



COMPLAINTS POLICY

Introduction

St Columba's College is a Mary Aikenhead Ministries College in the tradition of the Sisters of Charity. We are called to develop in each member of our community a contemporary understanding and application of the charism of Venerable Mary Aikenhead and the spirituality of the Sisters of Charity, and the Mary Aikenhead Ministries' mission and vision, and values of justice, love, compassion and hope.

Purpose and Objectives

The Mission and Values of St Columba's College recognise and encourage relationships based on respect and acceptance of one another. As a College community, we recognise the dignity of the individual and understand that a trusting and cooperative relationship between families, the College and the community is best for students.

Complaints help the College community to build and maintain relationships by providing information and feedback to the College, and by providing a valuable opportunity for reflection and learning.

The College recognises the right to make a complaint and its responsibility to provide a framework within which to resolve complaints.

The primary purpose of the Complaints Policy is to resolve complaints with a focus on student wellbeing and to support students to remain engaged in learning.

This policy sets out the internal procedures that apply within the College for addressing student or parent/legal guardian complaints and grievances, to ensure that these are dealt with fairly, consistently, transparently and promptly.

This policy demonstrates the College's commitment to practices that reflect the values of justice and hope. Its purpose is to provide the College's principles and procedures for responding to complaints and resolving a dispute. These internal procedures are a conciliatory and non-legal process.

Definitions

For the purpose of this policy the following terms are defined as follows:

Parent: in relation to a child, includes a legal guardian and any person who has parental responsibility for the child including parental responsibility under the Family Law Act of the Commonwealth, and any person with whom a child normally or regularly resides.

This policy also applies to a person who is authorised to act on behalf of the parent such as a support person or an advocate.

Complaint: a concern, grievance or issue that is raised by a member of the College community (ie student, parent) and which requires a resolution.

Complainant: is the party making the complaint.

Support Person: is someone who assists the complainant through the complaint process.

Advocate: is someone acting on behalf of the complainant.

Respondent: is the party against whom a complaint is lodged.

Staff Member: is someone who carries out a duty on behalf of the College, paid or unpaid, or who is contracted to provide a service to the College, or directly employed by the College.

Implementation

In implementing this policy, the College will:

- respect the rights and responsibilities of all members of the College community
- deal with complaints seriously and impartially
- receive and manage complaints in a way that is culturally safe and sensitive to the diverse circumstances of children and students, as well as providing support to vulnerable children and students
- handle complaints confidentially and sensitively, having due regard to procedural fairness and privacy principles
- ensure information about how to make a complaint is freely available
- encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible
- provide support to the complainant and any person against whom a complaint is made, and ensure that no person is victimised as a result of raising a complaint
- seek to resolve a complaint as early as possible and directly with the people involved
- acknowledge the reciprocal expectations of parents/legal guardians, students and staff members to act in a courteous, respectful, supportive and constructive manner towards one another
- if necessary, seek external support or involvement of relevant agencies in the resolution of a complaint
- bring about any changes deemed to be necessary, which arise from the resolution of a complaint.

Receiving a Complaint

The person receiving the complaint 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 resolution or outcome the complainant is seeking
- speak with those involved in the matter and/or respondents, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- keep notes of the process, discussions and interviews.

Resolving Complaints

It is important to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It would be useful if complainants could state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage.

Staff members are expected to respond in a timely manner and to do so by phone or email. All College staff are required to investigate complaints as per Appendix Three: Investigating a Complaint.

Actions to resolve complaints may include:

- Written acknowledgement of the complaint and the response to it
- An explanation of College processes and procedures
- An admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- An assurance that the event complained of will not reoccur
- An explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again
- An apology
- An undertaking to review College policies in light of the complaint.

Anonymous Complaints

A complainant can ask to remain anonymous. The College is committed to considering all complaints raised. To ensure procedural fairness, respondents have a right to know the particulars of the allegations being made against them and be given an opportunity to respond to them.

However, if a complainant asks to remain anonymous, or the complaint lacks sufficient detail, it may affect the College's ability to investigate, resolve and/or respond to the complaint.

What to do if you have a Complaint

Step 1: Contact the most appropriate staff member, as per the College Communication Guidelines (see Appendix One).

