

ELMSTEAD PRIMARY SCHOOL

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WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A CONCERN ABOUT YOUR CHILD AT SCHOOL

POLICY REVIEW CO-ORDINATED BY C.A. MIDDLEDITCH
(August, 2011)

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INTRODUCTION: PARENTS AND SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER

Children of any age are more likely to be happy at school, and to achieve their best, if their parents take an active interest in their education and welfare during the time the child is in school. At Elmstead Primary School we certainly value the involvement of parents and carers in the life of the school and offer many opportunities for you to take part in your child's education here.

It is natural that parents may, from time to time, be concerned about some aspect of their child's education or welfare at school. This may, for example, be due to a misunderstanding about the school's approach to aspects of the curriculum, or about the way we deal with behavioural issues. We therefore welcome enquiries from parents about these, and other matters and are confident that, in the vast majority of cases, we can reassure you by explaining our policies and practices, and how they affect your child.

With a commitment from all concerned to resolve any such concerns calmly and rationally, we can work with you to try to achieve the most appropriate solution in your child's interests.

You are welcome to see a copy of any of our school policies, which are all reviewed and drafted after consultation with members of staff. We can also provide you with a copy to take away if you wish, though we have to make a small charge to cover photocopying costs -please enquire at the school office. Key policies, including this one, are also published on the school website.

Headteacher: Mr. C.A. Middleditch

Date: August, 2011.

EXPRESSING YOUR CONCERNS

The policy of Elmstead Primary School, and that of the Government and the Local Authority (Essex County Council) is that **parental concerns and complaints should be dealt with locally, that is at school level**, wherever possible. This is because we want to build and maintain good relations with you and to work with you to provide the best possible education for your child.

Wherever possible, we prefer to resolve any concerns informally, so as to make the best use of valuable time in supporting all the children in our care.

If, therefore, you have any concerns at all about your child's education or welfare at school, please speak to your child's class teacher in the first instance, or contact us via the school office to arrange an appointment to discuss your concerns. We will then explain what action we can take to help resolve the problem.

From time to time, situations can arise where parents feel that they must state their concern more formally. The procedures set out in this document explain how we handle such cases. At the end of the guidance we explain where else, if necessary, you can get information and advice.

We recognise, at Elmstead Primary School, that parental concerns can give rise to stressful situations for families and the school's staff. We therefore ask you to bring your concerns to us in a spirit of positive willingness to seek a solution; and we will respond accordingly.

As partners in your child's education, we all need to approach any difficulties calmly, and without anger or aggression, so that we can work on the problem constructively together!

Please note that the guidance in this document does not cover concerns about the following, for which there are special arrangements laid down by law:

- the school curriculum, collective worship and religious education;
- appeals about admissions;
- appeals about exclusions;
- appeals about assessments and statements of special educational needs.

Information about the above procedures, some of which is published by the LA, is available from the school office. The arrangements for dealing with complaints about the school curriculum are quite tightly defined and it is often possible for us to deal with such concerns without recourse to statutory procedure.

<p style="text-align: center;">COMPLAINTS ABOUT RACIST INCIDENTS AND CASES COVERED BY CHILD PROTECTION ARRANGEMENTS</p>
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- We are required by law to report to the LA any apparently racially motivated incidents, and cases that come under child protection legislation.
- Allegations of this kind are extremely serious and are treated as such by both the school and the LA.
- Parents and others are asked also to acknowledge the seriousness of such cases and the implications when unfounded claims are put forward.
- Child protection arrangements may apply in cases where children only are involved and such incidents must also be reported in accordance with established procedures of which all schools are aware.
- Special arrangements, underpinned by employment law, apply in the case of concerns about members of staff, including the Headteacher, other teachers and support staff, where potential child protection issues may be involved.
- Depending on the exact nature of your concern, the case may be handled under these special personnel procedures, which are confidential in nature.
- Cases involving staff other than the Headteacher would be investigated by the Headteacher; concerns about the headteacher's conduct – not necessarily in connection with a child protection issue – would be investigated by the chair of governors, or a governor designated to deal with complaints.
- You are entitled to know that such an investigation has taken place, but under the law the details may not be disclosed. Where appropriate, however, we do take professional advice from our personnel adviser – the LA – and so you can be assured that such cases are dealt with thoroughly and, where appropriate, disciplinary action taken.

OUR PROCEDURES FOR DEALING WITH GENERAL CONCERNS

The majority of concerns from parents, carers and others – in **all** schools – should be handled under the following general procedures. The procedure is divided into four stages:

Stage 1 aims to resolve the concern through informal contact at the appropriate level in school (as described earlier in this document).

