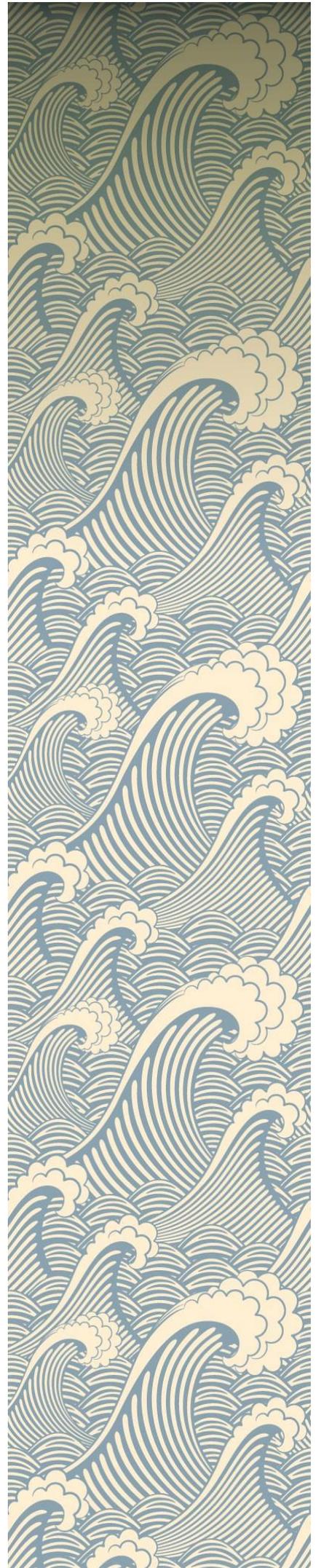




Griffin Schools Trust

Complaints Policy



Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Purpose	3
3. Scope.....	3
4. Equal Opportunities	3
5. Responsibilities.....	4
6. Timing.....	4
7. The Procedure.....	4
8. Investigating complaints	5
9. Stage 1: Informal Stage:	5
10. Stage 2 Formal Stage:.....	5
11. Stage 3 Formal Stage:.....	6
12. Stage 4 Formal Stage:.....	6
13. Notification of the panel’s decision.....	7
14. Record keeping.....	7
15. Vexatious Complaints	8
16. Harassment	8
17. Trust Head Office Complaints	8
18. Publicising the Procedure	9
19. Review	9

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This policy is intended to clarify how a concern or complaint regarding the Griffin Schools Trust (GST), or any school within the Trust, can be raised and how the process will be handled.
- 1.2 It is in everyone's interest that complaints about the School or Trust raised by parents, students and members of the public are resolved at the earliest possible stage. The experience of the first contact between the complainant and the school can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, the school and Trust must be clear about the procedures they will apply when they receive a complaint.
- 1.3 A complaint is defined as, “an expression of dissatisfaction requiring a response”. However, the Trust do not anticipate that all such expressions of dissatisfaction should be dealt with through the formal elements of this complaints process. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will aim to reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints. The underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally.
- 1.4 An anonymous concern or complaint will not be investigated under this procedure, unless there are exceptional circumstances. All complaints will be treated in a confidential manner, to ensure that a complainant does not feel the need to raise a complaint anonymously and to ensure a full complaints process can be undertaken.
- 1.5 To enable a proper investigation, concerns or complaints should be brought to the attention of the school or Trust as soon as possible. In general, any matter raised more than three months after the event, being complained of, will not be investigated.

2. Purpose

- 2.1 This policy aims to:
 - Encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible
 - Be easily accessible and publicised
 - Be simple to understand and use
 - Be impartial and non-adversarial
 - Allow swift handling with established time-limits for action
 - Ensure a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary.

3. Scope

- 3.1 This procedure applies to external complaints relating to all GST schools along with the Trust's Head Office.

4. Equal Opportunities

- 4.1 The Complaints Policy must always be applied fairly and in accordance with the schools Equal Opportunities Policy.

