# Complaints Handling Procedures

St Mary's School, Geelong

## 1. Introduction

St Mary's School is a school which operates with the consent of the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne and is owned, operated and governed by Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools Ltd (MACS).

MACS is committed to receiving, managing, and responding to complaints in a manner that achieves the best possible outcome for our students and fosters good relationships with parents and carers and the school community.

## 2. Scope

This procedure sets out the processes used to manage and respond to complaints in line with the *Complaints Handling Policy* to:

- promote the health, safety and wellbeing of students
- ensure consistent and fair complaints management
- improve the outcomes of complaints with a focus on collaboration and resolution
- meet its legal and regulatory obligations

## 3. How to make a complaint

A complaint is a formal expression of dissatisfaction with an action taken, decision made, service provided or handling of an issue by the school. The nature of complaints covered by this procedure is outlined in the *Complaints Handling Policy for MACS Schools* – Scope. The policy also indicates which complaints are not covered by the policy and how these may be addressed.

Complaints can be raised by students, parents or carers or members of our school community. A complaint can be about an action taken, decision made, or services provided by the school, or the way in which the school has handled an issue. It could also be about the behaviour of school staff, volunteers, or contractors.

In the day to day running of a school, students, parents and carers may also have queries, concerns or areas for which clarification is sought. These matters do not constitute complaints, and we encourage our staff to work collaboratively with students, parents, carers and members of the school community to resolve these matters informally with the wellbeing of the student at the centre of the matter.

If resolution of the matter is not possible in this manner, then it may escalate to a complaint under the Complaints Handling Policy and this procedure.

## 4. Who to contact

Where appropriate and in the first instance, any concerns or queries are to be raised with a student's classroom teacher or other relevant member of staff, including the Year Level Learning Leader.

If a concern is unable to be resolved informally, a complaint may then be raised with the principal or another senior staff member such as the deputy principal.

Where a complaint is received, to ensure fair and impartial management of the complaint, the principal will ensure that the complaint is allocated to a staff member other than the subject of the complaint.

Complaints can be submitted via either email, telephone or in-person meeting. Appropriate contact details are:

St Mary's School, Geelong

Email: admin@smgeelong.catholic.edu.au

Phone: (03) 52299453

In the case of a complaint involving the principal, the relevant General Manager (Region) should be informed. Contact details are listed below, see section 9, Complaints Escalation.

Parents and carers must not approach any other student in the care of the school to discuss an issue or to chastise them. Direct contact with other parents or carers to resolve the matter is also discouraged if the complaint relates to issues or incidents that have arisen at the school.

# 5. What information to provide and matters to consider

In making a complaint, complainants are required to:

- raise the concern or complaint as soon as possible after the issue has arisen
- be clear about the topic/s and/or issue/s forming their complaint
- provide all the relevant facts relating to the issues forming their complaint
- check and observe the Complaints Handling Policy and these Procedures
- communicate and respond in ways that are constructive, fair and respectful
- provide complete and factual information about the complaint
- observe confidentiality and a respect for sensitive issues
- act in good faith to achieve an outcome acceptable to all parties
- think about what a fair outcome would be for everyone
- have realistic and reasonable expectations about possible outcomes/remedies.

# 6. Role of the school staff

## 6.1. Receipt of complaint

Details of all complaints, including the names and contact details of the persons making the complaint, will be recorded by the school.

**Receipt of the complaint will be acknowledged in writing within two school days.**

Where possible, and relevant to their complaint, the complainant will be provided with information on how the complaint will be addressed and indicative timelines.

The complaint will be allocated to the most appropriate person for its management. If the complainant has not previously raised the issue or concern with the relevant teacher, the principal may, if appropriate to do so, ask them to first discuss their complaint with the teacher, before it progresses through this complaints procedure.

Complainants should be aware that employees, volunteers and contractors will be informed of formal complaints that are made about them in order to enable them to respond to the concern raised.

## 6.2. Response to complaints

The staff member managing the complaint will contact the complainant to let them know they have been allocated to their complaint and the next steps in the process.

In order to gather further information relating to the complaint, the staff member may communicate with the complainant to discuss the issues they have raised. They may also speak to other staff or students who may be able to provide relevant information.

If a complainant has a known vulnerability that has been communicated to the school, staff will seek to accommodate any cultural, financial, physical, mental/emotional or related vulnerabilities by putting relevant support in place.

School staff will endeavour to complete any necessary information gathering and hold an initial meeting, where appropriate, within 10 working days of the complaint being raised. A meeting will be arranged to discuss the issues raised by the complainant and explore options for resolution.

If the matter remains unresolved following this meeting and further time is required to resolve the matter, staff will consult and discuss any interim solutions that can be put in place with the complainant.

If the complainant and the school cannot achieve a mutually agreeable outcome, the principal or someone appointed by them, will write to the complainant providing a summary of the action taken by the school in response to their complaint and, the school's position in response to the issues raised. This should occur within 20 working days from when the complaint was first received. However, depending on the complexity of the complaint, more time may be required to gather sufficient information to fully understand the circumstances of the complaint. The complainant will be provided with updates as appropriate and reasonably practicable.

If the scope of the complaint is beyond the capacity or jurisdiction of the school, the matter will be referred to the relevant General Manager (Region), and the complainant will be informed of the referral and reasons for this decision. This may be required for complaints against principals or where matters are unresolved at the school level.

# 7. Record keeping and privacy statement

Personal, sensitive and health information is handled in accordance with the *MACS Privacy Policy*, MACS requirements for recordkeeping, retention and disposal, and requirements under the Child Information Sharing Scheme and the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme.

