



Summary guide for school board members and principals: Effective complaint handling for New Zealand schools

Complaints may come from akōnga (children and young people at school), parents or other people. An effective complaints process can help resolve issues early and support overall improvement.

This summary highlights seven key areas that support effective complaint-handling.

1. Put akōnga at the centre

Place the best interests, rights, and wellbeing of akōnga at the heart of your complaints process and reaching the best solution for them. Make sure children and young people:

- Know their rights and feel safe to speak up
- Can have their say in decisions that affect them
- Are supported in ways to ensure a safe environment when a child or young person wants to raise an issue – to avoid re-traumatisation
- Can access an advocate, interpreter or trusted adult to support them.

2. Welcome complaints and make it easy to speak up

Be open to concerns and complaints. Treat them as valuable feedback. Make sure your complaints process is:

- Visible and easy to understand
- Available in age-appropriate formats – for anyone wanting to raise a problem
- Flexible in how concerns can be raised (verbal, written, online, supported by a trusted adult)
- Accessible for people of varying reading literacy levels and different disabilities
- Accessible for people of different cultures and languages
- Encourage open language such as: “Got a problem? Let us help you solve it”
- Involve children and young people in shaping your complaints process to make sure it works for them.

3. Have a clear and fair process

Design a clear, stepped-out approach from receiving a complaint through to resolution.

Make sure you:

- Respond to complaints in a timely manner and with an open mind
- Assess priority, urgency, immediate safety and welfare concerns, and conflicts of interest
- Assign a key contact person – this person should be well known to the person who raised the complaint, for example the teacher of the student
- Set out the process for how a complaint will be considered, resolved, responded to and investigated if needed
- Be clear about how information will be stored and how it may be shared. Explain what will be kept private and the limitations on confidentiality
- Ensure procedural fairness or ‘natural justice’ to fairly make decisions on the outcome of the complaint
- Be clear about the outcome of a complaint and provide reasons
- Provide review options that are available, including the right to complain to the Ombudsman.

Ensure that Principals and the School Board keep a watchful eye over complaints and outcomes, including through regular reporting and reviews.

4. Communicate clearly and manage expectations

Recognise a child’s sense of time and aim to resolve complaints as quickly as possible. Help children, young people and adults understand the process. Make sure you are:

- Prompt in acknowledging complaints and timely in giving updates
- Supportive to children and young people to tell their story – making a safe space, showing respect and listening carefully
- Sensitive to the needs of children and young people – ensuring they are age-appropriate, culturally responsive and trauma-informed
- Clear, honest and realistic about the limitations on confidentiality
- Consistent in following through on doing what they say they will do.

Clearly outline to people:

- The realistic timeframe of the process
- What will happen during the process and what is possible – it may help to have a general overview process available to look at on your website
- What the reasons are for why decisions are made
- What the review options are if someone is unhappy with the outcome – such as going to the Ombudsman.

5. Ensure staff are ready and able to support to reach a solution if possible

Provide training and support so school staff can:

- Understand your complaints process and their responsibilities
- Receive complaints with an open mind and demonstrate that the process is valued and supported
- Feel confident resolving issues at the lowest level/earliest stage if appropriate
- Know when and how to escalate matters further
- Recognise trauma to be able to act appropriately and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation
- Support children and young people to tell their story safely
- Be confident in roles and responsibilities for recording and reporting complaint information.

6. Keep good records

Ensure you keep accurate records of:

- The complaint, the person's name who made the complaint - and their contact details
- Any actions taken or decisions made
- Any communications with the person who raised the complaint
- Names of other people involved, such as who managed the complaint and other support people.

Tell people that if they are raising complaints:

- What information is being recorded, when it may be shared and with whom
- How long the information will be kept.

Ensure your record-keeping is kept secure and meets legislative and contractual requirements.

7. Monitor, learn and improve

Treat complaints as an opportunity to improve and identify wider issues. Have processes to:

- Review complaint data for patterns or systemic issues and use this to support service improvement and planning
- Monitor timeframes and outcomes
- Monitor and review how complaints are handled as part of an active quality improvement plan
- Review complaint handling policies and procedures and staff development opportunities where needed.
- Let ākonga, parents, caregivers and school staff know what improvements have been made after your consideration of complaints.