

# **Guidelines for Handling School Complaints**

**(Parent Version)**

**Queen's College**

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**(Revised version)**

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## **Foreword**

### **Building a Culture of Communication**

Education is greatly valued in Hong Kong. With the advancement of society, people become more aware of their own rights and interests, and have growing expectation that schools should provide quality education to nurture future generations. They place a premium on the quality of management and services that schools provide. Key stakeholders, especially parents, consider the holistic development of students imperative. They often make inquiries and provide feedback and suggestions regarding the performance of schools. It is therefore vital for Queen's College (hereinafter 'the school') to maintain good communication with its stakeholders. In addition to providing effective communication channels, schools should also encourage parents, students and staff to make good use of them to express their views and feelings, so as to build up mutual trust and confidence and avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding.

### **Handling Complaints in a Positive Manner**

Striving for excellence and efficiency, and promoting accountability and transparency, are values that our society today upholds. Notwithstanding the availability of established systems and channels in the school for public inquiry, consultation and communication, some people would still lodge complaints with the school for one reason or another. The school should handle complaints positively, with patience and understanding, and provide prompt responses within an appropriate time frame. In fact, constructive criticisms and reasonable complaints should be valued as they may help the school improve. In addition to adopting an open attitude to diverging views, the school should also review its existing policies, procedures and measures for the continuous improvement of its administration. Should misunderstanding or insufficient communication be identified as the actual cause of any complaints, the school should undertake to explain to the complainant(s) fully and sincerely to remove its doubts. We understand that sometimes the school may find its manpower greatly sapped or their service adversely affected as a result of its efforts and time devoted to the handling of unreasonable behaviour of certain complainant(s). To ensure that school operation would not be affected, it is necessary to develop appropriate policies and measures to deal with such kind of unreasonable behaviour.

### **Formulating a School-based Mechanism**

In order to handle complaints more speedily and effectively, and to respond to the reasonable demands from complainants, the school should establish or enhance the school-based mechanism and procedures according to its own situations and needs.

A sound school-based complaint handling mechanism can help the school get to the root of the issues and take appropriate follow-up actions, such as introducing new measures or improving the existing policies and practices to prevent similar problems from recurring. The school should adequately communicate with its stakeholders to ensure that the relevant mechanism and procedures are transparent and acceptable for effective implementation.

### **Enhancing Effectiveness of Governance**

A healthy school governance culture is conducive to reducing misunderstandings and complaints. To enhance the efficiency of administrative management in schools and to reduce the administrative workload of teachers, the EDB launched a “Pilot Project on Strengthening Schools’ Administration Management” in some public sector schools in the 2012/13 school year. At the same time, the EDB launched the “Pilot Project on Enhancement of Complaint Management in Schools” (Pilot Project) from the 2012/13 to 2014/15 school year to help schools establish a fair, just and open system for managing complaints and try out the Enhanced School Complaint Management Arrangements (Enhanced Arrangements). In view of the positive evaluation results of the Pilot Project, the EDB announced the full implementation of the Enhanced Arrangements in all public sector and DSS schools by 1 September 2017. All non-pilot schools may base on their own situation opt to implement the Enhanced Arrangements on 1 September 2016, 1 January 2017 or 1 September 2017.

Under the Enhanced Arrangements, schools should formulate their school-based mechanisms and procedures for handling complaints. In view of the positive evaluation results of the Pilot Project, the Enhanced Arrangements is fully implemented in all public sector and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools with effect from 1 September 2017.

A good communication culture and a sound complaint management system are prerequisites for quality service and governance in the school. Hence the school will strengthen communication and maintain a close partnership with its stakeholders. The school will also enhance its governance and credibility through the introduction of a school-based mechanism and procedures for the effective handling of public complaints.

## Chapter I Scope of Application

1.1 To assist the school in setting up its school-based mechanism and procedures for effective handling of complaints from the public, the EDB has prepared a “**Guidelines for Handling School Complaints (for Government Schools)**” (GS Guidelines), which sets out the principles, policies and procedures of handling complaints.

1.2 The GS Guidelines are applicable to the handling of the following types of complaints lodged to the EDB or the school by parents, students or the public through various means, including post, fax, email, phone or in person:

**(i) Complaints about the daily operation and internal affairs of the school**

- ◆ In the spirit of school-based management, the School Management Committees (SMCs) of the school is entrusted with the power and responsibility to manage the school. The school should, therefore, collaborate closely with its SMC to develop its school-based mechanism and procedures for handling school affairs, including complaints related to the school. A complainant should lodge his/her complaint directly to the school for effective handling if it concerns the daily operation and internal affairs of the school.
- ◆ If complaints are lodged directly to the school, they will be directly handled and replied by the school according to its school-based mechanism.
- ◆ If formal complaints against the Principal or the SMC are received by the school, the Regional Education Office (REO) should be informed and the complaint will be directly handled by respective School Development Officer(s).
- ◆ If complaints are lodged directly to the EDB, the Bureau will decide on the appropriate way of handling according to the nature and gravity of the issue. In general, if the complaint allegations are related to daily operation and internal affairs of the school, the case will be referred to the school concerned for investigation and direct reply to the complainant. If the allegations involve special circumstances, e.g. breaches of legislations, non-compliance with the requirements stipulated in the relevant circulars, guidelines and codes of practice, student safety being endangered, school operation being seriously impeded, maladministration of the SMCs or serious mismanagement by the school, the case will be directly handled by respective School Development Officer(s) of REO.
- ◆ To ensure compliance with the relevant requirements, the school should handle complaints of different nature about daily operation and

internal affairs or complaints related to other legislations in accordance with the relevant EDB circulars and internal circulars, guidelines and codes of practice as appropriate.

**(ii) Complaints about the Education Ordinance, education policies and services provided by the EDB**

- ◆ The EDB is responsible for formulating education policies, enforcing the Education Ordinance and providing education services. If a complaint falls into any of the following categories, the school should re-direct it to the relevant division(s)/section(s) of the EDB as soon as possible for acknowledging receipt and direct handling even though the case may have taken place in the school:
  - Complaints about education policies (e.g. class structure and class size);
  - Complaints about alleged contravention of the Education Ordinance, Education Regulations or violation of the provisions of relevant circulars or internal circulars; and
  - Complaints about services directly provided by the EDB (e.g. school place allocation, services provided by REO).
- ◆ The relevant division(s)/section(s) of the EDB will also draw reference from relevant internal guidelines in handling the above complaints.

1.3 The GS Guidelines are not applicable to handling of the following types of complaints:

- ◆ Complaints related to ongoing legal proceedings;
- ◆ Complaints under the jurisdiction of other organisations/government departments;
- ◆ Complaints governed by other ordinances or statutory regulations such as complaints against corruption, fraud or theft.

1.4 In general, the school may consider not to accept the following types of complaints:

**(i) Anonymous complaints**

- ◆ Whether the complaint is made in written form or in person, the complainant should be asked to provide his/her name, correspondence/e-mail address and/or contact phone number to facilitate investigation and reply. If in doubt, the school may request the complainant to show his/her identity documents. Should the complainant fail or refuse to provide these personal details, thus rendering it impossible for the school to investigate and reply to the complainant, the school may deem the complaint anonymous and not handle it.

- ◆ However, under special circumstances (e.g. when there is sufficient evidence or when the case is serious or urgent), the middle or senior management of the school may decide whether to follow up with an anonymous complaint, such as treating it as an internal reference, informing the subject of the complaint about the case, or taking appropriate remedial and improvement measures. If follow-up actions are considered unnecessary, the school should briefly state the reasons and put on file for record.

**(ii) Complaints not made by the person concerned**

- ◆ Generally speaking, the person concerned should lodge the complaint by himself/herself. Anyone who seeks to file a complaint on behalf of the person concerned has to obtain his/her prior written consent. If the case involves a student (or a minor, or an intellectually disabled person), then his/her parents/guardian, or the person authorised by the parents/guardian, may lodge a complaint on his/her behalf.
- ◆ If a complaint is lodged by more than one person on behalf of the person concerned, the school may require the person concerned to appoint one of them as the contact person.
- ◆ Sometimes a complaint is referred or lodged on behalf of the person concerned by other organisations/groups such as Legislative councillors, district councillors, trade unions or the media. If the relevant organisation/group has obtained prior written authorisation from the person concerned, the school should handle the complaint in accordance with the prescribed procedures.

**(iii) Complaints with insufficient information**

If the complainant has not provided sufficient information and/or failed to provide further information requested by the school to enable a proper or meaningful investigation, the school may decide not to conduct investigation and close the case. To avoid misunderstanding, the school should provide a written reply to the complainant explaining clearly why the case was not handled by the school.

1.5 Parents and the public are advised to lodge any complaints related to school daily operation and internal affairs within the same school year. If the incident involved had happened more than one year, the environment might have changed or evidence might have disappeared, or the complainant/subject of the complaint might have already left his/her post or the school. The school will not be able to investigate the complaint because of the difficulty in collecting evidences.

## **Chapter II Guiding Principles for Handling Complaints**

2.1 In handling school-related complaints made by parents, students or the public, the school should refer to the following guiding principles:

### **Principle I: Handling of complaints by the appropriate party/parties**

2.2 A complaint should be directly handled by the organisation which is responsible for making the policies or providing the relevant services, or manages the persons/matters being complained. In this way, it can better understand and effectively address the concerns of the complainant. Accordingly, the school should handle those complaints relating to its daily operation and internal affairs, and the relevant division(s)/section(s) of the EDB should handle those complaints concerning the Education Ordinance, education policies and services. Complaints related to suspected breaches of other legislations of Hong Kong should be lodged to and handled by the relevant law enforcement agencies (e.g. the ICAC, Hong Kong Police Force). If the complaints fall into the categories specified in paragraph 1.2 (i) above, the school should refer to the relevant EDB circulars/internal circulars, guidelines and codes of practice as appropriate in handling such complaints.

2.3 If a complaint involves both the school and other division(s)/section(s) of the EDB, the related division(s)/section(s) should collaborate with the school(s) concerned on how to follow-up/handle the case. If a complaint is lodged to the school and the EDB at the same time, the Bureau will judge according to the nature and gravity of the issue whether the complaint should be referred the school concerned for follow-up or directly handled by the respective School Development Officer(s) of REO.

### **Principle II: Timely and efficient handling**

2.4 The school should handle and respond to all verbal or written inquiries, opinions or complaints as soon as possible to prevent any uninviting situation from worsening. Upon receipt of an inquiry/a complaint, the frontline staff should either directly handle it or immediately refer it to the designated staff/task force for action. If the responsible staff cannot resolve the problem, they should seek help from their seniors.

### **Principle III: Clear and transparent mechanism**

2.5 The school should, in collaboration with the SMC, set up a clear and effective school-based mechanism as well as procedures for speedy and proper handling of inquiries and complaints. They should adequately communicate with teachers and parents to ensure that the relevant procedures are generally accepted by stakeholders.



2.6 The school should prepare guidelines for stakeholders on the relevant policies, procedures and responsible staff for handling complaints. It may make parents and staff fully aware of the details of the procedures through different channels, e.g. school websites, circulars, student handbooks, staff meetings, parent-teacher meetings, seminars and school events.

2.7 The school should regularly review its complaint handling policies and guidelines by adequately communicating with its staff and parents, and revise the handling procedures whenever necessary.

#### **Principle IV: Fair and impartial handling**

2.8 The school should approach complaints positively and treat the complainants and the subjects of the complaints fairly. The school should provide sufficient appeal channels within the school (see paras. 3.6(ii) and 4.1) and consider inviting independent persons to participate in the complaint/appeal handling process, if necessary.

2.9 Before an investigation begins or where appropriate, the designated staff and related individuals should declare interests. If there is any conflict of interest, the persons concerned should avoid handling the case or having access to information relating to it.

2.10 To avoid conflict of interest, any staff member who is the subject of the complaint should not be involved in conducting or supervising the investigation, or signing and issuing letters to the complainant.

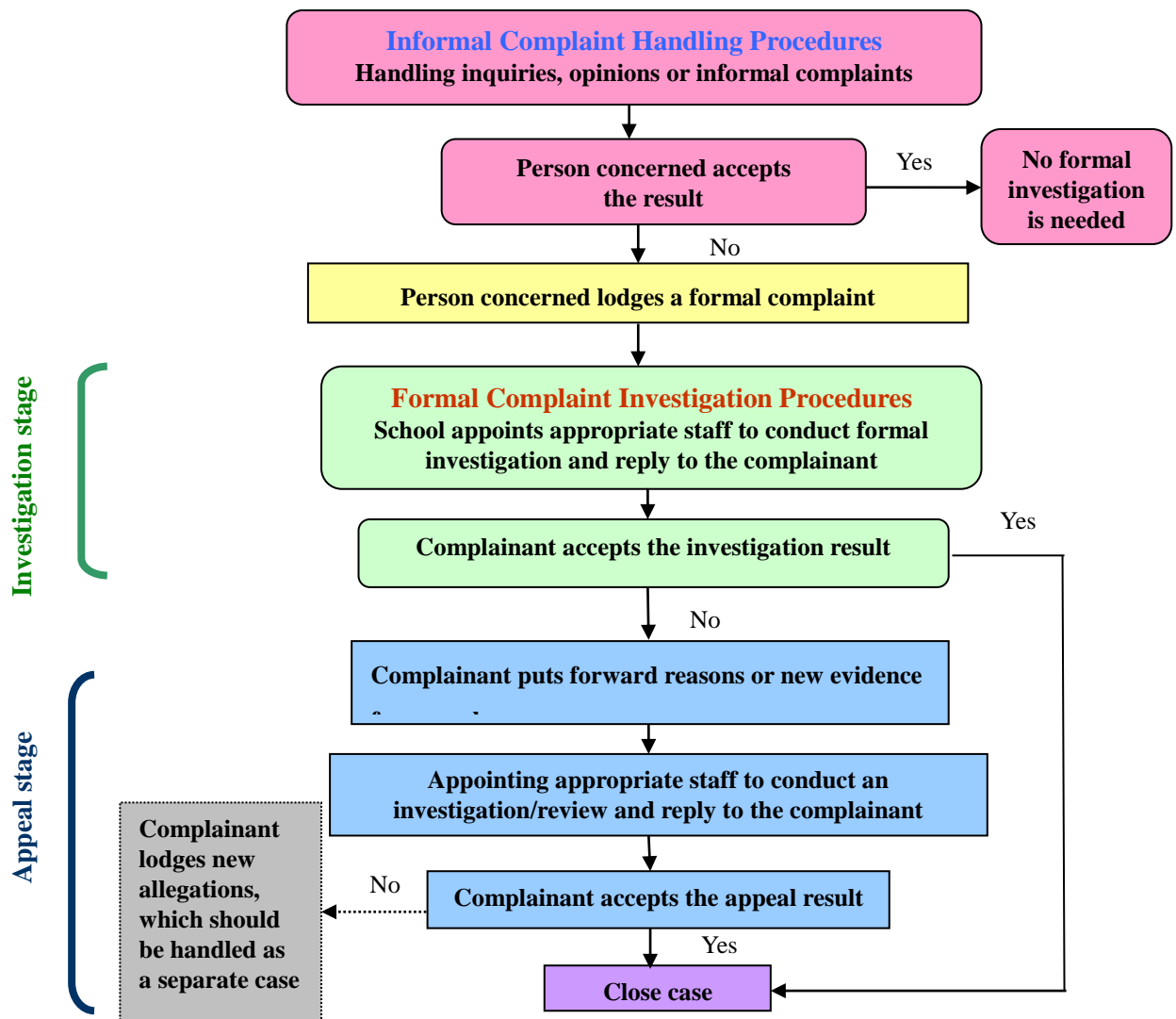
2.11 The school should see to it that the rights of the complainants or other persons involved in the complaint are being protected and that their future communication and contact with the school would not be affected.

## Chapter III Procedures for Handling Complaints

### Interpretation of Complaints

3.1 In general, unless the person concerned insists on making a formal complaint, the responsible staff can promptly provide assistance or help resolve his/her problem by following the informal complaint handling procedures. Please refer to Diagram 1 for the flowchart of complaint handling procedures in the school.

**Diagram 1: Flowchart of School Complaint Handling Procedures**



## **Informal Complaint Handling Procedures**

### ***Immediate/prompt handling***

3.2 If the school handles inquiries or complaints efficiently and appropriately, it will manage not only to remove misunderstandings and forestall crises, but also enhance its own image. The school may consider adopting the following arrangements:

- ◆ If the school receives an inquiry, opinion or informal complaint from the public, whether verbal or written, the frontline staff should clearly distinguish its nature and take appropriate action. In general, if the case does not require an investigation involving evidence collection, or the person concerned does not request a formal written reply, the frontline staff may handle the matter following the informal complaint handling procedures of the school.
- ◆ The frontline staff should listen to the concerns of the inquirer/complainant with care and understanding. If the incident is not serious, they should provide whatever assistance or information required or promptly respond to the concerns raised by the inquirer/complainant and help resolve the problems involved.
- ◆ If necessary, the school staff in charge of the relevant issue should have direct talks or interviews with the person(s) concerned to explain the school's stance and remove any misunderstanding, misgivings or worries of them.
- ◆ The school may, according to its own situation, set a time limit for an initial response (e.g. within two days).
- ◆ If necessary, the frontline staff should refer the case to a designated staff or a senior officer for prompt follow up actions and resolutions. The principal may decide whether to take up the handling of the case, depending on the situation of the school and the nature of the case.

### ***Replying to complaints***

3.3 For verbal inquiries/opinions/complaints handled by the informal complaint handling procedures, oral replies will suffice and written replies are normally not required. For opinions/complaints which are presented in written form or if the school wishes to make clear its stance or provide necessary details, the responsible staff may decide whether a simple written reply to the person(s) concerned/complainant is appropriate.

### ***Complaint records***

3.4 Cases handled by the informal complaint handling procedures normally need not be documented in formal written records. If an inquiry/complaint has been answered or resolved instantly, it is suggested that the designated staff or the principal may record the key points in a log book for future reference.

### *Appropriate follow-up*

3.5 Schools should review whether the policies or procedures regarding complaints have been properly followed and suggest appropriate measures to improve the handling of similar cases or prevent similar cases from recurring. If necessary, the responsible staff may brief the complainant(s) on the follow-up actions that the school has adopted and the results that follow.

### **Formal Complaint Investigation Procedures**

#### *Arrangements for the investigation and appeal stages*

3.6 If the school has made its best efforts to resolve the problem through the informal complaint handling procedures but the complainant still does not accept the school's response or the problem remains unresolved, the following formal complaint investigation procedures (including an appeal mechanism) should be initiated:

(i) Investigation stage

If the school receives any formal complaints, they should be handled according to the following procedures:

- ◆ in accordance with the school-based mechanism, assign appropriate staff to investigate the complaint and reply to the complainant;
- ◆ acknowledge receipt of the complaint **within 10 days**, seek the complainant's consent to obtain his/her personal data and information relating to the complaint, and inform him/her of the name, post title and phone number of the staff responsible for handling the case for contact purposes.
- ◆ if necessary, contact the complainant and other persons involved or arrange meetings with them in order to have a better grasp of the situation or request them to provide relevant information;
- ◆ handle the complaint as quickly as possible (The school should complete the investigation **within 30 calendar days** after receiving the complaint and send a written reply to inform the complainant of the investigation result. For complicated cases which require a longer processing time, an interim reply should be issued to inform the complainant of the progress of the case and the reasons why a longer time is needed to provide a substantive reply and, if possible, the estimated time frame for issuing a substantive reply);
- ◆ if the complainant accepts the investigation result, conclude the case officially; and
- ◆ if the complainant does not accept the investigation result or the way the school handled the complaint, and is able to provide new evidence or sufficient justification, he/she may lodge an appeal in writing against the school's decision. The school may inform the complainant the time limit of making an appeal in its reply.

(ii) Appeal stage

The school should adopt the following procedures with appeal cases:  
acknowledge receipt of the appeal within 10 days;

- ◆ in accordance with the school-based mechanism, assign appropriate staff of a higher rank than those responsible for the investigation stage, or staff from a different section, to handle the appeal and reply to the complainant;
- ◆ handle and resolve the appeal as quickly as possible (The school should complete the investigation **within 30 calendar days** after receiving the request for appeal.), and send a written reply to inform the complainant of the appeal result;
- ◆ if the complainant accepts the appeal result, conclude the case officially;
- ◆ if the complainant does not accept the appeal result or the way the school handled the appeal, the school should cautiously review the appeal process to ensure that proper procedures have been followed.
- ◆ if the complainant raises other new allegations, the school should handle them separately in order to avoid mixing up the old complaints with the new ones.

*Resolving conflict through mediation*

3.7 When handling complaints, the school may, having regard to the nature of individual cases, consider whether it is appropriate to adopt different means to resolve conflicts quickly. This includes seeking mediation service from a mediator, or inviting independent persons/professionals to provide impartial views to assist the persons concerned (including the complainants and the persons/organisations being complained against).

*Responding to complaints/appeals*

3.8 If the complaint or appeal is in written form, the school should respond with a written reply. If the complaint is made verbally, the responsible staff may decide whether to respond orally or in writing. If the case is referred by other divisions/sections of the EDB/other organisations, a copy of the written reply should be forwarded to them for reference.

3.9 Generally speaking, the time limit for replying to a complaint/appeal should start from the date on which it is received or when the complainant agrees to let the school have access to his/her personal data. If the information submitted is incomplete, the time limit should start from the date on which the school receives from the complainant the necessary information. If a reply cannot be given within the specified period, the school should explain to the complainant in writing why a longer handling time is needed to provide a substantive reply and, if possible, the estimated time frame for issuing a substantive reply.

### *Complaint/appeal records*

3.10 The school should keep a clear record of cases handled by the formal complaint investigation procedures. The school should establish a complaint record management system to store relevant information (including correspondences, investigation reports and interview records). In addition, the school should keep statistics of complaints and appeals lodged through both informal and formal handling procedures for future reference.

### *Appropriate follow-up*

3.11 At the end of the investigation/appeal stage, the school should review whether the complaint handling policies and procedures are appropriate, and suggest proper measures to improve the method of handling and to prevent similar incidents from recurring. The staff in charge should inform the complainant(s) of the school's follow-up actions and outcome of the review.

## **Chapter IV Arrangements for Handling Complaints**

### **Designated staff**

4.1 Taking into account the nature of the complaint, its scope and the people involved, the school may assign a designated staff or set up a task force to handle the complaint with reference to the following arrangements:

- ◆ Staff members who are responsible for the appeal stage should be different from those responsible for the investigation stage. In principle, the staff dealing with the appeal should be of a higher rank than those responsible for the investigation. If this is not practicable, the school should make other arrangements, such as appointing staff from another department, to ensure fair handling.
- ◆ Where necessary, the school may establish a task force to handle special complaint cases. Depending on the situation, the task force may include members of the SMC and representatives from other division(s)/section(s) of the EDB. To enhance credibility, the school may invite independent persons such as social workers, lawyers, psychologists, and parents or teachers not involved in the case to join the task force to provide professional advice and support.
- ◆ The appointed staff should be proactive in communicating with the inquirers/complainants, and prompt in providing responses as well as the information they need. The school should also ensure that frontline/designated staff have proper authorisation and clearly understand their roles and responsibilities.

4.2 For the deployment of staff in handling complaints, the school may assign a senior teacher, an Assistant Principal or the Principal to handle the investigation. If the school receives formal complaints against the Principal or SMC, it should refer the complaints to REO for follow-up actions.

### **Confidentiality**

4.3 All contents and information of complaints should be kept strictly confidential and restricted to internal reference or reference by relevant persons only.

4.4 When the school needs to collect personal data during the handling process or when it receives requests for the disclosure of data/records in respect of the complaint case, it should observe the regulations and recommendations laid down in the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance. This includes clearly stating the purpose and the form of collection of personal data, and that the data will only be used for handling the complaint or appeal cases.

4.5 The school should adopt appropriate security measures to protect personal data and privacy, such as keeping the data in safe places (e.g. cabinets under lock and key). Computer data should be protected by passwords. Use of portable data storage devices should be tightly controlled. Where necessary, encrypted portable data storage devices should be used.

4.6 The school should establish procedures to ensure that only authorised persons are allowed access to information relating to the case. The responsible persons should not disclose or discuss in public any contents or information relating to the case without authorisation.

4.7 Where interviews or meetings with complainant(s) are involved in handling the complaint cases, the school can incorporate the associated arrangements into the school-based complaint handling mechanism. To avoid misunderstanding, the school should:

- ◆ state clearly whether the person(s) concerned can be accompanied by others (e.g. relatives, legal representatives) during the interview/meeting and reiterate this stance before the interview/meeting starts;
- ◆ indicate before the interview/meeting starts whether audio/video recording is prohibited or whether the consent of all attendees has been obtained if the session is to be audio/video recorded;
- ◆ well brief the staff beforehand and ask the staff to remind the complainant(s) before the interview/meeting starts that both the staff and the complainant(s) should be cautious of unauthorized release of third party information and hence should refrain from divulging any such information over the phone. They should also observe and comply with Data Protection Principles appended to Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486) during the interview/meeting; and
- ◆ advise the staff that government school staff in carrying out a public duty should not refuse audio/video recording requests made by complainants. Whenever the dialogue touches on personal data and information of a third party, staff should reiterate the stance that he cannot disclose such information in compliance with Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486).

### **Follow-up and evaluation**

4.8 The school should conduct a comprehensive review on the strategies, process and steps it has taken in handling complaints in order to benefit from past experiences, improve the way of handling, and avoid similar cases from recurring.

4.9 The school should take appropriate follow-up measures to improve its services or revise relevant policies for enhancement of professional standards of its services.



4.10 The school should regularly review its own complaint handling policies and report to the SMCs by providing, for example, relevant data concerning complaint/appeal cases, and suggest, if necessary, improvement measures to enhance its school-based complaint handling mechanism and procedures.

4.11 If the complaints remain undissolved after the investigation and appeal stage, they may be dealt with a Review Board set up by EDB.

### **Support and training**

4.12 The school should provide appropriate training to assist staff to effectively handle inquiries/complaints, e.g. providing training programmes on communication, negotiation and mediation skills, or arranging experience sharing sessions for frontline/designated staff to enhance their capability in handling complaints and resolving conflicts.

## Chapter V Handling of Unreasonable Behaviour

5.1 Sometimes certain unreasonable behaviour of complainants may have a negative impact on the school, e.g. draining a considerable amount of the the school's human resources, interrupting its operations or services, as well as threatening the safety of staff and other stakeholders. The school may therefore develop appropriate policies and measures to handle this kind of unreasonable behaviour to ensure that its operation would not be affected.

### Definition of unreasonable behaviour

5.2 Complainants' unreasonable behaviour can generally be classified into the following three types:

- (i) Unreasonable attitude or behaviour, such as:
  - ◆ Acts of violence or intimidation
  - ◆ Making complaints with abusive language or in an insulting and discriminatory tone
  - ◆ Providing false data or deliberately concealing facts
  
- (ii) Unreasonable demands, such as:
  - ◆ Requesting a huge amount of information or demanding special treatment
  - ◆ Making telephone calls incessantly to ask for a dialogue or an interview, or to command a certain staff member to reply
  - ◆ Commanding a certain staff member to meet at a specific time and place
  
- (iii) Unreasonable persistent complaints, such as:
  - ◆ Insisting on rejecting the explanations and findings of the school/EDB, and/or requiring the school/EDB to discipline certain person(s), even after appropriate investigation procedures have been taken
  - ◆ In respect of the same case, repeatedly making the same complaints or presenting similar justifications as before without providing any new evidence
  - ◆ In respect of the same case, persistently bringing in new allegations or new complaint targets, but failing to present concrete evidence
  - ◆ Interpreting things in an unreasonable or irrational manner, or wrangling over trivial details

## **Formulating school-based policy**

5.3 The school may consider instituting appropriate policies and measures to deal with unreasonable behaviour of complainants:

- ◆ The school should designate suitable staff members to ascertain whether a complainant's behaviour is reasonable, and decide what measures should be taken. Generally speaking, the principal can make such decisions. However, if the complaint is lodged against the principal/SMC, such decisions should be made by the designated staff of REO.
- ◆ The school should integrate its policies regarding unreasonable behaviour of complainants into the school-based complaint handling mechanism and consult stakeholders' views.
- ◆ All stakeholders should be informed of the school's policy regarding unreasonable behaviour of complainants.

