, while also making policy and advocacy accessible to communities. Our annual report and recommendations track the data we collect and our engagement with community partners. We identify opportunities to align our work with state priorities and advocate for reforms that ensure greater student engagement and success.

Thank you for the opportunity to support this bill. We see great value in being proactive about education equity and justice. If I can answer questions or provide information, please feel free to reach out to me at 206-430-0753 or carrie.basas@gov.wa.gov. We would be delighted to connect with your new ombuds, should you pass this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carrie Basas'.

Carrie Basas, J.D., M.Ed.

Director, Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds