

RESOLVING PARENTS' COMPLAINTS AND GREVIANCES



Necva Ozgur M.Ed.

MERIT

Muslim Educators' Resource, Information & Training Center

www.meritcenter.org

nozgur@meritcenter.org

OUTLINE

- I. INTRODUCTION
- I. WHAT ARE PARENTS OF TODAY LIKE?
- II. WHAT MAKES PARENTS ANGRY
- III. PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES
- IV. HOW TO HANDLE COMPLAINTS
- V. CONDUCTING A CONFLICT RESOLUTION MEETING
- VI. CASE STUDIES OF REAL-LIFE CHALLENGES
- VII. Q/A

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important but least liked responsibilities of principals, administrators and teachers is to handle parents' complaints and grievances.

No one wants to deal with conflicts and complaints but they are a part of the schools' realities and have to be dealt with before they become a major challenge.

IS IT A PARTNERSHIP OR A POWER STRUGGLE?

- ▣ Parents entrust their most valuable children to the school and want to be sure the school is doing the best for their children.
- ▣ The school staff claims that they are the educators, they know the best and get offended when parents suggest anything.
- ▣ The school administrators and teachers are educators and they know how to educate children; however, parents know their children best.

**IT IS NOT POWER STRUGGLE;
WE ARE BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP FOR THE
BENEFIT OF OUR CHILDREN**

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- ▣ Building trusting relationships is central to the principal's role.
- ▣ One important role of the principal is identifying, analyzing and solving problems that occur in schools.
- ▣ The skill of understanding and managing the problem solving process is the key to success for the principal.

II. WHAT ARE PARENTS OF TODAY LIKE?

Some of today's parents are:

1. Less respectful of authority
2. More educated about schools
3. Overly concerned about the quality of education
4. Disengaged and absent
5. Feeling stressed and guilty
6. Overly protective
7. Defensive and confrontational

1. LESS RESPECTFUL OF AUTHORITY

- ▣ Today's parents don't respect the authority, rather, they question the authority.
- ▣ Dealing with parents who lack respect for school authority means that before we can move to solving the problem, we must first establish rapport.

2. MORE EDUCATED ABOUT SCHOOLS

- ▣ Today's parents are much more educated about schools.
- ▣ The shelves of libraries and book stores are full of books giving parents the inside track in choosing the best schools and teachers for their children.
- ▣ Parents are advised about how to lobby assertively for their child's education. The books are full of suggestions:
 - “Don't be intimidated by your child's teacher”
 - “Don't be afraid of the principal”

3. OVERLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

- ▣ Today's parents are filled with negative information about "failing schools" by the media.
- ▣ Parents are fearful that their children won't be able to measure up because the schools are failing to provide basic skills, discipline and values.
- ▣ Parents who see education as the answer to a better future for their children are concerned that watered-down curricula, lack of standards and lack of discipline will deprive their children of the skills they need to succeed in life.

4. DISENGAGED AND ABSENT

- ▣ Most of the time, the parents who you need to speak to the most are the parents who never respond. You call home, leave messages on voicemail, but you never hear back from them.
- ▣ There's not much you can do other than send a letter home in the mail in case phone messages are being deleted. Keep a copy of this letter in your records.
- ▣ Unfortunately, parents are under no obligation to speak or meet with you, and the best you can do is advocate for these students yourself.

5. FEELING STRESSED AND GUILTY

- ▣ Many of today's parents lead very complicated lives filled with demanding jobs, daily planners, cell phones, and nannies.
- ▣ They rarely find 30 minutes of quality times for their children.
- ▣ These parents want educators who can handle all of their children's problems at school.

6. OVERLY PROTECTIVE

- ▣ All parents should be advocates for their children, but not to the point where they enable the student to get away with minimal effort for maximum credit.
- ▣ The overly protective parent will argue that the student has difficulty being responsible, and therefore the teacher should help take over the student's responsibilities.
- ▣ These parent insists that the teacher should write the homework in the student's agenda or give less homework.
- ▣ The overly protective parent focuses on the student's final grade and not the learning process.

