

Meet One of Our Ombudsmen: Steve Zuber

Steve Zuber has been a teacher everyday for the past 44 years. For Zuber, being a teacher doesn't just mean educating students in English, psychology and history (which he did for 10 years), it also means creating a safe environment where students can focus on learning. He has always been passionate about helping students and improving the education system.

"I knew I wanted to be a teacher since I was a little kid," said Zuber. "It wasn't a big, tough decision for me. That's what I had planned to do all along."

He has spent 30 years in the public school system, 10 years working at Casey Family Programs and three years at The Office of The Education Ombudsman (OEO). At OEO, he has worked with almost 300 hundred families, mediating conflicts, disputes and problems with the public school district.

Zuber first started his career in education as a high school teacher in Yakima. It was then that he learned each child and family had their own needs, concerns and worries.

"Everyone had their individual story to tell and that led me into being a high school counselor," said Zuber. "I was lucky, I spent most of my time actually helping kids, instead of changing schedules. I was still a teacher everyday."

After twenty years of counseling, Zuber joined Casey Family Programs, the nation's largest operating foundation focused entirely on improving the foster care system. He worked on keeping foster children in school and helping them plan for post-high school life. He also worked extensively with families and the school system, which inspired him to become an Education Ombudsman.

"I felt like becoming an Ombudsman was the next step in my progression," said Zuber.

As an Education Ombudsman, Zuber resolves complaints from parents against school districts from an impartial perspective. He focuses on the best interest and academic needs of the student involved.

Zuber quickly found himself specializing in resolving issues focused on bullying.

"I don't know how it happened, but it was a natural fit," said Zuber.

In addition to helping students feel safe at school, Zuber has been part of a group that sponsors statewide conferences on bullying for school staff. He also took part in planning and co-hosting the international bullying conference last fall, held by the International Bullying Prevention Association.

Zuber is most proud of his work on bullying legislation and improving the bullying model policy and procedure.

"I am very hopeful that my being part of a group here will lead to a safe environment, where school is a secure place allowed to concentrate on teaching," said Zuber.

Although he has helped many families overcome bullying problems, Zuber doesn't think bullying will ever stop. He says we can prevent it from becoming too intense, but we can never fully get rid of it. And, with the popularity of social media sites and the Internet, students are bullied off campus.

Zuber says that bullying is drawing more attention now because it is being transformed. There used to be face-to-face bullying, verbal and sometimes physical

bullying, where a student knew who the bully was. Now, it is done electronically, on Facebook or through texting. It has become a faceless type of bullying.

“You used to be able to change your environment to avoid the bully. Now, you can’t get away from it,” said Zuber.

Although bullying may not be preventable, he does have some recommendations to decrease its prevalence. First, Zuber says that he would like to see funds provided to thoroughly train staff and parents in recognizing and responding to bullying. Students also need to be trained. The role of a bystander is extremely important to prevent bullying.

Secondly, he believes the state needs to better clarify the role of a school during off campus hours, like the weekend, when electronic bullying occurs. State law says that if something impacts education, the school needs to get involved. Zuber says there needs to be greater clarity for school districts.

“Each new call is like a puzzle and the Ombudsman tries to put the pieces together. The satisfaction comes when we find the missing piece of the puzzle, the resolution between the family and the school district,” said Zuber.

Regardless of what Zuber is doing, he is always helping others.

“I will continue to be of service to others. My role as an Ombudsman carries over to every part of my life,” he said.

Zuber is grateful to everyone who has shaped his experience as an Ombudsman:

“Thank you to the parents. I appreciate all the families I work with and thank you for trusting me. Thank you to the school officials who let me work with them in seeking resolutions. And thank you to my coworkers; I have not worked with a finer group of dedicated and knowledgeable people.”