5. Responsibilities

- 5.1 GST is responsible for maintaining a fair and consistent Complaints policy.
- 5.2 The Head has overall responsibility for the internal organisation, control and management of the policy in school.
- 5.3 Each GST school will have a nominated Complaints Co-ordinator whose responsibility it is to operate and manage the Complaints policy within the school.
- 5.4 The Clerk of the complaints committee will be the contact point for the complainant for Stages 3 and 4 of this procedure and be required to set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible; collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing (recommended at least five school days in advance); meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing; record the proceedings and notify all parties of the panel's decision.
- 5.5 The role of the Chair of the Governing Body is to check that the correct procedure has been followed and if a hearing is requested, notify the clerk to arrange the panel.
- 5.6 The Chair of the Panel has a key role, ensuring that the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption; the issues are addressed and key findings of fact are made; parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease; the hearing is conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy; the panel is open minded and acting independently; no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure; each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions and that written material is seen by all parties.
- 5.7 Griffin Schools Trust expects anyone who wishes to raise a concern or complaint to:
 - treat all members of the school community with courtesy and respect
 - respect the needs of pupils and staff within the school
 - avoid the use of violence, or threats of violence, towards people or property
 - recognise the time constraints under which members of staff in schools work and allow the school a reasonable time to respond to a complaint
 - follow the complaints procedure.

6. Timing

- 6.1 Complaint matters should normally be conducted within the timescales laid down in the procedure.

7. The Procedure

- 7.1 The Stages of the Complaints Procedure:
 - Stage 1 (informal): complaint heard by staff member
 - Stage 2 (formal): complaint heard by Head
 - Stage 3 (formal): complaint heard by Governors Complaints Panel
 - Stage 4 (formal): complaint heard by Governors Appeals Panel.

- 7.2 At each stage in the Complaints Procedure, all involved will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved including the following:
- an apology or explanation
 - an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
 - an assurance that the event will not recur and an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again

8. Investigating complaints

- 8.1 It is suggested that at each stage, the responsible officer makes sure that they:
- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved
 - clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved
 - meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is necessary)
 - clarify what the complainant feels would put things right
 - interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
 - conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
 - keep notes of the interview or arrange for an independent note taker to record minutes of the meeting

9. Stage 1: Informal Stage:

Complaint Heard by Staff member

- 9.1 It is normally appropriate to communicate directly with the member of staff that the complaint relates to. This may be by letter, telephone or in person by a pre-arranged appointment requested via the school. If you are uncertain about who to contact, please seek advice from the school office or Trust Head Office.
- 9.2 If there is a difficulty in discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff, the Complaints Co-ordinator can be contacted to request to refer the complainant to another staff member. Please contact the school office for information in relation to this.
- 9.3 Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the Complaints Co-ordinator may consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be.
- 9.4 Where the first approach is made to a governor, the Complaints Co-ordinator will be informed. Governors will not respond to complaints outside of the formal procedure.
- 9.5 Many concerns can be resolved by simple clarification and it is anticipated that most complaints will be resolved by this informal stage.

10. Stage 2 Formal Stage:

Complaint Heard by Head

- 10.1 If your concern or complaint is not resolved at the informal stage you may choose to put the complaint in writing and pass it to the Head, who will be responsible for ensuring that it is investigated appropriately.

- 10.2 You should include details which might assist the investigation, such as names of potential witnesses, dates and times of events and copies of relevant documents. It is very important that you include a clear statement of the actions that you would like the school to take to resolve your concern. Without this, it is much more difficult to proceed.
- 10.3 The Head may invite you to a meeting to clarify your concerns and to explore the possibility of an informal resolution. If you accept that invitation, you may be accompanied by a friend, if you wish, to assist you in explaining the nature of your concerns.
- 10.4 Within 5 days of receiving your formal complaint, the school will respond with how it intends to proceed, including an indication of the anticipated timescale. Any investigation will begin as soon as possible and when it has been concluded, you will be informed in writing of its conclusion.
- 10.5 If the complaint is in relation to the Head, this stage of the Complaint will be heard by the Chair of Governors or Griffin Schools Trust Lead.

11. Stage 3 Formal Stage: Complaint Heard by Governors Complaints Panel

- 11.1 If the complainant is not satisfied with the response of the Head, they can write to the Chair of Governors to request that their complaint is considered further.
- 11.2 The clerk will convene a panel of three. Two panel members will be governors who have not previously been involved with the complaint. At least one member of the panel will be required to be independent of the running and management of the school, and will therefore not be a governor or member of SLT. The complainant should submit the details of their concerns, in writing, to the clerk. The clerk will seek similar written responses from the school, where this is necessary.
- 11.3 A meeting of the panel will take place, usually within 10 school days, to consider the matter. The complainant (who may be accompanied by a friend if they wish) and representative(s) from the school (who may also be accompanied by workplace colleagues or representatives from their professional associations) may be invited to attend this meeting in order to clarify the matter. As the panel meeting is investigatory in nature, the persons giving evidence or making representations to the panel will normally attend separately.
- 11.4 When the panel has collected sufficient information, it will deliberate and then inform the complainant, the Head and the governing body of the outcome, in writing.
- 11.5 Consideration of the complaint by the governing body and the school, save for any actions that are agreed, will terminate at this point.

