Parent and Student Complaints and Grievance Policy

1 Introduction

In order to meet the guidelines of best practice, Great Southern Grammar has developed a complaints policy to help address and resolve potential problems, with a focus on pre-empting and avoiding them, where possible.

The complaints procedure outlined at Section 3 aims to assist the school community in addressing problems and provides the School with helpful information.

At GSG, complaints are treated as constructive suggestions and are used to improve standards and prevent cause for further complaint. Even unjustified complaints are viewed as possible indicators of areas requiring improvement.

Great Southern Grammar fosters an open culture in which:

- Parents and students are listened to;
- Parents feel comfortable in contacting the Headmaster, Heads of House, Head of Year, Home Room Teachers, Head of Boarding or other senior staff; and
- Staff members are comfortable in dealing with complaints.

This policy aims to meet the requirements of the Education Act 1999, which stipulates that schools are to have a dispute resolution procedure in place as a condition of registration and re-registration.

2 What Constitutes a Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem.

A complaint may be made by if a person thinks that the School has, for example:

- done something wrong;
- failed to something it should have done: or
- acted unfairly or impolitely.

A complaint may be made about:

- the School as a whole;
- a particular process or procedure/group within the School; or
- an individual member of staff.

While parents will often raise issues on behalf of their children, there are issues which students may choose to raise on their own behalf and which are best raised by the students themselves. (See Section 10 Information for Students)

Complaints from members of the public will be treated in a similar way to complaints from parents, although most complaints from the public will normally be referred directly to the Headmaster or the Deputy Headmaster.
Complaints from members of staff about aspects of their work are covered in the Staff Complaints and Disputes Policy.

2.1 Reducing Anxiety

GSG recognises that the person making the complaint may feel vulnerable, hence the School will aim to reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be dealt with.

The following factors will assist in reducing anxiety:

- Providing clear information about the complaints procedure.
- Acknowledging complaints as soon as is practical, but within a maximum five days. Staff are to inform parents what is happening as regards their complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be sent.
- Ensuring the nature of the complaint and the issue/s concerning the complainant are clear. If it is not immediately obvious:
  - the complainant may need more time to explain; and
  - the complainant could be asked to put their complaint in writing.
- Ensuring that parents feel that their views matter and offering to discuss possible outcomes at a face to face meeting.

2.2 Recording

The School maintains an accurate record of complaints and other parental concerns. This is required as:

- the complaint may become the cause of future legal action;
- patterns in the record of complaints may indicate a need for action; and
- the Headmaster checks the log regularly and reports on complaints to the School Council.

The log is maintained by the Personal Assistant to the Headmaster and contains the following:

- date when the issue was raised;
- name of parent;
- name of student;
- brief statement of the issue;
- location of detailed file;
- member of staff handling the issue; and
- brief statement of the outcome.

Confidential files on all complaints are maintained and kept together, cross-referenced with other files as necessary. The files contain simple but clear notes of all conversations with parents about any source of dissatisfaction. (This includes chats and telephone calls, as misunderstandings easily arise). Records concerning students are kept for seven years after the student reaches 18 years of age.

2.3 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important issue for students, parents and staff. It is essential that any complaint is treated with respect and in a confidential manner.

Parents often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the School’s policy that complaints made by parents are not to rebound adversely on their children and, similarly, 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 is to be carefully explained.
It may be possible to deal with a problem without naming individuals. However, even if no names are given, the source of the complaint may be clear. Depending on the nature of the complaint and on the circumstances, it may be impractical to investigate without identifying the member of staff or the child.

Members of staff have the right to know about complaints that might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be made known to them and those who need to be consulted.

The School will provide training to assist staff to deal not only with complaints made to them, but also with complaints that are made about them. The School is also aware there is a need to provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made. This would normally be provided by a colleague who is not otherwise involved.

2.4 Training

Given the diverse nature of complaints, the School is to provide training so that all staff know how to carry out their responsibilities. Training will cover:

- the complaints procedure
- communication skills, such as listening, questioning and calming
- handling complaints, negotiation and mediation skills
- skills in observing, recording and reporting
- the benefits of handling complaints well and the consequences of mishandling complaints.
3 Flow Chart of Complaints Procedure

Person Making the Complaint

Record of Complaint

Complaint resolved

GSG Staff Member

Resolved

Record of Complaint

Unresolved refer to Head of Sub-School

Unresolved refer to Deputy Headmaster or Headmaster

Resolved

Refer to Chair of School Council

Unresolved refer to External Arbiter

Unresolved Intractable Complaint

Resolved

Resolved
4 Complaints by Parents

The School takes all complaints seriously. It is recognised that a gentle expression of concern, or a simple query, may grow into a major issue if parents feel that they have not been taken seriously or have been brushed aside. Often an issue that has the potential to become problematic can diminish if it is handled well in the initial stages. Therefore, the School’s complaints management procedures are flexible and are used for both formal complaints and the informal raising of issues.