7. DEFENSIVE & CONFRONTATIONAL

- ▣ There are some parents who defend their children's devious actions, deny their children have any wrongdoing, and imply the problem is you.
- ▣ Be sure to discuss specific observations of behavior, and let parents draw their own conclusions.
- ▣ Also, be sure to refer to your rules and grading as “policies.” Use fairness to your advantage, and explain that you can't make exceptions since it would not be fair to your other students.

III. WHAT MAKES PARENTS ANGRY

“DIRTY DOZEN”

1. Failure to communicate
2. Always defending the teachers
3. Breaking promises
4. Labeling parents
5. Defensiveness
6. Educational jargon
7. Intimidation, control, power and blame
8. Lack of respect for parents and children
9. Dishonesty
10. Unwillingness to admit mistakes and apologize
11. Failure to give parents credit for understanding their children
12. Unprofessionalism

1. FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

- ▣ This is the number one reason why parents are upset with the school.
- ▣ Making major changes without giving parents notice makes them upset.
- ▣ Although parent forums, newsletters, advisory councils and opinion polls take a lot of time and energy, the information sharing and discussion can defuse anger, lessen rumors and remove misconceptions.

2. ALWAYS DEFENDING THE TEACHERS

- ▣ Always defending the teachers without even hearing the issue from the parents' perspective makes parents upset.
- ▣ Many teachers feel that their administrator's first responsibility is to back them up, no matter what they do.
- ▣ The administrator needs to be fair and just with both parents and the teacher.

3. BREAKING PROMISES

- ▣ Parents get really upset if you say you'll do something about the problem and do nothing.
- ▣ Promising to call a parent back but not calling makes parents angry.
- ▣ It is extremely important to let parents know that you will investigate the complaint and inform the parents in 48 hours and never fail to call.

4. LABELING PARENTS

- ▣ Putting labels on parents because of their backgrounds, cultures and social status makes parents upset.
- ▣ Don't assume the child is having a problem because he/she comes from a single-parent home.
- ▣ We need to understand parents no matter what background they come from.

5. DEFENSIVENESS

- ▣ Getting defensive whenever a parent questions our actions or motives is a natural, but unwise reaction.
- ▣ When we get defensive, we appear guilty, dishonest and unprofessional.
- ▣ These behaviors will surely escalate and only serve to inflame a parent who only wanted answers or explanations.

6. EDUCATIONAL JARGON

- ▣ Our inability as educators to explain what we are doing and why in a language parents can understand makes them angry.
- ▣ Unless we do a better job of communicating in plain language, any efforts to bring changes in improving education will fail.

7. INTIMIDATION, CONTROL, POWER & BLAME

There are many subtle ways to intimidate parents, most are unintentional but damaging:

- ▣ Sending notices of meetings without checking parents' availability
- ▣ Not telling them what the meeting is all about
- ▣ Sometimes administrators use sarcastic, demeaning language
- ▣ Sometimes administrators tell parents instead of asking them
- ▣ Sometimes administrators accuse parents instead of listening to them

8. LACK OF RESPECT FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

- ▣ Administrators are sometimes accused of treating parents who are educationally or economically disadvantaged without respect.
- ▣ Whether this is true or a perception, that makes parents angry.

9. DISHONESTY

- ▣ When principals try to cover mistakes they did or their staff member did, the parent-principal relationship can be destroyed.
- ▣ When parents start thinking that the principal or the teacher cannot be trusted, they will have a hard time believing the principal.

10. UNWILLINGNESS TO ADMIT MISTAKES AND APOLOGIZE

- ▣ Every administrator has done his/her share of mistakes.
- ▣ Parents will usually forgive mistakes and bad judgment.
- ▣ However, what they can't forgive is an unwillingness for the educators to admit mistake and apologize.