Stage 2 is the first formal stage at which written complaints are considered by the Headteacher, or the designated governor, who has special responsibility for dealing with complaints.

Stage 3 is the next stage once Stage 2 has been worked through. It involves a complaints review panel of governors.

Stage 4 is the LA Review stage where the local education authority will review and comment on the way we have dealt with your complaint.

How each of these stages operates is explained on the following pages.

STAGE 1 – YOUR INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE SCHOOL

1. Most concerns can be dealt with informally, when you make them known to us, although the culture of the school is all about effective communication and a positive partnership with parents/carers, therefore minimising such incidences.
2. We will see you, or contact you by telephone, or in writing, as soon as possible after your concern is made known to us. All members of staff know how to refer, if necessary, to the appropriate person with responsibility for particular issues raised by you. He or she will make a clear note of the details and will check later to make sure that the matter has been followed up.
3. We will ensure that you are clear what action or monitoring of the situation, if any, has been agreed. We will confirm this in writing to you.
4. We will ensure that we speak directly to all appropriate persons who may be able to assist us with our enquiries into your concern.
5. We will discuss with you (normally within ten working days) the progress of our enquiries. You will have the opportunity of asking for the matter to be considered further, once we have responded to your concern.
6. If you are still dissatisfied following this informal approach, your concern will become a formal complaint and we will deal with it at the next stage.

STAGE 2 – FORMAL CONSIDERATION OF YOUR COMPLAINT

This stage in our procedures deals with written complaints. It applies where you are not happy with the informal approach to dealing with your concern, as outlined under Stage 1 above.

- 1) Normally, your written complaint should be addressed to the headteacher. If, however, your complaint concerns the Headteacher personally, it should be sent to the school marked "For the attention of the Designated Governor."
- 2) The Designated Governor will acknowledge your complaint, confidentially in writing, as soon as possible after receiving it. This will be within three working days.
- 3) We will enclose a copy of these procedures with the acknowledgement.
- 4) Normally we would expect to respond in full, within ten working days, but if this is not possible, we will write to explain the reason for the delay and let you know when we hope to be able to provide a full response.
- 5) As part of our consideration of your complaint, we may invite you to a meeting to discuss the complaint and fill in any details required. If you wish, you can ask someone to accompany you to help explain the reasons for your complaint.
- 6) The Headteacher, or designated governor, may also be accompanied by a suitable person.
- 7) Following the meeting, the Headteacher or designated governor will, where necessary, talk to witnesses and take statements from others involved. If the complaint centres on the pupil, we will talk to the pupil concerned and, where appropriate, others present at the time of the incident in question.
- 8) We will normally talk to pupils with a parent or carer present, unless this would delay the investigation of a serious or urgent complaint, or where a pupil has specifically said that he or she would prefer the parent or carer not to be involved.
- 9) If the complaint is against a member of staff, it will be dealt with under the school's internal confidential procedures, as required by law.
- 10) The Headteacher or designated governor will keep written/typed, signed and dated records of all meetings and telephone conversations, and other related documentation.
- 11) Once we have established all the relevant facts, we will send you a written response to your complaint. This will give a full explanation of the Headteacher's/designated governor's decision and the reasons for it. If follow-up action is needed, we will indicate what we are proposing to do. We may invite you to a meeting to discuss the outcome as part of our commitment to building and maintaining good relations with you.
- 12) The person investigating your complaint may decide that we have done all we can to resolve the complaint, in which case we may use our discretion to close the complaint at this point. Please see the next page for further information about this process.

- 13) If we do not close the complaint after Stage 2, you may wish to proceed to Stage 3, as described on page 11.

CLOSURE OF COMPLAINTS

- Very occasionally, a school and/or the LA will feel that it needs, regrettably, to close a complaint where the complainant is still dissatisfied. At Elmstead Primary School we would hope to avoid such a situation ever occurring.
- We, and the LA, will do all we can to help to resolve a complaint against the school, but sometimes it is simply not possible to meet all of the complainant's wishes. Sometimes it is simply a case of "agreeing to disagree."
- If a complainant persists in making representations to the school – to the Headteacher, designated governor, chair of governors or anyone else - or to the LA, this can be extremely time-consuming and can detract from our responsibility to look after the interests of **all** the children in our care.
- For this reason, **we are entitled to close correspondence – including personal approaches, as well as letters and telephone calls – on a complaint where we feel that we have taken all reasonable action to resolve the complaint.** The LA will support us in this position, and especially where the complainant's action is causing distress to staff and/or pupils.
- In exceptional circumstances, closure may occur before a complaint has reached Stage 3 of the procedures described in this document. A complaints panel might not meet if it was felt that such a meeting might not be helpful. The purpose of a panel is to assist the process of investigating the complaint.