Step 2: Escalate the complaint to the most appropriate middle leader, as per the Communication Guidelines.

Step 3: Escalate to the appropriate member of the Leadership Team by the complainant;

Step 4: Escalate to the Deputy Principal/Principal.

In some rare cases it may not be possible to resolve the complaint to the satisfaction of the complainant using these procedures. In such a case, the complainant should discuss the options for further action with the Principal. Steps 5-7 in the Complaints Handling Flow Chart (see Appendix Two) outline further actions the Complainant may take. This may also include the involvement of external dispute resolution consultants.

Procedures

Step 1: Initial Contact with College Staff

The College values direct communications and expects that individuals (students/parents/legal guardians) will bring a complaint directly to the staff member involved, and that those involved will make every effort to resolve the complaint. Wherever possible, complaints should be resolved by a process of discussion, cooperation and conciliation. The aim is to reach an acceptable outcome, which restores and maintains good relationships. A positive relationship between students, parents/legal guardians and College staff is critical in realising and maintaining the best possible educational outcomes. Complaints can be resolved early when a concern is first raised with the person responsible for the situation.

The complainant should make initial contact with members of the College staff who may be in the best position to resolve the complaint. The College Communication Guidelines (available via the Parent Information Portal on SEQTA) provide the list of appropriate staff for various matters related to a student's enrolment.

If there is uncertainty about the most appropriate person to address the complaint to, contact should be made with College Reception for referral to the appropriate person. Due to teachers' classroom and supervision duties, the first contact is best made by email, with an appointment request for either a phone conference or face-to-face meeting.

Parents/legal guardians and staff are strongly discouraged from sending or discussing confidential, sensitive and/or emotional information via email. These matters are best discussed face to face or over the phone. The College email systems are monitored and should not be considered private. The College will not respond to confidential, abusive or sensitive emails via email and will seek face to face meetings for issues of this nature.

In making a complaint, it is important to clearly outline the concerns or issues (eg academic performance, student behaviour, student/peer incidents) so that the staff member can constructively prepare for the meeting/phone conference. It is useful to think about possible resolutions and outcomes.

If the issue is resolved at this level, this will be documented via the College's internal reporting mechanisms.

If the matter remains unresolved, parents/legal guardians may contact the most appropriate middle leader.

Step 2: Referral to a Middle Leader

If initial communication between the parties does not resolve the complaint, then the complainant may contact the most appropriate middle leader (refer Appendix One) to make an appointment for either a phone conference or a face-to-face meeting and outline the nature of the complaint, either verbally or in writing, and the steps taken to resolve it. See Appendix Three for the steps required to investigate a complaint.

The middle leader will:

- respond in a timely manner to the complainant to organise a meeting/phone conference
- limit information sharing regarding the complaint to the relevant parties
- fully document the complaint, any actions taken to resolve it and outcomes of those actions
- ensure that no one is victimised as a result of a complaint being made
- allow the complainant to be accompanied by a support person
- clarify the nature and content of the complaint with the person against whom the complaint has been made, and inform them of their right to respond, and to be accompanied to any meeting by a support person
- organise a process of mediation, if necessary.

If the matter is not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, they may refer the complaint to a member of the Leadership Team.

Step 3: Referral to a member of the Leadership Team

If the middle leader is unable to resolve the complaint, the complainant may contact the most appropriate member of the Leadership Team (refer Appendix One) to make an appointment for either a phone conference or a face-to-face meeting and outline the nature of the complaint, either verbally or in writing, and the steps taken to resolve it.

The Leadership Team Member will:

- respond in a timely manner to the complainant to organise a meeting/phone conference
- limit information sharing regarding the complaint to the relevant parties
- fully document the complaint, any actions taken to resolve it and outcomes of those actions
- ensure that no one is victimised as a result of a complaint being made
- if necessary, allow the complainant to be accompanied by a support person

- clarify the nature and content of the complaint with the person against whom the complaint has been made, and inform them of their right to respond, and to be accompanied to any meeting by a support person
- organise a process of mediation, if necessary.

If the matter is not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, they may refer the complaint to the Deputy Principal or Principal.

Step 4: Referral to the Deputy Principal/Principal

If the issue remains unresolved after discussion with the relevant person(s) at the College, parents/legal guardians may refer the complaint to the Deputy Principal/Principal.

