



**POLICY TITLE:**

**Complaints Policy**

DATE OF IMPLEMENTATION:

DECEMBER 2005

DATE TO BE REVIEWED:

OCTOBER 2016

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**Purpose of the Policy**

The purpose of the Complaints Policy is to outline procedures for dealing with parental and/or students' complaints as quickly as possible after they arise.

**Scope**

This policy applies to employees, volunteers, parents/carers/, students and members of the public, and describes the step by step procedures to follow upon receiving a complaint.

**Responsibility**

Principal

**Point of Contact**

Assistant Principal

**Definitions**

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem. A complaint may be made if a parent or student thinks that the school has, for example:

- *done something wrong;*
- *failed to do something it should have done; or*
- *acted unfairly or impolitely*

A complaint may be made about the school as a whole, about a specific department in the school or about an individual member of staff.

**Policy**

**Rationale**

Problems are likely to arise if parents or students feel that the school is not open to their concerns. It is better to have a direct complaint to a member of staff than to have parents or students sharing their dissatisfaction with others. Parents and students like to feel valued and involved with the school and they should be encouraged to voice their concerns. This is more likely to occur where the culture of the school is open and complaints are received in a positive manner.

An expression of concern, or a simple query, may grow into a painful matter if parents or students feel they have been brushed aside. Equally, issues with the potential to become acutely difficult may dwindle and fade if they are handled well at the initial stage.



The key principles for the handling of complaints are:

<i>The school is open to the concerns of parents and students</i>
<i>Complaints are received in a positive manner</i>
<i>Parents and students can expect to be taken seriously and can approach any member of staff about their concerns</i>
<i>Information about complaints is clear and readily available</i>
<i>Concerns are dealt with speedily and those who have raised them are kept informed about progress</i>
<i>It is not acceptable for students to receive adverse treatment because they or their parents have raised a complaint</i>
<i>Clear confidential files and a log are kept</i>
<i>Confidentiality is respected and maintained so far as is possible</i>
<i>Resolution of the matter is sought</i>
<i>Staff training covers the handling of complaints</i>

The school will ensure that all members of staff have appropriate training in handling complaints. Training will cover:

- the complaints procedure
- communication skills, such as listening, questioning and calming
- handling complaints, negotiation and mediation skills
- skills in observing, recording and reporting
- the benefits of handling complaints well and the consequences of handling them badly.

### ***Parental Complaints***

**If a parent has a complaint you, as a member of staff, should deal quickly and honestly with the complaint if you feel confident to do so. Such a complaint might be in relation to a subject grade, perceived unfair treatment of a late assignment, and so on.**

**If you do not feel confident about handling the complaint, you should consult with your Head of Department, in the first instance, and with the Deputy Principal if you and the HOD think it is warranted.**

If the complaint is about an area that lies outside your responsibility you should report it to the Deputy Principal immediately.

Matters incapable of resolution at a particular level should be referred to the appropriate senior person, with parents kept informed of the action being taken. This covers, for example, a complaint made to a relatively junior member of staff about a more senior colleague.

Senior staff will recognise when issues need to go straight to the Principal, with whom the responsibility for most complaints lie.



Certain parents will wish to go straight to the Principal with their concerns, and this should be respected. However, it should be explained that the Principal might not be able to respond until he/she has consulted the staff members who can help.

The Principal will share serious complaints with the President of the School Board. If a serious complaint is about the Principal, parents are encouraged to write directly to the President, whose address will be supplied on request.

If you receive a complaint and decide to respond to the parent or student in writing, you should also discuss your response with the Principal, who will co-sign the response.

Make sure you are clear about the nature of the complaint before you respond. If it is not immediately obvious:

- the parents may need more time to explain;
- they could be asked to put their complaint in writing;
- it may be helpful to discuss possible outcomes.

***All complaints need to be handled seriously***

It is the policy of the school that all complaints will be acknowledged immediately; or within five working days if the matter is complex. You should inform parents about what is happening to their concern or complaint, and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be received. The issue should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

***Recording***

**A log book for recording complaints is kept in the Deputy Principal's office. It is important that you record the details of the complaint accurately as:**

- it may become the cause of legal action in the future;
- patterns in the record may indicate a need for action; and
- the Principal should be able to check the log and report on it regularly to the School Board.

The log should contain the following information:

- date when the issue was raised
- name of parent
- name of pupil
- brief statement of issue
- location of detailed file
- member of staff handling the issue
- brief statement of outcome.

These files are confidential and are only to be accessed by members of school staff in the presence of the Deputy Principal or Principal. The files should contain simple but clear notes of all conversations with parents about any source of dissatisfaction. This applies to friendly chats and to telephone conversations, as



misunderstandings easily arise. There should be a clear statement of what is concerning the complainant/s. The notes can be agreed with parents.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is an important issue for students, parents and staff. It is essential that any complaint is treated in a confidential manner and with respect.

Parents often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. If, for example, they wish to discuss a particular member of staff, they may fear that their child will suffer in some way because they have complained.

It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the school's policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their children and similarly that complaints raised by students should not rebound on them or on other students.

The question of confidentiality should be discussed sensitively and on an individual basis with the parents and the school's policy should be carefully explained.

