

School complaints culture and staff support

In this article we set out some of the support that's available to schools in a bid to reduce the overhead that complaints management generates.

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The beginning of the academic year has seen an almost immediate launch into parental and non-parental complaints.

The process appears to favour the complainant

Whilst we can speculate as to why the tendency to complain seems to have increased and become less of a last resort and more of a first response, it is clear the nature and intensity of the complaints has affected both the complainants and the resilience of those being complained about.

It is important to take all but the silliest of complaints seriously, and all complainants need to be treated with deference and politeness. It is difficult for a member of staff to be accused of un-professional behaviour and to suffer allegations that could be harmful to their career whilst the process appears to favour the complainant.

It is not possible or appropriate to provide assurances or predict supportive outcomes when the decision-making is in third party panels' hands. The required independence of the process can lead to the accused feeling out of control and isolated. The same need for independence leads to a degree of formality that can appear intimidating and uncomfortable for the accused whilst appearing to give the weight of credibility to their claims.

Duty of care

Whilst the process is designed to resolve complaints as quickly as possible, it is still a long time for the person who is accused to carry on as normal without knowing what the outcome will be.

It is important, then, for the Trust or governing body to have a support strategy to assist those going through the experience: complaint mentors or coordinators to update on process, and peer-to-peer support to enable discussion without judgement. This is part of the duty of care an employer owes to their staff. It can be good for morale for staff to know they have the support when they need it most, and it can prove to be vital to their mental health and help sustain their loyalty as they go through the process and following its resolution.

The increase and intensity of school complaints poses a challenge for all involved and can sap valuable resource, time and energy; but help is available. We offer guidance, advice and resources to effectively handle complaints and resolve disputes as well as being able to support you and your team to reduce the overhead that complaints management generates.

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