## **Handling of unreasonable behaviours**

5.4 While developing policies and measures to deal with unreasonable behaviour of complainants, the school may consider the following suggestions:

(i) Unreasonable attitude or behaviour

- ◆ Any unreasonable attitude or behaviour, including acts of violence, intimidation, and abusive/offensive conduct or language, whether performed face-to-face, by phone, or in writing are unacceptable. The staff member handling the complaint should convey this message clearly to the complainant and demand that he/she stop acting in such a way, otherwise he/she may terminate the meeting or conversation with him/her. If the complainant refuses to comply after the warning, the staff member may terminate the meeting or conversation with him/her.
- ◆ The school should develop contingency measures and guidelines to remind staff responsible for handling complaints to stay alert and take suitable action to protect their own safety. The school should empower the staff member to make decision, depending on the situation, on whether to terminate the interview or dialogue with the complainant and ask the complainant to leave, if his/her behaviour poses an immediate threat to the staff's personal safety or damages their personal interests. In an emergency or if it is deemed necessary, the school should take appropriate and decisive action, such as reporting to the police or taking legal action.

(ii) Unreasonable demands

- ◆ If a complainant makes unreasonable demands which have an adverse impact on the school, e.g. interrupting its operation/services or other stakeholders are affected by the unreasonable behaviour of the complainant, the school may consider suggesting to the complainant alternative communication methods (e.g. make appointment before visiting the school, submit his/her views in writing, contact only the staff designated by the school, or contact the school staff according to the time, frequency, date, duration and modes of communication specified by the school). The school must notify the complainant in writing of such arrangements and handling procedures.
- ◆ If the complainant's behaviour improves, the school may consider whether the restrictions should be lifted. If the school decides to keep the restrictions, it should regularly review the conditions for imposing them.

(iii) Unreasonable persistent complaints

- ◆ Faced with these complaints, if the school has carefully examined the case and handled it properly under the prescribed investigation and appeal procedures, and sent a detailed and unbiased written explanation regarding the outcome to the complainant, the school may escalate the case via REO to a senior directorate ranked no less than D2 level for a decision on whether any further correspondence or action on the complaint should be discontinued.
- ◆ Upon agreement by the above senior management to cease handling the case, the school should communicate with the complainant in a firm manner that a final decision has been made regarding the case and that the decision is irreversible in order to avoid any unrealistic expectations on the part of the complainant.
- ◆ If repeated complaints are received from the complainant subsequently, the school may send a "Reply Card" to the complainant, referring him/her to the replies previously given.

## **Chapter VI Conclusion**

### **Effective school-based mechanism**

6.1 To ensure that public inquiries/complaints are properly handled, the school should establish a school-based complaint handling mechanism and procedures relevant to its own circumstances and the needs of stakeholders. It should be:

- ◆ Clear and unambiguous
- ◆ Open and transparent
- ◆ Concise and easy to follow
- ◆ Fair and just
- ◆ Able to protect confidentiality of information
- ◆ Under continuous review and improvement

6.2 An effective school-based complaint handling mechanism not only increases public confidence in school governance, but also prevents public opinions/inquiries from evolving into formal complaints or unnecessarily escalating to the other division(s)/sections(s) of the EDB or other government departments/organisations.

### **Maintaining good communication**

6.3 In addition to formulating an effective complaint handling mechanism, the school should continue to maintain a close partnership with parents and staff by enhancing communication with them. Members of the Parent-Teacher Association of the school may serve as a bridge of communication by helping to explain the school policies to parents, relieving their sentiments of dissatisfaction, and playing the role of mediator when necessary. To enhance the standards of the professional services it provides, the school should always assume an open attitude and listen to the views of the stakeholders to identify room for improvement regarding its school-based inquiry/complaint handling mechanism and procedures.