Following receipt of a complaint, the Deputy Principal/Principal may take some or all of the following actions:

- Acknowledge receipt of a written complaint as soon as possible, ensuring the complainant is aware of the College's complaints procedures
- Record the complaint in the agreed data management system to ensure the complaint can be tracked
- Advise the complainant that a record of their complaint is being maintained
- Contact the complainant for more information to help assess the issues or allegations
- Assess the complaint, which may result in undertaking one or more of the following processes to help resolve it: allow more time for resolution; provide assistance to reach a resolution through Leadership Team support; or arrange for an independent investigation
- Where necessary, seek advice from appropriate sources and/or external agencies to determine how a complaint may be reviewed and whether other avenues of appeal/redress already exist
- Advise the complainant of any delays that may occur in the College's ability to respond within a set timeframe
- Where necessary, actively support the complainant with special needs throughout the complaint process
- Record the outcome of the complaint in the agreed system database
- Communicate the outcome of the complaint investigation to the complainant and the respondent.

Steps 5-7: If Unresolved - Further Actions

If the issue remains unresolved after discussion with the Deputy Principal/Principal, parents/legal guardians may refer the complaint to the Board Chair, then, as per the Complaint Handling Flow Chart (see Appendix Two), if still unresolved to Mary Aikenhead Education Australia (MAEA)/Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS), and then, if necessary, to the Trustees Mary Aikenhead Ministries (TMAM). To commence this process, please contact the Personal Assistant to the Principal who, in the first instance, will escalate to the Board Chair.

Possible Outcomes of a Complaint

If the College's assessment results in the complaint being upheld, then suggested actions could include providing the complainant with:

- an apology or expression of regret
- formal communication of a change of decision, policy, procedure or practice
- the provision of counselling or other support.

If the complaint is not upheld the suggested actions could include providing the complainant with:

- an explanation of:
 - how the decision taken is consistent with College policy
 - how the decision taken is supported by an external agency that specialises in the area

- under consideration
 - how College policies and guidelines are reflected in and supportive of the decision
- the provision of counselling or other support.

Complainants should note that privacy laws may prohibit information being provided to the complainant of any specific action that has been taken in relation to individuals about whom the complaint has been raised. This is also consistent with the College's commitment to uphold the dignity of each person involved during the complaint process.

If the matter cannot be resolved at the College level, or if the complaint is about the Principal, complainants may contact the Chair of the St Columba's College Board, Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools or Mary Aikenhead Education Australia.

Serious or Repeated Complaints or Allegations of Misconduct

Where a complaint relates to an allegation of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, or when complaints are sufficiently serious or repeated, the Principal will be informed and the Principal will follow the processes related to Mandatory Reporting and/or Reportable Conduct.

Depending on the nature of the complaint, Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS), Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and/or the Police may be a point of reference in responding to and resolving the matter.

Child Abuse (including sexual offences)

Child abuse includes any instances of physical or sexual abuse (including grooming), emotional or psychological harm, serious or significant neglect and family violence involving a child.

Complaints of alleged child abuse (including sexual offences) of children or school students should be reported to the Principal.

There are legal obligations on all adults to report child abuse to police once a reasonable belief is formed that a sexual offence may have been committed against a child.

Failure to disclose a sexual offence against a child is a criminal offence under section 327 of the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic.) (Crimes Act) and applies to all adults (18 years of age and over) in Victoria.

Communication with children under 16 years of age by teachers, staff or any other person to prepare or groom a child for future sexual activity is a criminal offence under section 49M(1) of the Crimes Act and must be reported to the police. The offence of grooming applies to any person aged 18 years or over and does not apply to communication between people who are both under 18 years of age.

Complaints Against the Principal

In the case of a complaint involving the Principal, the Board Chair should be informed immediately.

Complaints in Relation to Information Sharing Schemes

St Columba's is a prescribed Information Sharing Entity (ISE) that may share information under the Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS) and the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVISS).

The College, as an ISE, may receive complaints from individuals in relation to its conduct as an ISE under the CISS or FVISS. It may also receive a complaint from another ISE.