11. FAILURE TO GIVE PARENTS CREDIT FOR UNDERSTANDING THEIR CHILDREN

- ▣ Parents would like to have their personal knowledge and understanding of their children validated.
- ▣ They get angry when educators assume that the experts know best.
- ▣ Educators might know educational theory better than the parents, but parents know their children better than the parents.

12. UNPROFESSIONALISM

- ▣ Administrators should model professionalism.
- ▣ Administrators makes parents upset by:
 - Sharing parental confidences
 - Gossiping about parents' issues
 - Talking in a derogatory manner in public about parents and students.

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO HANDLE PARENTS WHO ARE WORRIED OR ANGRY

- ▣ Be trustworthy and have integrity
- ▣ Never talk about people behind their backs
- ▣ Don't make promises you can't keep
- ▣ Do more than you promised you would
- ▣ Apologize when you are wrong
- ▣ Confront people with care and respect
- ▣ Be punctual
- ▣ Always attack the problem, never the person
- ▣ Do what you say you are going to do, and if you can't, let people know your reasons

CONFLICTS, COMPLAINTS & HANDLING GRIEVANCES

- ▣ A complaint or grievance is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived situation or outcome.
- ▣ The dissatisfaction may be based on a perception that the school has:
 1. Done something wrong
 2. Failed to do something it should have
 3. Acted unfairly or inappropriately
- ▣ It may be about the school as a whole, about a specific department in the school or about an individual member of staff or student.
- ▣ Once a complaint is raised it is advisable the school deal with it as quickly and professionally as possible, according to the approved policy and procedures.
- ▣ Failure to do so will potentially leave the school open to a range of criticism within the school community and in the wider community/possibly via the media.
- ▣ It is beneficial if the person investigating the allegations remains impartial at all

IV. PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

1. Establishing Complaint Resolving Policy & Procedures
 2. Informing the School Community about the Policy & Procedures
 3. Training the staff about the school's complaint resolving policy
-
1. Communicating with the parents effectively & in a timely manner
-
1. Responsive Attitude

1. ESTABLISHING THE COMPLAINT RESOLVING POLICY & PROCEDURES

- ▣ The schools are encouraged to develop and publish their policy and procedures for the resolution of complaints.
- ▣ This information should be made available to the school community.

2. INFORMING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Positive resolution of complaints is more likely when:

- ▣ The school's policies and procedures are clearly communicated to the school community.
- ▣ Parents and students can expect that their complaints will be taken seriously.
- ▣ The school community knows how complaints are handled and which staff members have been specifically delegated authority to handle various complaints.
- ▣ What happens if the parent is unsatisfied about the complaint resolution process and wants to take the case to higher authority.

3. STAFF TRAINING

- ▣ Complaints can be handled by various staff within a school. It is therefore appropriate that all staff receive professional development in handling complaints, including a school policy and procedures.

- ▣ Such training could include the following topics:
 1. Complaints procedures
 2. Active listening skills
 3. Questioning and negotiation skills
 4. Mediation
 5. Observation, recording and reporting skills
 6. Privacy and confidentiality

4. COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS EFFECTIVELY & IN A TIMELY MANNER

- ▣ Clear protocols and lines of communication should be established to handle complaints.
- ▣ Many issues can be dealt with best at the level at which they occurred.
- ▣ It is important that staff are able to recognize when a complaint needs to be dealt with by a more senior member of staff, especially the Principal.
- ▣ Schools are encouraged to be clear about which issues are generally the province of particular staff.
- ▣ If a complaint remains unresolved after action by the Principal, there may be circumstances where a parent will wish to write to or meet with the higher authority.
- ▣ The grievance policy should indicate if the principal is the last resort or if there is a higher authority.

