

Dealing with Complaints from Parents and/or School Communities

Key messages

Before any formal complaint is made to the School Board

- Be aware of what's going on in your school/community. Stay connected with groups. Check in with Presiding Member (board chair), senior leadership team, etc. Make yourself available and approachable.
- The relationship with your PM is critical and needs to be nurtured. Set up and use your regular meeting to keep them informed and vice versa - no surprises in either direction. Default meetings should be at least every fortnight and an extra one is advisable prior to board meeting to set/confirm agenda.
- Engage in conversation with those who have concerns. Be open to meeting if requested and invite those with concerns in to talk.
- Listen openly, reflect, plan together to overcome issues. People want to feel heard and know they can trust you to respond.
- Keep a record of meetings, actions, timelines, outcomes – use the digital log even if korero is benign – you never know how things might evolve. Refer “Visitor Log – Sample” elsewhere in the Principals Kit.
- Follow meeting with an email record capturing concerns, agreed actions, timelines, next meeting if required.
- Check in periodically - in person, by phone - don't underestimate value of personal contact.
- Seek support with the issue – SLT, relevant staff member, MoE, RTL, etc.
- Seek support for the process when operating from an employer perspective – NZSTA [0800 782 435](tel:0800782435)
- Seek personal support – PSO, trusted colleague, leadership adviser, mentor, appraiser, EAP.
- Policies / guidelines – awareness. Promote early conversations for early resolutions. Align with school values.
- Policies / guidelines – review. Check process/procedure for when principal is subject of complaint, Conflicts of Interest, NZSTA advice, sub-committee, staff trustee – ensure your PM has this procedure/info at their fingertips.

After any formal complaint is made to the School Board

- Once the board receives a complaint, they have a process to follow – school policy/procedure AND Section 8 PPCA. These should align and be known to the PM.
- PM and/or trustee delegated with leading the process should seek NZSTA advice - is this in your policy?
- The board considers whether this issue can be resolved through informal discussion, or whether more formal steps need to be followed – check this in your policy/procedure.
- If an operational issue (ie concerning a staff member), the complaint should be redirected back to you as principal (follow process in relevant CA if about a staff member, seek NZSTA advice about process when acting as the employer - personal, professional support and a “second look” at process from PSO.
- If about you, board discusses in-committee, (note conflicts of interest, including staff rep), sets up sub-committee to investigate with clear terms of reference incl what, who, when, where and how etc – if not clear then boundaries can be blurred and cause more damage.
- Board writes to you outlining themes (from within complaint/s) that are concerning them.
- Letter states they are dealing with informally (through discussion) in the first instance Sect 8.1 (unless serious – H&S, disciplinary) but could go straight to Sect 8.4 if warranted.
- Will invite you to make written and/or in-person response to sub-committee within few days – usually within about ten days to allow you time to seek support and draft a written response even if just to clarify the response.
- Should encourage you to seek advice/representation - CALL PSO and email letter.
- Your written response – facts only, non-emotive, aim to help board to deal with issues at lowest level, be aware of the unexpected - all written records are discoverable.
- Timing – you need time to get feedback on response, organise representation at meeting (often not possible in the timeframes suggested by the board).
- Acknowledge receipt of letter, do not discuss matter or respond in any way, advise you're contacting your union and will respond in due course.

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- Work with your representative to prepare written response.
- Work with your representative to prepare for meeting, what to expect, possible outcomes, etc.
- NZEI Te Riu Roa has both PSO (Principal Support Officers) and IO (Industrial Officers) staff who will advocate on your behalf.