The following information is recorded where a complaint is received under the CISS or FVISS:

- the date the complaint was made and received
- the nature of the complaint
- the action taken to resolve the complaint
- the action taken to lessen or prevent the issue from recurring
- the time taken to resolve the complaint
- further action taken if the complaint was not resolved.

Complaints relating to Reportable Conduct

Legal obligations are imposed on the Principal to report to the Commission for Child and Young People (CCYP), and investigate allegations of reportable conduct, where those allegations are based on a person's reasonable belief that reportable conduct or misconduct involving reportable conduct has occurred. Reportable conduct includes the following:

- sexual offences against, with or in the presence of a child
- sexual misconduct against, with or in the presence of a child
- physical violence against, with or in the presence of a child
- behaviour that causes significant psychological or emotional harm
- significant neglect.

Complaints relating to a reportable conduct allegation which meets the requisite threshold and which involves a staff member (which amongst others, can include a teacher, Principal, volunteer or contractor) must be reported.

Complaints of reportable conduct in relation to an employee (other than a Principal) should be reported to the Principal. Complaints of reportable conduct involving the Principal should be reported to the Board Chair.

Avenues of Appeal

If a complaint remains unresolved, the Principal should advise the complainant that he/she may have the right to seek an avenue of appeal through authorities such as Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools or Mary Aikenhead Education Australia. The Human Rights Commission and/or legal representation may also be another avenue of appeal.

Withdrawal of a Complaint

A complaint can be withdrawn at any stage during the complaint management procedures. A complaint should be retracted in writing by the complainant and addressed to the Principal.

POLICY HISTORY AND SCHEDULE

Date of Approval:	August 2023
Approval Authority:	College Leadership Team
Delegated Contact Person:	Principal
Next Review Date:	August 2025

Guidelines for Family Communication about College Related Matters

December 2023

St Columba's College works in an educational partnership with parents/legal guardians to foster authentic and respectful relationships with families that support the holistic development of all students. Interactions with families should focus on achieving the best outcome for the student, while balancing the needs of the student, family and the College. On entering into this partnership, families assume a number of important responsibilities which include loyalty to the College community, a commitment to the College Vision and Mission Statement and support of all College policies and expectations.

It is acknowledged that there may be occasions when parents/legal guardians wish to express concerns or make complaints regarding College matters. Parents/legal guardians are always encouraged to communicate with the relevant College personnel to discuss their concerns.

The College is always available to assist parents/legal guardians through discussion in developing a clearer understanding of College expectations. The College's [Complaints Policy](#) (Students and Parents/Legal Guardians) has been hyperlinked for your information.

The College places high value and priority on maintaining a safe and respectful working environment for our staff. We regard certain behaviours as harmful and unacceptable insofar as they compromise the safety and wellbeing of our staff. Parents/legal guardians are expected to comply with the expectations outlined in the [St Columba's College Parent/Legal Guardian Code of Conduct](#).

