

## FACT SHEET 17: PARENT COMPLAINTS

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Any parent or caregiver can register any concerns they may have about the publicly funded government school system or any school therein.

The Department of Education and Training *Parents Guide to Schools* states: "School principals should include information about making a complaint in at least one school newsletter each year."

Wherever possible, try to seek a solution to a concern through informal means. Any Department employee can receive a complaint. In general, complaints about school matters should be made to the relevant teacher or principal, unless there are concerns about the local principal, in which case the complaint should be made to the next supervisory level – the Regional Director.

A formal complaint can be made orally or in writing. Oral complaints that cannot be resolved informally may need to be put in writing. There is a Complaint Form available on request.

When lodging a written complaint:

- Stick to the facts i.e. information which can be verified if scrutinised by others and the person making the complaint must know that the information is true.
- Avoid opinion i.e. in sticking to the facts don't make any attempt to interpret these facts or speculate about the possible meaning of these facts or the motives of any individual mentioned in the complaint.
- The complaint must be expressed in uncomplicated or unemotional language i.e. be free of anger, sarcasm or accusation and must be expressed in everyday, straightforward language.
- Don't lodge a complaint in order to get back at somebody or in an effort to hurt somebody.
- The complaint must not be malicious i.e. don't attempt to discredit anyone; don't offer opinions on an individual's professional competence or personal qualities.
- The complaint must not be on behalf of other people, i.e. complain on your own behalf, about matters which concern you. Others must be responsible for lodging and pursuing their own complaints.

You can have a support person present when making the complaint and at any related meeting. A support person acts in an observer capacity to give moral support and to be a witness to the discussions.

Parents may seek advice from the Federation about any aspect of lodging and pursuing a complaint.

Principals and teachers are available to discuss and resolve concerns in informal ways and the procedures for formal complaints should be pursued only if informal attempts have proved unhelpful.

According to the Department's policy the principal or other appropriate Department Officer must, in the case of a written complaint, provide a copy of the complaint to the staff member who is the subject of the complaint.

In the case of an oral complaint the relevant officer is to discuss the complaint with the complainant (person making the complaint), provide or arrange assistance to enable the complaint to be set out in writing, ensure the written version of the complaint is signed by the complainant, provide a copy of the

document to any staff member concerned and provide a copy of the *Complaint Procedures* to the complainant and any staff member concerned.

One of the following outcomes must be achieved:

- The parties resolve their differences;
- The complaint is withdrawn, or
- A reasonable compromise is agreed upon.

If processes of conciliation fail the appointed DET officer must make a decision to either:

- Dismiss the complaint;
- Conclude that the complaint has been substantially resolved;
- Issue a directive or warning; or
- Refer the matter to a Department Officer with greater seniority with appropriate recommendations.

It is extremely helpful if the person making the complaint (complainant) has a clear idea about the constructive outcomes which he/she hopes will be achieved as a consequence of the complaint.

If the complainant is unhappy with the decision he/she may appeal to the Regional Director. The request for a review must be lodged in writing within 10 working days of the advice of the decision.

Parents making a complaint may be fearful that their child/ren could be subject to reprisals if they speak out. The Department's policy offers the following assurance to those lodging formal complaints:

"It is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure that neither the parent making the complaint, nor the child involved, is in any way victimised as a result of their actions and that the rights of teachers are not prejudiced in the investigation of complaints."

P&C Association meetings are an open forum which allow parents to express and share their views and concerns.

Too often the standard clause in the P&C Association constitution – which states that "The Association shall not exercise any authority over the teaching staff or any matter relating to the control or management of the school" – is incorrectly interpreted to mean that association members have no right to express concerns about aspects of school management or classroom teaching practice.

A *discussion* cannot and must not be equated with the *direct* exercise of authority. Discussions *per se* may refer to practical matters but that referral should not be interpreted as an attempt to authoritatively impose change on those practical matters.

When matters of controversy arise at meetings the Chair must exercise a judicious control over discussions. It is helpful for the Chair to remind all members to observe the conventional decorum of debate and to address *general principles*, never *specific personalities*.

Obviously, great care must be exercised to ensure that no member of the school community is unfairly, or maliciously singled out for the purpose of being publicly pilloried. If concerns are only felt by one or two members it is quite in order for the Chair to suggest that these few parents ought to explore their concerns privately with the school principal.