5. RESPONSIVE ATTITUDE

A complaint may be resolved more readily when:

- ▣ There is a demonstrated commitment at all levels within the school to identify a satisfactory resolution to the complaint.
- ▣ Issues are dealt with promptly and with appropriate discretion and sensitivity. This often saves escalation into an on-going dispute.
- ▣ Complaints are treated seriously.
- ▣ School policies and procedures are clearly understood, publicized and supported by the school community.
- ▣ Appropriate flexibility is shown in dealing with concerns.

V. HOW TO HANDLE COMPLAINTS

1. Talk with the complaining party
2. Talk with the person accused
3. Make plans for further investigation
4. Prepare to collect information
5. Work to resolve the problem
6. Take action immediately
7. Ensure that inappropriate behavior will not reoccur
8. Ensure that no reprisal or retaliation occurs
9. Ensure the safety and well being of staff and students present during an interview. This may involve terminating the interview.

COMPLAINT RESOLVING MEETING

There are eight key tasks you must perform in any conflict resolution process you design:

1. Be impartial and trustworthy
2. Don't become defensive or angry
3. Provide an orderly process
4. Establish a safe environment
5. Balance power between the disputing parties
6. Stimulate possibilities for resolution
7. Represent the interest of the organization
8. Show empathy with the parents' concern even if you consider they have a particular motive

CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS

1. Identify the conflict
2. Decide whether to intervene or not
3. Identify parties, issues and emotions
4. Analyze the conflict
5. Design the process
6. Educate parties and get agreement to participate
7. Conduct the conflict resolution meeting
8. Set up a system to be sure an agreement is followed

BEFORE THE COMPLAINT RESOLVING MEETING

1. Find out the nature of the complaint:
Is it about procedures?
Is it about the quality of education?
Is it about the behavior of individuals?
2. Clarify the specific details of the complaint.
3. Determine what the person who has a complaint wants to achieve in terms of resolution.

STARTING THE MEETING

1. Set up the meeting environment
2. Open the meeting and set the ground rules
3. Explain the process
4. Have each party describe their experience
5. Invite questions for clarification
6. Discuss and sort issues
7. Generate ideas for solutions
8. Review and modify the issues and possible solutions
9. Agree to a resolution
10. Formalize the agreement

GUIDELINES FOR REACHING CONSENSUS

Develop guidelines for reaching consensus.

Use the following sample to create yours:

- ▣ We accept that different views are healthy and will help us come to a satisfactory decision
- ▣ We will utilize each person's experience that has some bearing on our problem
- ▣ We will all present our positions as clearly as possible and answer questions
- ▣ We will not argue over others' positions, instead we will ask questions that will encourage understanding of different positions
- ▣ We will take whatever time is needed to reach a consensus
- ▣ We will explore each person's position thoroughly

*Managing a difficult person means
first managing oneself.*

Carol Tavis

VI. CONDUCTING A CONFLICT RESOLUTION MEETING

1. WELCOME PARENTS WITH WARMTH

- ✓ Greet parents with a smile and a handshake.
- ✓ Begin by sharing something positive about their child.
- ✓ Never sit behind your desk; move your chair close to and in front of the parents.
- ✓ If the parents choose to stand, stand at eye level.
- ✓ Have eye contact with parents.

*Seek first to understand,
before you seek to be understood.*

Stephen Covey

2. LISTEN CAREFULLY AND ATTENTIVELY

- ✓ Allow parents to vent their anger and frustration.
- ✓ Don't argue or interrupt, just listen.
- ✓ Use your body language to show empathy and understanding.
- ✓ Before you react or suggest a solution, it is important that you understand the problems or issues, especially from the parents' point-of-view.

3. REMAIN CALM AND MAINTAIN YOUR COMPOSURE

- ✓ Never compromise your professional integrity.
- ✓ Be a role model for the parents.
- ✓ A calm, cool response to an angry verbal attack can help neutralize a confrontational parent.
- ✓ Don't accuse or judge, just state how you feel about the situation.