The designated governor may decide, therefore, that every reasonable action has been undertaken to resolve the complaint and that a complaints review panel would not help to move things forward.

- This does not, of course, prevent you from referring your complaint to the LA for a review of the way it has been handled, as described later.

STAGE 3: CONSIDERATION BY A COMPLAINTS REVIEW PANEL
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- If your concern has already been through Stages 1 and 2, and you are not happy with the outcome, we may agree to set up a complaints review panel to consider it. This is a formal process, and your ultimate recourse at school level. The designated governor has discretion to agree to this form of meeting where he or she feels it would be helpful in resolving the complaint.

The purpose of this arrangement is to give your complaint a hearing in front of a panel of governors who have **no prior knowledge of the details of the complaint** and who can, therefore, consider it without prejudice.

- **The aim of a complaints review panel is to resolve the complaint and to achieve reconciliation between the school and the parent. We recognise, however, that it may sometimes only be possible to establish facts and make recommendations which will reassure you that we have taken your complaint seriously.**

The **complaints review panel** operates to the following formal procedures:

- a) The clerk to the governing body will aim to arrange for the panel meeting to take place within **20 working days**.
- b) The clerk will ask you whether you wish to provide any further written documentation in support of your complaint. You can include witness statements, or ask witnesses to give evidence in person.
- c) The Headteacher will be asked to prepare a written report for the panel. Other members of staff directly involved in matters raised in your complaint will also be asked to prepare reports or statements.
- d) The clerk will inform you, the Headteacher, any relevant witnesses and members of the panel by letter, at least **five working days** in advance, of the date, time and place of the meeting. We hope that you will feel comfortable with the meeting taking place in the school; but we will do what we can to make alternative arrangements if you prefer.
- e) With the letter, the clerk will send you all relevant correspondence, reports and documentation about the complaint and ask whether you wish to submit further written evidence to the panel.
- f) The letter will explain what will happen at the panel meeting and the clerk will also inform you that you are entitled to be accompanied to the meeting. The choice of person to accompany you is your own, but it is usually best to involve someone in whom you have confidence but who is not directly connected with the school. They are there to give you support, but also to witness the proceedings and to speak on your behalf if you wish.

- g) With the agreement of the chair of the panel, the Headteacher may invite members of staff directly involved in matters raised by you to attend the meeting.
- h) The chair of the panel will bear in mind that the formal nature of the meeting can be intimidating for you and will do his or her best to put you at your ease.
- i) As a general rule, no evidence or witnesses previously undisclosed should be introduced into the meeting by any of the participants. If either party wishes to do so, the meeting will be adjourned so that the other party has a fair opportunity to consider and respond to the new evidence.
- j) The chair of the panel will ensure that the meeting is properly minuted. Please understand that any decision to share the minutes with you, the complainant, is a matter for the panel's discretion and you do not have an automatic right to see or receive a copy. Since any minutes usually name individuals, they are understandably of a sensitive and, therefore, confidential nature.
- k) Normally, the written outcome of the panel meeting, which will be sent to you, should give you all the information you require. If, however, you feel that you would like to have a copy of the minutes it would be helpful if you could indicate this in advance. If the panel is happy for the minutes to be copied to you, the clerk can then be asked to maintain confidentiality in the minutes.
- l) During the meeting, you can expect there to be opportunities for:
 - you to explain your complaint;
 - you to hear the school's response from the Headteacher;
 - you to question the Headteacher about the complaint;
 - you to be questioned by the Headteacher about the complaint;
 - the panel members to be able to question you and the Headteacher;
 - any party to have the right to call witnesses (subject to the chair's approval) and all parties to have the right to question all witnesses;
 - you and the Headteacher to make a final statement.
- m) In closing the meeting, the chair will explain that the panel will now consider its decision and that written notice of the decision will be sent to the Headteacher and yourself **within two weeks**. All participants other than the panel and the clerk will then leave.