All complaints must be recorded in the complaints log which is administered by the Headmaster’s Personal Assistant. Complaints against members of staff need particularly sensitive handling.

4.1 Lines of Approach

Complaints may be made to any member of staff, but parents are encouraged to raise issues regarding their children in line with the School’s Pastoral Care Policy. The initial points contact are recommended:

- Junior School - contact the child’s class teacher
- Middle School – contact the child’s Head of Year
- Senior School – contact the child’s Head of House

If staff are approached about a matter that lies outside their area of responsibility, the staff member should refer the matter to the appropriate person. The person who made the complaint is to be informed when a matter is referred.

In all instances an appropriate member of senior staff is to be informed of any parental complaints. This senior staff member will ensure that the matter is brought to the attention of the Headmaster or Deputy Headmaster.

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. Senior staff will refer those issues that need to go directly to the Headmaster.

There may be some parents who wish to go directly to the Headmaster with their concerns, and this should be complied with. However, it should be explained that the Headmaster may be delayed in responding to the concern. It is preferable that complaints are referred to the Head of Sub-School in the first instance, then the Deputy Headmaster and, finally, (if necessary) the Headmaster.

If the concern relates directly to a member of the Executive, parents should make an appointment with the Headmaster to discuss the matter.

Written responses to parental complaints are to be discussed with the Headmaster. These responses are to be signed by the Headmaster and copies kept.

If there is a situation involving the Police, the Headmaster, or the next most senior staff member, if the Headmaster is unavailable, must take responsibility for action in the School and ensure that the Chair of the School Council is informed as soon as possible.
4.2 Resolution

Sometimes the very acknowledgment of an issue by the School brings relief to parents. Satisfaction as regards to a complaint may come from any of the following:

- knowing that changes have been made and matters will be different in the future
- knowing that the School is now alert 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

If time has been needed to consider matters, parents should receive a report letter. This should cover:

- the issues raised
- how the issues were considered
- the people consulted
- the action that is to be taken
- an apology, if appropriate

4.3 Intractable Complaints

Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes intractable, it may be due to its nature or the way in which it was handled, or possibly because the parent perceives the School to have ‘closed ranks’ against him or her.

There may be a small minority of persistent or aggressive complainants who will never be satisfied. The School may discover on investigation that the complaint was without foundation or motivated by malice. Nevertheless, all complaints will be treated seriously and the School’s procedures followed.

4.3.1 Referral to the School Council Chair

If a satisfactory outcome cannot be reached, the Headmaster will refer the matter to the Chair of the School Council and inform the parents that this stage has been reached. Where a parent believes that the complaint has been mishandled by the Headmaster, the parent may write directly to the Chair of Council.

If the concern relates to the actions of the Headmaster, the concern should be taken to the Chair of Council. The Chair will discuss the matter fully with the Headmaster and be provided with the relevant documentation. If a briefing is required from a member of staff, this will occur in the presence of the Headmaster.

The Chair will respond to the parents, notifying them that he/she is reviewing the matter, asking if they wish to add anything further and providing a date by which they may expect a response.

The Chair may be able to offer a new approach to the matter, and this may satisfy the parents. The Chair’s response should be clear and detailed, and should offer a meeting with the parents if the matter remains unresolved.

4.3.2 Meeting with the Chair of the School Council

If a meeting is requested, the Chair will agree to meet the parents. Those involved are:

- the Chair of the School Council
- the Headmaster and, at the most, one other member of staff
- the parents

Parents are permitted to bring with them a support person who is not involved with the complaint.
The Chair, after questioning and listening to the parents and the Headmaster, may be able to offer a solution. If this is not possible, and parents wish to take the matter further, the Chair will consider seeking the advice of an independent arbitrator. Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) will be asked for guidance and advice. If appropriate, for example if there is a conflict of interest, then AISWA will broker an independent arbiter.

4.4 Information for Parents

This policy will be provided to parents when joining the School and information is available on the School website (Annex A).

5 Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints may be where there is no indication of either name or address, or where the complainants say that they do not wish to be identified. They may come from members of the public, parents or from students.

Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of students will normally be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders to all students about school expectations.

Parents and students are 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 Headmaster’s discretion as to what action, if any, should be taken.

Anonymous complaints are to be recorded in the log.