4. WEIGH YOUR WORDS

- ✓ Don't allow your remarks to be interpreted as a criticism of parenting skills or cultural practices.
- ✓ Keep the discussion focused on the needs of the child.
- ✓ Address only the specific complaint or interest.
- ✓ Permit parents to back down without losing face.
- ✓ Don't be forced into an immediate response or quick resolution to the problem just to end the conference.
- ✓ Feel free to let the parents know that you will give them a response at a later time.

5. WORK TOGETHER TO FORM A SOLUTION

- ✓ Seek parents' suggestions.
- ✓ Encourage parental involvement.
- ✓ Build on the student's strengths.
- ✓ Present possible solutions: additional testing, referrals, counseling, special classes, or tutoring.
- ✓ Offer concrete suggestions that parents can use at home.

6. PUT IT IN WRITING

- ✓ Take notes without defensive comments.
- ✓ Repeat the notes to the complainant and asking whether it represents an accurate record of the allegations.
- ✓ State the problem and possible solutions.
- ✓ Record exactly what each person commits to do next.
- ✓ Have everyone present sign the notes.

7. DO NOT ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE DISRESPECTED

- ✓ Respect the parent, and always expect respect in return.
- ✓ Assert yourself with minimal risk by using a stern, disapproving look if appropriate.
- ✓ If the confrontational parent tries to verbally bully you, just let them know that you'll be happy to continue speaking with them when they have calmed down.

8. MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

After the meeting with the parents:

- ✓ Parents need to feel secure and trusting in their relationship with you.
- ✓ Only discuss the conference with those who need to know what happened.
- ✓ However, be ready to specify to parents why it was important for you to discuss the situation with these specific staff members.

If a conference did not go well:

- ✓ Start the damage control process immediately.
- ✓ Keep key people, board members and community members informed of the situation.

9. KEEPING PROPER RECORDS

A record of the complaint should include the following details:

1. Date when issue was first raised
2. Name of parents and student
3. Detailed statement of concern/complaint including:
 - Nature of complaint
 - The person who complained
 - Date of incident
4. Description of the procedures applied and the time frame for reporting on the outcomes of any investigation
5. Statement of outcomes
6. Staff member handling complaint
7. Location of files established as part of office records management. It should be noted that documents that may be created during the course of investigations and handling a complaint might have to be produced in legal proceedings.
8. The record should contain clear and accurate notes of conversations with parents, students and staff.
9. Records will be very useful if further disputation occurs or in the case of future legal action.

10. FOLLOW-UP

Good practice in responding to a complaint includes:

- ▣ Inform the person who has a complaint about the meeting timelines
- ▣ Provide reasons for decisions
- ▣ Allow the person who has a complaint to have a fair hearing
- ▣ Respond in accordance with the merits of the complaint, and the values of the school and legal advice.
- ▣ Implement the plan/solution immediately.
- ▣ If the issue was not resolved, act to have it resolved.
- ▣ Demonstrate your sincerity and concern for the child, and offer further help.
- ▣ Confirm that all parties involved in the conference actually followed through on their commitments.
- ▣ Keep communicating and for the most serious problems, contact the parents about once a week.

TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE PARENT

- ▣ It is often the case that the person making a complaint may be anxious and feel vulnerable.
- ▣ The establishment of clear procedures for handling complaints may dispel this uncertainty and anxiety.
- ▣ Parents are usually less anxious when they are assured the school values their opinions, staff are approachable and the school will not be defensive.
- ▣ They are also generally less anxious when they are familiar with the school's system and when they know about the avenues of communication.
- ▣ Complaints tend to be resolved more readily when parents are able to discuss issues openly with appropriate school staff.
- ▣ Schools which actively seek the opinion of parents help to create an open and positive climate.
- ▣ Staff may handle some complaints if they have the authority and preferably training about how to appropriately handle these matters.
- ▣ It is easy for staff who may not be questioned about their work very often, to perceive questions from parents to be threatening.
- ▣ Where the complaint is complex, serious, or where the staff member is not - or should not - try and resolve it him/herself, the matter should be dealt with by a person within the school with appropriate delegated authority and impartiality.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS 1

