

Information Sheet No.38

Handling problems in the school system

Parents must feel able to raise any concerns they have about schooling in an appropriate way and feel confident that legitimate concerns will be dealt with fairly through an established process. All complaints should be treated seriously, sensitively and in a confidential manner and should anticipate resolution of the concern/s.

School community members are encouraged to raise issues informally by speaking directly with principals and school staff. Complaints can also be made in writing.

A complaints handling process is fundamental to the Department of Education/school providing good service to parents. The process to be followed is described fully in the Complaints Resolution Policy located at <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/policies/pdf/ComplaintsResolution.pdf>

1. The complainant should be clear about the problem or concern giving as much information as possible to describe the complaint and outlining what would resolve the complaint.
2. Special arrangements should be made to facilitate the lodging of a complaint by persons with special needs such as cultural or linguistic backgrounds or persons with disabilities.
3. When complaints are unresolved at the school level, they should be referred to one of the three Directors (Schools) or the Manager (Workforce "Relations & Legal Services) in the Department.
4. Officers dealing with complaints must be independent of and uninvolved with the matters of concerns raised in the complaint.
5. Complainants will be advised of the timeframe for action, be provided with pertinent information including the responsible contact officer's details, and be kept informed, as appropriate, of the progress of the complaint.
6. Complainants may have a support person when notifying or discussing a complaint. Where this incurs cost, this is to be accepted by the complainant.
7. Complaints may be resolved on an informal basis by explaining the school or departmental policy or procedures.
8. All information concerning formal complaints must be confidential either in schools or the Department's central office and must be held securely.
9. Resolution may be achieved by:
 - the withdrawal of the complaint
 - the reaching of an agreed outcome
 - the rejection of the complaint including the provisions of reasons for a decision
 - a decision to take certain action in respect of the complaint and an outline of the reasons for doing so
 - a decision by the Department to move the complaint to another forum
 - a decision by the complainant to use other forums such as the ACT Human Rights Office, the Office or the ACT Ombudsman or a Parliamentary or Legislative Assembly member.

A Complaint Lodgement Form is located at <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/policies/pdf/ComplaintLodgementForm.pdf>

Information Sheet No.36

Parent participation: how does your school rate? (cont.)

School-based concerns

Occasionally you may want to address your problem or concern to someone other than the classroom teacher. This may be the case when:

- You have already approached the classroom or subject teacher but no satisfactory resolution could be arrived at
- You believe that it is a school rather than classroom matter or your problem or concern is not about a member of the school's teaching staff.

The steps recommended for meetings with class teachers apply in each of these situations. Some additional suggestions are:

- Try to get the problem resolved at the lowest possible level of authority.
- Involve as few people as possible but having support can be helpful.
- Use existing lines of authority if you need to take your problem or concern beyond the school principal.
- Avoid discussing the issue with others while your child is present.
- Aim for a co-operative, problem-solving approach. This does not mean that you should minimise the importance of your problem or concern or be less tenacious in your efforts to do something about it. You can be determined and reasonable at the same time.

Using these avenues will help you to resolve most of your school-based problems and concerns in a satisfactory way. These steps do not apply, however, if you wish to make a formal complaint about a teacher. This is a complex process which is not taken lightly.

Note: In secondary schools, there are other staff members you might contact such as the pastoral care teacher, the year co-ordinator, the teacher responsible for student welfare, the subject area co-ordinator, etc.