**Anonymous allegations about child abuse should be monitored closely but no action taken until there is more certainty about the veracity of the allegation. A teacher or other staff member who is required to report must form a reasonable belief before a report is made.** (Refer to Child Protection Policy)

6 Student Complaints

The principles that apply to parental complaints also applies to complaints and concerns from students.

There are, however, differences in approaches. One important difference is that students should be able to raise concerns with any member of staff with whom they feel comfortable, whether it is a homeroom teacher, class teacher, Head of House or Year, any member of staff, Head of Sub-School, Director of Studies, Deputy Headmaster or Headmaster.

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 provided.

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 pupil 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 programs can be of use, not only in teaching students how they support and act as mentors to others, but also in encouraging them to understand that their views matter.
6.1 Information for Students
This policy will be provided to students and parents when joining the School and information is available on the School website (Annex B).

7 Key Principles
A summary sheet detailing the key principles for the handling of complaints at Great Southern Grammar is attached at Annex C.

8 Review
This policy is to be reviewed annually and presented to the Headmaster and the School Council for ratification.

9 Information for Parents
Great Southern Grammar welcomes suggestions and comments from parents and takes seriously complaints and concerns that may be raised. This summary will show you how to use our complaints system. For the detailed Student and Parent Grievance Policy please contact Administration.

A complaint will be treated as an expression of genuine dissatisfaction that requires a response.

We wish to ensure that:

- Parents wishing to make a complaint know how to do so.
- We respond to complaints within a reasonable time and in a courteous and efficient way.
- Parents realise that we listen and take complaints seriously.
- We take appropriate action with the full knowledge of the parent concerned.

“How should I complain?”
When you contact the School, ask to speak to the appropriate staff member and be as clear as possible about what is troubling you. It is usually best to start with the person most closely concerned with the issue, as they may be able to sort things out quickly and with the minimum of fuss. However, you may prefer to take the matter to a more senior member of staff, for example the Head of House or Head of Year, Head of Sub-School, The Director of Studies, the Deputy Headmaster and, once these avenues are exhausted, the Headmaster.

We encourage you to raise issues regarding your child utilising the School’s Pastoral Care structure.

The initial recommended points contact are

- Junior School - contact your child’s class teacher
- Middle School – contact your child’s Head of Year
- Senior School – contact your child’s Head of House

If the person you contacted needs to refer the matter to another staff member, you will be kept informed.

“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 need to hear your views, concerns 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 and we would encourage you to do so. 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 five working days, 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 further with other staff. If a detailed exploration of the issue is needed you may be invited to come in to discuss the concern with staff members involved. If necessary a letter or report will be sent to you following such a meeting. This will tell you of the outcome of your complaint. It will explain the conclusion, the reasons for it, and any action taken or proposed.

“What about confidentiality?”

Your complaint or concern will be treated in a confidential manner and with respect. Knowledge of it will be limited to the Headmaster and those directly involved. The Chair of the School Council may also be informed. It is the School’s policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their children.

We cannot entirely rule out the need to make third parties outside the School aware of the complaint and possibly identify 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 the matter to the police. You would be fully informed and involved in any such action.

While information relating to specific complaints will be kept confidentially on file, we would point out that anonymous complaints may not be pursued.

Action which is taken under staff disciplinary procedures as a result of a complaint will be handled confidentially within the School by the Deputy Headmaster or Headmaster.

“What if I am not satisfied with the outcome?”

If you are not satisfied, the Headmaster will offer to refer the matter to the Chair of the School Council. Alternatively, you may wish to write directly to the Chair. The Chair will call for a full report from the Headmaster and will examine matters thoroughly before responding. This may result in a positive solution but, if it does not, the Chair 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.

On rare occasions it may be necessary to refer the matter to an independent arbiter if no resolution can be reached.

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

10 Information for Students

This summary shows you how to use Great Southern Grammar complaints system. For the detailed Student and Parent Grievance Policy please contact Administration.

Problems, Complaints or Suggestions?
The School would like to hear them.

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.

Does it matter what the issue is?
• No, it can be a big problem or a small one. By discussing it, you may come up with positive ideas.

What will happen next?
• If possible, the staff member will deal with it in person. If not, they will go on your behalf to someone who can help.

Do others have to know?
• If you are worried about confidentiality, tell the staff – they will understand.

Even if you find the issue hurtful or embarrassing, don’t worry – it will only be discussed by staff who can help you. There may be occasions where staff are required legally to report to third parties.

11 Key Principles

The key principles for the handling of complaints at Great Southern Grammar 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 as far as possible
• Resolution of the matter is sought
• An independent arbiter can be engaged as a final level in the process
• Staff training covers the handling of complaints