- ▣ Some parents' requests for action may be dealt with immediately.
- ▣ For example, a parent may demand that a teacher be dismissed, or suspended from classroom activities. In such an instance, the complainant should be informed that matters of staff management remains the responsibility of the Principal. Principals may wish to declare the areas of action which are not negotiable.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS 2

- ▣ If a parent wishes to complain about the conduct of a teacher but does not want their name to be disclosed to the teacher, the school should in most cases say that it cannot deal with a complaint on that basis. Schools may wish to insert a statement on this topic into their complaint handling policies.
- ▣ For example, the policy could say:

“We will treat your complaint with respect and sensitivity. However you should not assume that your communications with us or any documents you may supply to us, will necessarily be kept confidential. Although we endeavor to deal with complaints with appropriate discretion, we reserve our right to disclose details of the matter to other persons who in our opinion need to know them, in order to facilitate the

RESOLUTION OF A GRIEVANCE OR COMPLAINT

Resolution can take many forms, for instance:

- ▣ Acknowledgement of a problem can reassure a complainant, knowing that the school is now aware of a possible problem
- ▣ Feeling that the concern has been taken seriously and that all reasonable steps are being taken to address it
- ▣ Accepting an outcome which may be different from the one sought, but which is perceived to be well-considered and fair to all concerned
- ▣ A letter issued to the complainant covering the issues raised, how they were considered and what action will be taken
- ▣ A formal apology, but subject to prior consultation with the school's insurers and/or legal advisers
- ▣ A positive change in the particular school's policy or procedures in light of the complaint

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE COMPLAINT/GRIEVANCE IS NOT RESOLVED?

Many parents are not familiar with school structures, nor with the process of negotiating their way through the decision making hierarchy within a school

They wish to consult a person who has greater decision making authority than say a teacher. This will usually be the Principal

If the complaint is still at an impasse after discussion at that level, the Principal may wish to declare that there is to be no further debate

Some parents may still wish to consult the Chairperson of the board. The Principal can brief the Chairperson on the actions taken by the school and whether they followed approved school policy and procedures

CONCILIATION COMMITTEE

- ▣ The formation of a Conciliation Committee is an option to be considered by some schools. Terms of reference should be documented for this committee.
- ▣ This gives the complainant another (impartial) avenue if the concern remains unresolved after speaking with the Principal and/or Chair of the school board.
- ▣ It also states implicitly that the school has adopted a conciliatory approach.
- ▣ The Principal, in consultation with the Chair of the school board, will need to decide when it would be necessary to refer a complaint to the above Committee.
- ▣ The relationship of such a committee to the responsibilities of the Principal and the school board will need to be clarified and documented.

SUMMARY

- ▣ A clear and effective complaints policy and procedures is essential for the early and expeditious resolution of concerns and complaints.
- ▣ This can also reflect positively on the ethos, values and practices of the school. The following principles underpin a successful policy for handling complaints:
 - ▣ The school ethos encourages an openness to hearing the concerns of parents and students
 - ▣ The school values feedback from parents and students and complaints are received in a positive manner
 - ▣ The school has a clear policy and procedures for handling complaints which is available to members of the school community
 - ▣ Complaints are dealt with speedily and sensitively and those concerned are advised about progress
 - ▣ Training in communication skills and the handling of complaints is provided to staff
 - ▣ Records are maintained and securely filed
 - ▣ All legislative obligations are met (e.g. mandatory reporting)
 - ▣ Regular reviews of complaint handling procedures should be undertaken to ensure the effectiveness and responsiveness of school policy and procedure
 - ▣ The emphasis should be on early intervention, effective management and resolution.