COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURES

The key principles for the handling of complaints are:

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

1 The Nature of Complaints

There are essentially four areas of complaints: parents (and guardians), students, the public and staff. This document deals mainly with procedures for parents and students.

The Education Act 1999 has, as a condition of registration and re-registration, a requirement that a school has a dispute resolution procedure.

While parents will often wish to raise issues on behalf of their children, there are other issues which students may choose to raise on their own behalf and which are best raised by them.

Complaints from members of the public will be treated in a similar way to complaints from parents, although most complaints from the public would be referred directly to the Principal or a senior member of staff.

2 Parental Complaints

An Open Organisation: Climate and Culture

Problems are likely to arise if parents 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 sharing their dissatisfaction with others. Parents like to feel valued and involved with the school and they should be encouraged to voice their concerns.
Complaints Policy and Procedures - May 2009

- Is the school open, listening to parents and students?
- Are parents comfortable in contacting the Principal, the Link or classroom teacher, or other senior staff?
- Are staff comfortable in dealing with complaints?

An effective complaints procedure can diffuse problems and can provide the school with helpful information. Complaints treated as constructive suggestions can be used to improve standards and may prevent cause for further complaint. Even an unjustified complaint may indicate an area that can be improved.

**What constitutes a complaint?**

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem. A complaint may be made if a parent 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, a specific department in the school, an individual member of staff, or another member of the school community.

All complaints need to be handled seriously. A gentle expression of concern, or a simple query, may grow into a painful matter if a complainant feels that 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.

An unresolved problem may become a festering dispute or a confrontation. Procedures must therefore be in place for appropriate action when a matter remains unresolved or cannot be resolved quickly.

Procedures need to be flexible to handle both formal complaints and the informal raising of issues. It does not seem helpful to attempt to differentiate between “formal” and “informal” complaints. One can easily become the other. Serious issues may be raised in an informal and friendly way and apparently trivial issues in an adversarial manner. Complaints against members of staff need particularly sensitive handling.

**Significant complaints need to be recorded.**

**Lines of Approach**

St Mary’s has a clear protocol for dealing with a complaint. All members of staff are encouraged to deal with parental concerns that lie within their area of responsibility and parents are encouraged to direct their initial concerns to the staff member involved.

If approached about a matter that lies outside their area, staff should refer it to a member of the School Executive.

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.

The School Executive will recognise when issues need to go straight to the Principal, with whom the responsibility for most complaints lies.

If parents wish to go straight to the Principal with their concerns, this should be respected. However, it should be explained that the Principal might not be able to respond until she has
consulted appropriate staff. Parents may also be encouraged to approach the appropriate staff member, Head of Department or Senior Staff member in the first instance.

Serious complaints will be shared with the Chairman of the School Board by the Principal. There may be certain circumstances, such as complaints about the Principal, when the parents will need to direct their complaint in writing to the Chairman with the school’s address being supplied on request.

Written responses to complaints should always be discussed with and approved by the Principal.

**Reducing Anxiety**

Because the person who complains may feel vulnerable, the school can reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be handled.

- Information about the complaints procedure should be clear.
- Complaints should be acknowledged as soon as possible or within one week. Staff should inform parents what is happening to their concern or complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be received.
- The nature of the complaint and what is concerning the complainant should be clear. 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.
- Parents need to feel that their views matter.

**Recording**

The school should keep an effective log of complaints and other significant parental concerns because:

- it may become the cause of future legal action
- patterns in the record may indicate a need for action
- the Principal should be able to check the log if necessary

The log should contain the following information:

- date the issue was raised
- name of parent (or guardian)
- name of student
- brief statement of issue
- location of detailed file
- member of staff handling the issue; and
- brief statement of outcome, including closure date and date of last correspondence.

Confidential files on all complaints should be maintained and kept together, cross-referenced with other files as necessary. The files should contain simple but clear notes of conversations
with parents about sources of dissatisfaction. There should be a clear statement of the complainant’s concern.

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.

If there is a situation involving the police, the Principal or next most senior staff member (if the Principal is unavailable), must take responsibility for action in the school and the Chair of School Board should 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 complainant says that they do not wish to be identified. Anonymous complaints may come from members of the public, from parents or from students.

Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of students could be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders to all students 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 should be recorded in a log.

Resolution

Sometimes the very acknowledgement of an issue by the school brings relief and resolution for parents. Satisfaction for a complainant may come from any of the following:

- knowing that changes have been made, and that matters will be different in future
- knowing that the school is now alerted 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

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.

A complaint is considered to be intractable if the parents have appealed to the Principal and are still not satisfied with the response.

- Referral to the Chairman of the School Board

  The Principal will refer the matter to the Chairman of the School Board and inform 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 write directly to the Chairman.

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

  The Chairman should respond to the parents, notifying them that he 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 Chairman may be able to offer a new approach to the matter, and this may satisfy the parents. The Chairman’s response should be clear and offer a meeting if the parents remain troubled.

- Meeting with the Chairman of the School Board

  If a meeting is requested, the Chairman should offer to meet the parents at a time convenient to them.

