

What can schools learn from businesses on handling parental complaints?

An interview with HSBC's ex-commercial manager

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As schools continue to grapple with the rising volume and complexity of parental complaints, they find themselves searching for solutions from various sources.

Browne Jacobson's spring 2024 [School Leaders Survey](#) illustrated the growing issue, with 65% of respondents saying they had [experienced an increase in complaints](#) during the 2023-24 academic year.

Our education team has provided advice on [navigating parental complaints](#) and [proactively handling vexatious complaints](#).

During the 2024/25 academic year, we turn our attentions to what schools and academy trusts can learn about complaints management from other industries.

Here, **Malcolm Broad MBE**, a school governor who prior to retiring was responsible for dealing with customer complaints to HSBC across five counties in South-West England as a former Area Customer Services Manager, speaks to **Victoria Hatton**, Senior Associate in Browne Jacobson's education team, about his experiences and relevant takeaways for schools and trusts.

Can you tell us about a time when you had to handle a difficult customer complaint during your time at HSBC?

I remember one particular complaint that was escalated to HSBC Customer Complaints in London. It involved a customer who had received paying-in books from the bank on the first anniversary of her husband's death. He ran a business but the business account had been closed down not long after his death. The arrival of the paying-in books on the anniversary of his death was deeply upsetting for the customer.

I immediately apologised to the customer and assured her that the situation would never be repeated. However, I felt that a simple apology wasn't enough to make up for the distress caused. So, I decided to go the extra mile and ordered a basket of flowers to be delivered to her home on the following Saturday. I chose a basket of flowers instead of a bouquet, so that she wouldn't have to arrange the flowers herself. The local florist delivered the basket as planned.

The customer called me the following Monday. She was overjoyed and grateful for the gesture.

That's a great story. It really highlights the importance of going above and beyond for customers. Do you think this approach is always necessary when dealing with complaints?

It depends on the situation. Obviously, not every complaint requires such a grand gesture. However, I do believe that taking the time to listen to the customer, empathise with their situation, and do what you can to make things right can go a long way in building trust and loyalty. In the end, a happy customer is always worth the effort.

With over 20 years of experience as a governor and/or trustee in both the maintained and independent sectors, I'm curious to know how you've seen the number and nature of parent complaints change over time?

I have definitely seen an escalation in the number of complaints received by schools and trusts over the years. Historically, most complaints were dealt with at an informal level with a local teacher. However, we have seen increasing numbers of parents reaching for the complaints policy and instigating the formal route to deal with their complaint.

There are many factors that have contributed to this change. One of the main reasons is the rise of social media, where disgruntled parents are quite happy to tell their story to their Facebook group contacts. Additionally, with primary schools, parents talking among themselves at the school gates can also contribute to the escalation of complaints.

Another factor is the ongoing cost of living problem, which means resources at local authorities, GPs and schools have become so stretched that it's having a serious and adverse impact on children, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Lastly, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the relationship between schools and parents, especially with teaching remotely. This has led to an increase in complaints as parents have had to navigate new ways of learning and communication with schools.

That's a really interesting perspective. How do you think schools and multi-academy trusts can address this issue?

It's important for schools and multi-academy trusts to have a clear and transparent complaints policy in place. This should include a process for handling complaints, as well as a commitment to resolving issues in a timely and effective manner.

It's also important to listen to parents' concerns and to take them seriously, even if they are expressed informally. By building trust with parents and being responsive to their needs, schools and multi-academy trusts can help to prevent complaints from escalating.

What do you think are the key differences are in the way that commercial institutions, such as HSBC, handle customer complaints compared to how schools and academy trusts manage complaints from parents and carers?

In a commercial setting, the impact of poor customer service can, and often does, impact the bottom line – i.e. profit. Poor service can also impact upon customer loyalty and reputational damage. Therefore, commercial institutions like HSBC have a vested interest in handling customer complaints effectively and efficiently.

I recently had an issue with a tin of mandarins that I purchased from a very famous supplier. When I opened the tin, the mandarin segments had disintegrated, leaving the juice with bits. I wrote to the supplier, whose complaints team was extremely apologetic and sent me a £5 voucher. This gesture of apology and reimbursement made me feel valued as a customer and more likely to remain loyal to that brand.

On the other hand, in the education sector, parents and carers do not have the same level of choice as customers in a commercial setting. While they can exercise their right to choose another school, it's not always easy to find an alternative school if they are dissatisfied.

Additionally, schools and academy trusts do not always have a dedicated customer complaints team, or someone who owns and deals with complaints. However, we are fast learning in trusts that we need someone or some people to fulfil a similar role.

Trusts must ensure that all complaints are treated the same way, to ensure a consistent approach and to avoid unhelpful accusations that one school is better or worse than another, or that the process is handled differently from one school to the next.

How do you think schools and academy trusts can improve their approach to handling complaints?

Schools and academy trusts should have someone who is responsible for dealing with complaints and ensuring they are handled consistently across all schools in the trust. By doing so, schools can build trust with parents and carers and avoid reputational damage.

Complaint investigations should be undertaken by staff, trustees or governors who have been trained to carry out such work. In situations where a complaint is escalated and the need for a complaints panel is required, training should be provided. To ensure a consistent approach at such panel hearings, it may be a good idea to have a pool of staff, trustees or governors to call upon.

What does effective complaints management look like in commercial institutions?

The most successful commercial institutions know that owning a problem when one arises is really important. They understand that saying sorry at the outset can often take the initial sting out of a complaint. However, it's important to note that an apology needs to be clear and unambiguous, even if the customer is wrong. So, any letter or email to a customer needs to say in the first sentence, "I am sorry".

Handling the complaint quickly and efficiently is also key, letting the customer know how long any investigation may take, and keeping them informed on progress. Finally, they should be made aware how to escalate the complaint if they are unhappy with the final outcome.

How can schools and trusts learn from this approach?

I have seen many instances where all the parent wanted was an apology, yet the school or trust has spent an incredible amount of time, energy and resources defending its position, which wasn't needed and actually, in some cases, made the complaint worse.

By owning the problem and apologising at the outset, schools and trusts can show they take complaints seriously and are willing to take responsibility for their mistakes.

I would want to encourage schools to be creative about complaint outcomes regardless of whether a complaint is upheld or not. Often, there will be actions that a school has agreed to follow up.

Let the parent know when such actions have been implemented. Apply what I call the "wow" factor by doing something the parent doesn't expect – this could be just inviting them in for a coffee or chat about how the school has taken their complaint seriously, and explaining the actions taken by the school since the complaint was first raised.

It's important to remember that effective complaints management is not just about resolving the issue at hand, but also about building trust and maintaining a positive relationship with the parent or customer.

Malcolm is a former Senior Commercial Manager with HSBC Bank plc. Alongside his banking career he has more than 20 years' experience as a governor and/or trustee in the maintained and independent sectors. He is a former National Leader of Governance 2016-21 and formerly Chair of Governors at Sexey's School, Bruton. Malcolm co-founded Ablaze, an independent charity tackling inequality of opportunity for young people in the West of England which won the coveted Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2011. Away from education Malcolm is a director of the Baptist Insurance Company plc and former treasurer of Baptist Union of Great Britain. Malcolm was awarded an MBE for services to education in Bristol in December 2007.

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