

Parental complaints surge: how can schools stay afloat?

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Since the pandemic, there has been a significant rise in the number of complaints that schools are receiving from parents and this trend shows no signs of abating. Schools are sharing concerns about the volume and complexity of the complaints they are handling and the toll that this continues to take on staff and governors.

In the Academies Regulatory and Commissioning Review, the Department for Education (DfE) highlighted concerns surrounding the impact of complaints on the system as more parents seek to scattergun their concerns to Ofsted, local authorities and other agencies.

Reasons for this increase remain unclear. It may be a symptom of a growing “complaints culture” or a result of people being “grumpier” with a “greater propensity to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard”, as recently suggested by Amanda Spielman, Ofsted’s Chief Inspector.

Certainly, the manner in which some parents chose to pursue their complaints can be deeply unpleasant for staff and governors, particularly where it involves aggressive behaviour or abusive, offensive or derogatory language. However, the DfE’s best practice guidance makes it clear that labels of vexatious, serial or persistent should be attached to the complaint and not to the complainant. Therefore, unless the complaint itself is vexatious, a school will still need to respond to the complaint in accordance with its complaints policy.

Rather than continuing to be flotsam on this wave of complaints, schools have the power to take back control; the starting point for this is undertaking a holistic review of the school’s complaints management processes and focusing on the elements they can control. This includes:

1. What the school’s complaints policy says

The complaints policy needs to comply with legal requirements and DfE best practice, both of which are different for maintained schools and academies. Using a template policy can be a good starting point but make sure that it is from a reputable source and tailored where necessary.

2. How well staff and governors are trained in complaints management

Staff are on the front line and are absolutely key to the success of the school’s approach to effective complaints management. They may be experts in pedagogy, administration or supporting children with special educational needs, but to be effective in avoiding complaints or preventing complaints from escalating, they need to be trained in relevant skills and feel well supported in exercising them. Training should cover not just the complaints procedures, but effective communication skills and conflict resolution strategies. The same is true for governors. If schools want governors get things right when they sit on complaints panels, then they need to clearly understand what is expected of them.

3. The school's systems and processes for undertaking effective investigations

Having processes for managing complaints compliantly and consistently is key. The starting point of any external review is whether the school has followed its published complaints procedure and the timescales set out in it. The investigating officer should be well trained and have sufficient time to be able to undertake a thorough investigation, culminating in a clear report. Using a template outcome letter from a reputable source can help to ensure that a clear and detailed explanation of the decision is effectively communicated to the parent.

Used together, these strategies can assist taking back control of the complaints process but the aim remains to avoid complaints or premature escalation and, ultimately, to preserve the vital relationship between the parent and the school in the best interest of the child.

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