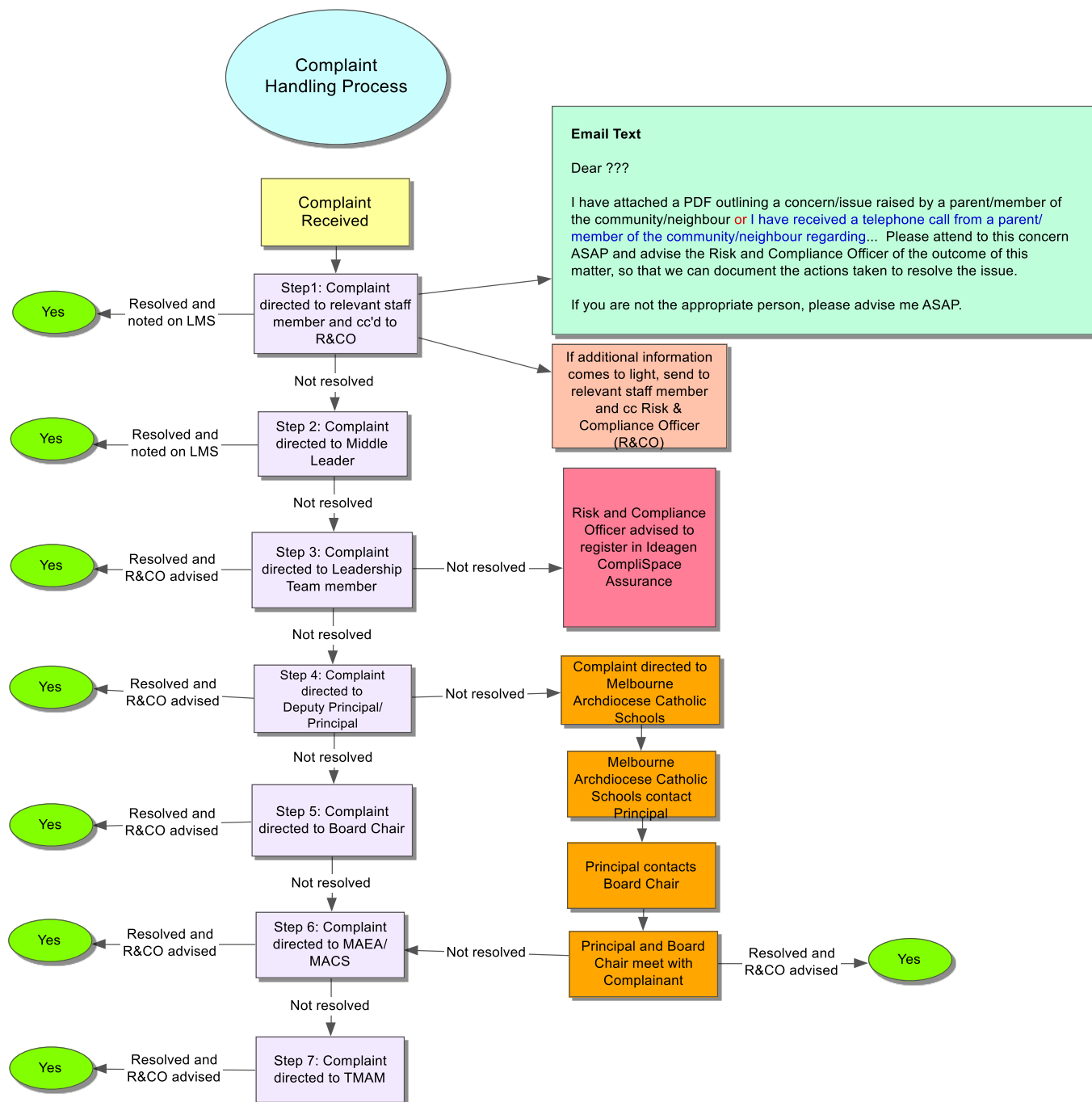
To have specific concerns and complaints addressed, we recommend that initial contact be made with the relevant College personnel in the order below.

In all cases where the matter cannot be satisfactorily resolved, after making contact with the personnel in the order listed in the table below, parents/legal guardians are encouraged to contact the Deputy Principal/Principal.

Curriculum/Book list matters	Subject teacher Learning Area Leader/Innovative Programs Leader Instructional Leader
VCE matters	VCE Leader Head of Learning & Teaching
VET matters	Applied Learning Leader Head of Learning & Teaching
Student academic progress	Subject teacher Instructional Leader House Leader Head of Learning & Teaching
Learning Diversity (Individual needs)	Learning Diversity Leader Director of Students Head of Learning & Teaching

Student wellbeing matters	House Group Teacher House Leader Director of Students Head of Students
Sport Co-curricular matters	Team Coach Sports Administrator Head of College Operations
Performing Arts Co-curricular matters	Performing Arts Administrator Music Programs Director Head of College Operations
Uniform	House Group Teacher House Leader Director of Students Head of Students
Financial	Finance Officer - Family Accounts Business Manager
Enrolments	Registrar Principal
eBooks, College digital device matters	Help Desk Network and Systems Manager Learning Technologies Leader

Appendix Two: Complaint Handling Flow Chart



Appendix Three: Investigating a Complaint

The person investigating the complaint 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 if further information is required)
- clarify what resolution or outcome the complainant is seeking
- speak with those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- keep notes of the process, discussions and interviews
- contact the complainant and the respondent at the conclusion of the investigation to provide the outcome of the investigation
- advise the complainant of the escalation processes available to them.