Privacy laws may prohibit information being provided to the complainant about any specific action taken in relation to individuals about whom a complaint has been raised.

The principal will ensure records relevant to child safety and wellbeing are created, maintained, stored and disposed of in accordance with the policies and procedures for recordkeeping in MACS schools.

# 8. Outcome of complaints

Potential outcomes of complaints can include:

- an apology – either verbal or written
- mediation – with an internal or external mediator
- an official warning
- disciplinary action
- a behavioural contract (in the case of a student)
- pastoral or spiritual care
- an understanding that the behaviour will not be repeated; and/or
- a change in policy or procedure.

Complainants will be provided with the reasons for the outcome/decision.

# 9. Complaint escalation

A complainant may escalate their complaint to the MACS regional office via the following details:

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| Western Regional Office<br>Email: manager.wro@macs.vic.edu.au | |

Alternatively, a complainant may lodge a complaint online at www.macs.vic.edu.au/Contact-Us/Complaints.aspx.

## 9.1. When the regional office will become involved

The regional office is responsible for responding to complaints when:

- a complainant is not satisfied that a matter has been addressed in accordance with the school's complaints handling policies and processes
- a complainant is not satisfied that an acceptable resolution has been reached
- the subject of the complaint relates to policy outside the responsibility or management of the school
- a school requests assistance to resolve a complaint
- the subject of the complaint is the principal of a school.

The regional office will generally not become involved when:

- issues have not been raised with the school
- the school is continuing to address the issues in the complaint
- issues raised are the responsibility of the school (e.g. school uniform, tuck shop duty, parking)
- issues raised should be able to be resolved at the school level.

## 9.2. Role of the regional office

The regional office will:

- acknowledge receipt of a complaint within two working days
- contact the complainant to ensure they are aware of the complaint handling procedures, to confirm and clarify their issues and provide an indicative time for resolution
- raise the issue with the school, if the complainant has not done so, to assist with initiating discussions with the school, if appropriate
- work with the school and the complainant to achieve a mutually agreed resolution
- if a mutually agreed resolution cannot be achieved, the General Manager (Region) will review the issues raised by the complainant and communicate the outcome of this review to the complainant.

In undertaking the above procedure, the regional office will:

- ensure that any student affected by the complaint remains engaged in education
- support families and school staff in the complaint process by providing appropriate or additional support; and
- document the actions taken to achieve the outcome.

When a complaint is not resolved after the involvement of a General Manager (Region), it may be referred to the Executive Director for review.

## 9.3. External avenues for escalation

If the complaint is unable to be resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant, but the matter is however finalised, the complainant has the right to seek alternative independent or other advice or contact other entities such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, or

the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. Complaints related to the minimum standards for school registration can be referred to the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA).

# 10. Students raising complaints and concerns

Complaints made by students will be taken seriously. How to make complaints will be integrated into the learning and teaching program at the school.

Students are informed and understand who to approach and relevant processes to raise complaints.

St Mary's School ensures students know/are informed of who to approach and relevant processes to raise complaints by the information being part of their wellbeing curriculum, circle time and SEL Lessons.

Students may also be assisted/accompanied by a support person when raising a complaint. The support person can be a family member, a friend or a professional with knowledge of the student. The support person can also assist with ensuring the cultural safety of students and families in the complaints process. Further information about support persons can be found below. Additional resources to support students to raise issues or concerns are available at:

- Report Racism Hotline (call 1800 722 476) – this hotline enables students to report concerns relating to racism or religious discrimination
- Reach Out
- Headspace
- Kids Helpline (call 1800 55 1800)
- Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI)

# 11. Support for complainants

## 11.1. Support person

A support person can accompany complainants when discussing complaints with school staff. The support person can be a family member, a friend or a professional with knowledge of the student.

Any person acting in a professional capacity on behalf of the parents or carers must provide their occupational details and full name prior to the meeting being held. It is at the principal's discretion if an external professional is a participating member of any school meeting.

The support person may encourage and facilitate sharing of parent/guardian/carer knowledge, perception, and issues. The support person should support a positive working relationship between all parties. The support person does not speak on behalf of parents and carers when discussing complaints with the principal or act as their representative.

## 11.2. Multicultural services and interpreters

MACS can provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers to support families/carers to raise complaints to the school if required.

St Mary's School can provide details of the services to support Indigenous and multicultural students via MACS.

Translation and interpreting services can be provided to assist all complainants. Please contact St Mary's School for assistance to access these services.

Call (03) 52299453 or email: admin@smgeelong.catholic.edu.au and let us know if you need an interpreter. We will organise one for you.

## 11.3. Withdrawal of a complaint

A complaint can be withdrawn at any stage during the complaint handling process.

A complaint should be withdrawn in writing by the complainant and addressed to the principal or the relevant General Manager (Region).

# 12. Definitions

Definitions of standard terms used in this document can be found in the Glossary of Terms.

**Complaint**

A formal expression of dissatisfaction with an action taken, decision made, service provided or handling of an issue.

**Complainant**

The person or persons who have raised a complaint with the school.

# 13. Related policies and documents

### Related MACS policies and documents

Child Abuse Identification and Response Policy
Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy
Code of Conduct for Parents
Code of Conduct for Students
Complaints Handling Policy
Enrolment Policy
Privacy Policy
Reportable Conduct Policy
Student Bullying Support and Response Policy
Student Behaviour Support Policy
Whistleblower Policy

# Policy information table

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