12. Stage 4 Formal Stage: Complaint Heard by Governing Body Complaints Appeal Panel

- 12.1 The complainant usually needs to write to the Clerk to the Governing Body giving details of the complaint and asking that it is put before the appeal panel. The Chair, or if the Chair has been involved at any previous stage in the process, a nominated governor, will convene a complaints panel.

- 12.2 The governors' appeal hearing is the last school-based stage of the complaints process.
- 12.3 The panel can be drawn from the nominated members and may consist of three people. The panel may choose their own Chair. No governor may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it. It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial.
- 12.4 The panel can:
- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part
 - uphold the complaint in whole or in part
 - decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
 - recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur
- 12.5 The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised that the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that their complaint has been taken seriously.
- 12.6 An effective panel will acknowledge that many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child. The panel Chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial.
- 12.7 Extra care needs to be taken when the complainant is a child. Careful consideration of the atmosphere and proceedings will ensure that the child does not feel intimidated. The panel needs to be aware of the views of the child and give them equal consideration to those of adults. Where the child's parent is the complainant, it would be helpful to give the parent the opportunity to say which parts of the hearing, if any, the child needs to attend.

13. Notification of the panel's decision

- 13.1 The Chair of the Panel needs to ensure that the complainant is notified of the panel's decision, in writing, with the panel's response (including the reasons for the decision).
- 13.2 The final stage of appeal is to the Secretary of State for Education. Complainants should be advised to write to The School Complaints Unit (SCU) at:
- Department for Education
2nd Floor, Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester M1 2WD

14. Record keeping

- 14.1 Schools should record the progress of the complaint and the final outcome. A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing. At the end of a meeting or telephone call, the member of staff will ensure the complainant and the school have the same understanding of what was discussed and agreed. A brief note of meetings and telephone calls will be kept and a copy of any written response will be added to the complaint record, which will be stored confidentially from the date of resolution plus a period of 6 years.

The Complaints Co-ordinator at each GST school is responsible for the records in relation to complaints.

- 14.2 The Trust complies fully with its obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998 and other relevant legislation pertaining to the safe handling, use, storage, retention and disposal of information in relation to Complaints.

15. Vexatious Complaints

- 15.1 If properly followed, the GST Complaints procedure will limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the chair of governors is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed. If the complainant writes again on the same issue, then the correspondence may be recognised as vexatious and there will be no obligation on the part of the school or Trust to respond.
- 15.2 It is important to note however that, should a complainant raise an entirely new, separate complaint, it must be responded to in accordance with the Complaints procedure. It is not the complainant who is vexatious; it is the correspondence.

16. Harassment

- 16.1 We regard harassment as the unreasonable pursuit of issues or complaints, particularly if the matter appears to be pursued in a way intended to cause personal distress rather than to seek a resolution. Behaviour may fall within the scope of this policy if:
- it appears to be deliberately targeted at one or more members of school staff or others, without good cause
 - the way in which a complaint or other issues is pursued (as opposed to the complaint itself) causes undue distress to school staff or others
 - it has a significant and disproportionate adverse effect on the school community
- 16.2 In cases of unreasonably persistent complaints or harassment, the school may take some or all of the following steps, as appropriate:
- inform the complainant informally that their behaviour is now considered by the school to be unreasonable or unacceptable, and request a changed approach
 - require all future meetings with a member of staff to be conducted with a second person present. In the interests of all parties, notes of these meetings may be taken
 - inform the complainant that, except in emergencies, the school will respond only to written communication and that these may be required to be channelled through the Trust

17. Trust Head Office Complaints

- 17.1 If a complaint is sent to Head Office, the Trust will refer to this policy and ensure that it is forwarded to the relevant school Complaints Co-ordinator, if appropriate.
- 17.2 If the complaint relates directly to Head Office, the complaint will be passed to the Chief Executive for review and investigation. Updates as to the progress of the investigation will be given regularly.
- 17.3 If the complaint relates to the Chief Executive, it will be passed to the Chair of the Board for review and investigation.

18. Publicising the Procedure

18.1 This policy will be published on all GST school websites, along with the Trust website, to ensure it is available to all staff, parents and stakeholders.

19. Review

19.1 This policy document will be reviewed by the Griffin Schools Trust Board every two years.

19.2 The Trust and Local Governing Bodies will monitor the level, nature and trends of complaints, and review the outcomes on a regular basis to ensure the effectiveness of the procedure, making changes where necessary.