- n) The panel will then consider the complaint and all the evidence presented in order to:
- reach a unanimous, or at least a majority, decision on the complaint;
 - decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
 - recommend, where appropriate, to the governing body changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that similar problems do not happen again.
- o) The clerk will send you and the headteacher a written statement outlining the decision of the panel **within two weeks**. The letter will explain that you are entitled to have the handling of the complaint reviewed by the LA under Stage 4 of the procedures, as described on the next page. That process is not strictly an appeal, as the LA cannot direct the governing body in most general complaints cases. It is, however, an opportunity to seek the view of an official third party and the outcome, including any recommendations, may be helpful to you in seeking resolution of the complaint, through the Secretary of the Department for Children, Schools and Families if necessary.
- p) We will keep a copy of all correspondence and notes on file in the school's records, but separate from pupils' personal records.

STAGE 4: THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AND THE LA REVIEW

The following information is provided by the LA:

- 1) Your LA is Essex County Council. **LAs have limited powers to intervene in matters of school management** and, along with central government, Essex LA encourages parents and others with concerns about schools to discuss the issues firstly with staff at the school, as set out in Stage 1 of the above procedures. The majority of concerns about children's education and welfare can be resolved in this informal way, which helps to build and maintain good relations between the school and parents.
- 2) The LA can advise you on the route for expressing your concerns or making a complaint and can facilitate the resolution of the complaint by liaising with the Headteacher and governing body to ensure that procedures are followed and your concerns dealt with reasonably.
- 3) **If you come to the LA without first having gone through the above procedures, we will explain to you that you must go back to the school in the first instance and follow its procedures.**
- 4) Our role in facilitating the resolution of complaints about schools is a carefully balanced one. We try to maintain an objective stance, giving you and the school the information and any guidance you need to move the matter forward.
- 5) We have an agreement with schools that, if you send us a written complaint about a school, we will normally forward the complaint to the school for attention. We would use our discretion not to do this if the written complaint includes information of a highly sensitive and/or personal nature, in which case our Personnel Services department would deal with it and contact the school in a discreet way.
- 6) It is difficult for us to address anonymous complaints, though we do check out any assertions made in them where they appear to be serious. The school has a right to know who is complaining about them and most situations can only be resolved if both sides can get together and work through the problem.
- 7) Where you have been through the school's internal complaints procedures (with or without recourse to a complaints review panel) and are still unhappy with the outcome or decision from the governing body you can either call the LA's Helpline number : **01245 436231** to ask for advice, or you can write to the LA enclosing full details of your complaint, including correspondence between yourself and the Headteacher and governing body. Please address correspondence to:

Essex County Council
PO BOX 47
CHELMSFORD
CM2 6WN

- 8) If appropriate, we will then conduct an LA Review. This consists of an examination of the correspondence connected with the complaint and consideration of any statement from the governing body and Headteacher about the way the complaint has been handled. We may also seek the views of other LA staff who have contact with the school.
- 9) **The purpose of the LA Review is to establish whether the governing body and Headteacher (or designated governor) appear to have followed the school's complaints procedures and whether they have acted reasonably.**
- 10) We will aim to send you, and the school, the outcome of the review **within ten working days**, but will let you know if it is likely to take longer. The letter will state our view of the way the complaint has been handled and will give any appropriate recommendations for yourself and the governing body to consider as a way forward.
- 11) If you wish to pursue your complaint beyond the LA Review, you can write to the Secretary of State at the address shown below:

Secretary of State
Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF)
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
LONDON
SW1P 3BT
- 12) Please enclose with your letter to the DfCSF a copy of the LA Review outcome. This will save time in that the DfCSF will not need to ask for our view of what has happened.

We would advise parents that, unless the school and/ or LA is shown to have behaved unreasonably or not to have followed their own procedures, there is likely to be little further action that can be taken, as governing bodies are empowered to deal with many issues without reference to either the LA or the Secretary of State.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE
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The **Essex Federation of PTAs** has a Helpline on **01245 233582**. you can also contact via e-mail at efpta@efpta.demon.co.uk

If you're your concern is about an aspect of **special needs provision**, which might include information about relevant voluntary organisations and support groups in Essex, you might like to talk to our **Parent Partnership** team on their Helpline: **01245 436036**.

If your concern is about **bullying** or other **behavioural issues**, our **Behaviour Support Service** can offer advice. Please contact them at their nearest office for the district of Tendring: **01206 711182**.

If you can access the Internet, the **Department of Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF)** also has a parents' website at www.parents.DfCSF.gov.uk which you may find a helpful source of information and guidance.

*The information in this document was compiled in conjunction with
Essex County Council, the Local Authority
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