It may be possible to deal with a problem without naming individuals. However, even if no names are given, the source of the complaint may be clear. Depending on the nature of the complaint and on the circumstances, it may be impractical to investigate without identifying the member of staff or the child – it may also be in the interest of the child to do so.

Members of staff are rightly concerned that they should know about complaints that might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be known only to themselves and to those who have to be consulted. The school will provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made, upon request; this will be provided by a colleague who is not otherwise involved.

**If there is a situation involving the police, the Principal, will take responsibility for action in the school and the Governing Body Chairperson will be informed as soon as possible.**

### ***Anonymous Complaints***

Anonymous complaints may be where there is no indication of either name or address, or where the complainants say that they do not wish to be identified. They may come from members of the public, from parents or from students.

Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of students will be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders to all about the school's expectations.

Parents and students should be encouraged to give their names and should be given reassurance on the issue of confidentiality. If they persist in wishing to



remain anonymous, it is at the Principal's discretion as to what action, if any, should be taken, depending on the nature of the complaint.

Anonymous complaints will be recorded in the log.

**Anonymous allegations about child abuse should be dealt with as outlined in the school's Child Protection Policy.**

**Parents and students may be satisfied the situation has been resolved by any of the following:**

- knowing that changes have been made, and that matters will be different in future
- knowing that the school is now alert to a possible problem
- feeling that their concern has been considered seriously
- an outcome which may be different from the one they sought, but which they perceive to be well-considered
- a considered letter
- an apology.

In all cases where time has been needed to investigate a complaint, parents will receive a report in writing which covers:

- the issues raised
- how the issues were considered
- the people consulted
- the action that is to be taken
- an apology, if appropriate.

### ***Intractable Complaints***

There may be a small minority of persistent or aggressive complainants who will never be satisfied, whatever the school does. The school may even discover on investigation that the complaint was without foundation or motivated by malice. Nevertheless, it is wise to treat all complaints seriously and to follow the procedures.

Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes intractable, it may be due to its nature or to the way in which it was handled, or possibly because the parent perceives the school to have 'closed ranks' against him or her.

There are different stages of action to be taken with intractable complaints:

#### **Referral to the President of the School Board**

In most cases, the procedure will be that the Principal refers the matter to the President of the Board and informs the parents that this stage has been reached. However, a situation may arise where the complaint seems to the parent to have been mishandled by the Principal. In those circumstances, the parent should be able to write direct to the President.



The President will discuss the matter fully with the Principal and be provided with relevant documentation. If a briefing is required from a member of staff, this will occur in the presence of the Principal.

The President will respond to the parents, notifying them that he/she is reviewing the matter, asking them if they wish to add anything further and providing a date by which they may expect a response.

The President may be able to offer a new approach to the matter, and this may satisfy the parents. The President's response will be clear and detailed, and will offer a meeting if the parents remain troubled.

### **Meeting with the President of the Board**

If a meeting is requested, the President will offer to meet the parents at a time convenient to them. Those involved are:

- the President of the School Council
- the Principal and, at the most, one other member of staff
- the parents

Parents are encouraged to bring with them a supportive friend who is not involved with the complaint. Legal representation is not appropriate at this stage.

The President, after questioning and listening to the parents and the Principal, may be able to find a solution. If this is not possible, and the parents wish to take the matter further, the President could consider seeking the advice of an independent arbitrator.

### **Referral to a Conciliation Committee**

The school may establish a Conciliation Committee if resolution by the Principal and the President of the Board has failed. The Conciliation Committee is composed of a convener, independent of the school, and up to four other members, two of whom will be members of the Board (excluding the Chair).

The President of the Board, in consultation with the Principal, decides when to refer a complaint to the Conciliation Committee, and invites the convener to call a meeting.

The President has no further involvement until the convener reports back at the end of the committee's deliberations.

### **Meeting with the Conciliation Committee**

Those involved in the meeting are:

- up to five Committee members, including the convener;
- the Principal, and possibly a key member of staff; and



- the parents, who are invited to bring a supportive friend, as for the meeting with the President of the Board

A sufficient amount of time is committed to the meeting, in case it is needed.

The parents and the Principal are asked in advance whether there are any papers they would like to have considered at the meeting, bearing in mind the need for all to keep the proceedings confidential. The papers are copied and distributed before the meeting.

The convener will emphasise that he or she is concerned to reach a positive conclusion and will invite first the parents, then the Principal to speak. After this, the convener encourages questions and general discussion.

The convener may find it helpful at some point to invite the Principal, the parents and their friend to withdraw from the discussion for a time, leaving the Committee alone.

If more time is required, it may be necessary to convene a second meeting. If so, Committee members must commit themselves to attend, as continuity is essential.

If a positive solution is reached, the convener will summarise the outcome and confirm the nature of the agreement before the meeting disperses. The agreement will be recorded, copied and circulated as soon as possible.

At the end of the Committee's deliberations, the convener will make a full report to the Board President and inform the parents that this is being done. The President would be expected to endorse the Committee's decision.

#### **Further Action**

Some independent schools may have a person designated as a 'visitor' to whom complaints may be referred if they have not been resolved within the school.