  Parents should be permitted to bring with them a supportive friend who is not involved with the complaint.

  The Chairman, will listen to and question the parents and the Principal, in the hope that a solution can be found. On rare occasions, this may not be possible.

As part of the induction, new staff will be made aware of the Complaints Policy and its implementation.

3 A Leaflet for Parents

St Mary’s Anglican Girls’ School welcomes suggestions and comments from parents and takes seriously complaints and concerns that may be raised.

A complaint will be treated as an expression of genuine dissatisfaction that needs a response. We wish to ensure that:

- parents wishing to make a complaint know how to do so
- parents realise that we listen to and take complaints seriously
- we respond to complaints within a reasonable time and in a courteous and efficient way
- we take action where appropriate.
“How should I complain?”
Members of staff will be happy to help. It may be best to start with the person most closely concerned with the issue – for example, matters referring to the Year 6 class should be raised with the Year 6 teacher, concerns about House matters with the Head of House, sports concerns with the Head of Physical Education, etc. They may be able to sort things out quickly, with the minimum of fuss. However, you may prefer to take the matter to a more senior member of staff, for example a Head of Junior School, one of the Deans, Deputy Principal, or the Principal.

“I don’t want to complain as such, but there is something bothering me”
The school is here for you and your child, and we want to hear your views and your ideas. Contact a member of staff, as described above.

“I am not sure whether to complain or not”
If as parents you have concerns, you are entitled to raise them. If in doubt, you should contact the school, as we are here to help.

“What will happen next?”
If you raise something face-to-face or by telephone, it may be possible to resolve the matter immediately and to your satisfaction.
If you have made a complaint or suggestion in writing, we will contact you within a week, to respond to your concerns and explain how we propose to proceed.
In many circumstances, the person you contact will need to discuss the matter with a colleague and consider it further before responding. You will be given a date by which time you will receive a response. If a detailed exploration of the issue is needed, a further meeting will be required to explain the conclusion, the reasoning for it, and any action taken or proposed.

“What happens about confidentiality?”
Your complaint or concern will be treated in a confidential manner and with respect. Knowledge of it will be limited to the Principal and those directly involved. The Chairman of the School Board may also need to be informed. It is the school’s policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their child(ren).
We cannot entirely rule out the need to make third parties outside the school aware of the complaint and possibly also the identity of those involved. This would only be likely to happen where, for example, a child’s safety was at risk or it became necessary to refer matters to the police. You would be fully informed.
While information relating to specific complaints will be kept confidentially on file, we would point out that anonymous complaints might not be pursued.
Action, which may need to be taken under staff disciplinary procedures as a result of a complaint, would be handled confidentially within the school.

“What if I am not satisfied with the outcome?”
We hope that you will feel satisfied with the outcome, or at least that your concerns have been fully and fairly considered.
Should this not be the case, the Principal will offer to refer the matter to the Chairman of the School Board. Alternatively, you may wish to write directly to the Chairman via the school. The Chairman will call for a full report from the Principal, and will examine matters thoroughly before responding. A positive solution will hopefully be achieved, but if it does
not, the Chairman will invite you to a meeting. You may wish to be supported by a friend, but legal representation would not be appropriate at this stage.

The school recognises and acknowledges your entitlement to express your concern and we hope to work with you in the best interests of the young people in our care.

4 Students’ Complaints

The principles that apply to parental complaints should also be applied to complaints and concerns from students.

There are, however, differences in approaches. One important difference from the handling of parental complaints is that students should be able to raise concerns with any member of staff with whom they feel comfortable, whether it is the Class or Link Teacher, a counsellor, a member of the Senior Staff, or the Principal.

In more complex situations, once the matter is resolved, the outcome should be discussed with the student by a member of staff. To make sure that it is fully understood, a written record may be shared.

Complaints that appear trivial still need to be handled seriously. Young people may test the complaints procedures on relatively minor issues before finding the confidence to raise something painful, such as bullying.

If the issue is a painful one, or if exploration of it is taking time, a student may need support from another student or from an adult. Students should be encouraged to choose a person with whom they feel comfortable to provide support.

Complaints, and ways of dealing with them, also need to be explained to students. Personal and Social Education programmes can be of use, not only in teaching students how they may support and act as mentors to others, but also in encouraging them to understand that their views matter.

5 A Leaflet for Students

This specimen leaflet includes the elements of a complaints system for students. It is kept brief so that it can be printed on a postcard and discussed in Link.

Any Problems, Complaints, or Suggestions?
If so, the school would like to hear.

How do I make a complaint?
• By talking about it – or by writing it down if you find that easier.
• You can do it by yourself, or as part of a group, or through your parents.

To Whom?
• To anyone on staff.
• By discussing it, you may come up with some positive ideas.

Does it matter what the issue is?
• No, it can be a big problem or a small one.

What will happen next?
• If possible, the staff member will deal with it in person.
  If not, he or she will go on your behalf to someone who can help.
**Do others have to know?**

- You need to trust that your complaint will be dealt with discretely and in the best interests of those involved.

Even if you find the issue hurtful or embarrassing, don’t worry – it will only be discussed by staff who can help you.