

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE for PARENTS

Introduction

Tonbridge School has long prided itself on the quality of the teaching and pastoral care provided to its pupils. However, if parents do have a complaint, they can expect it to be treated by the School in accordance with this Procedure. If at any time parents have cause for concern or occasion for complaint, they should raise the matter with the school as soon as possible. All concerns or complaints will be taken seriously and with respect, and the school will respond promptly. The sooner the school hears of a problem or potential problem, the sooner and more easily the problem can be investigated (if there is need for wider exploration) and meet with a satisfactory resolution.

Stage 1: Informal Resolution

It is hoped that most complaints and concerns will be resolved quickly and informally. Parents with cause for concern or complaint should feel free to talk directly to a member of staff, to telephone, or to write with details of the issue that concerns them. In the first instance, it may be best to address a concern to the member of staff most closely involved in the matter at issue (such as Housemaster or Head of Department), who may well be able to resolve the problem quickly: but there may be some concerns which parents prefer to bring directly to the Second Master or the Headmaster.

Any complaint will receive a prompt response: either by immediate discussion (and, it is hoped, resolution) in person or by telephone, or, if wider consultation and/or investigation is required, by letter as soon as possible setting out the conclusion of the inquiry, the reasons for it, and any action taken or proposed. If such action includes use of the disciplinary procedures for staff, this will be handled confidentially within the school. The member of staff will make a written record of all concerns and complaints and the date on which they were received. This record will be kept by the Headmaster's Office and periodically monitored by the Second Master. Should the matter not be resolved within 14 days, or in the event that the member of staff and the parent fail to reach a satisfactory resolution, then parents will be advised to proceed with their complaint in accordance with Stage 2 of this Procedure as detailed below.

Confidentiality will be observed as far as is consistent with proper investigation and effective handling of a complaint. It is school policy that the voicing of a concern or the making of a complaint by a parent should not in any way rebound adversely on their son.

Any complaint against the Headmaster should be made directly to the Chairman of Governors at the address set out below. He will be responsible for investigating the complaint appropriately, responding to the complainant in line with the procedures above and keeping his own record of any such complaints.

The Tonbridge School Behaviour Policy sets out the circumstances in which the Headmaster may expel a boy. Wherever practicable, the parents of the boy concerned will be invited to discuss the issue with the Headmaster (or in his absence the Second Master) before a final decision is taken. The Headmaster is required to inform the Chairman of Governors without delay of the decision and the circumstances. If the parents wish to contest the Headmaster's decision, they may exercise a right of appeal to the Appeal Committee of the Governors following the Stage 3 Procedure set out below.

Stage 2: Formal Resolution

If the complaint cannot be resolved on an informal basis, then the parents should put their complaint in writing to the Headmaster. The Headmaster will decide, after considering the complaint, the appropriate course of action to take. In most cases, the Headmaster will meet with the parents concerned, normally within 14 days of receiving the complaint, to discuss the matter. If possible, a resolution will be reached at this stage, although it may be necessary for the Headmaster to carry out further investigations. The Headmaster will keep written records of all meetings and interviews held in relation to the complaint.

Once the Headmaster is satisfied that, so far as is practicable, all of the relevant facts have been established, a decision will be made and parents will be informed of this decision in writing. The Headmaster will also give reasons for his decision. If parents are still not satisfied with the decision, they should proceed to Stage 3 of this Procedure.

Stage 3: Appeal Committee of the Governors

The Appeal Committee will consist of two Governors, neither of whom will have had previous involvement in the Headmaster's decision or in the matters subject to complaint, and a third person, independent of the management and governing of the school.

Notice of the appeal must be sent in writing to the Chairman of Governors at the address below, setting out fully all the reasons for making the complaint or contesting the Headmaster's decision. If the appeal arises out of a decision by the Chairman in respect of a complaint against the Headmaster, then the letter should be addressed to the Deputy Chairman at the same address. Included should be any documents or other evidence or details of witness to fact or character on which the parents intend to rely. Any appeal against expulsion should be received within ten days from the date when the Headmaster's decision took effect.

The Chairman of Governors (or, as in the circumstances above, the Deputy Chairman) will inform the Headmaster that an appeal has been lodged, and send all relevant papers to the Secretary of the Appeal Committee. The Secretary of the Appeal Committee will then communicate with the appellant(s), collect together all the relevant papers and make the necessary arrangements for the appeal hearing. The Headmaster's response to the appellant(s) will be included in the papers to be provided to the latter. The hearing must take place within twenty-one days from the notice of appeal being received, unless otherwise agreed between the school and the appellant(s).

The appellant(s) has the right to attend in person to make oral representations and should inform the Secretary of the Appeal Committee in writing of his request to attend within five days of the notification of the date of the hearing. The notification will contain instructions in respect of attendance. If no such request is made, the Appeal Committee will determine the appeal on the written submissions only.

The Secretary of the Appeal Committee will give the Headmaster and the appellant(s) not less than seven days' notice of the date, time and place of the appeal hearing and whether it is to be determined by oral hearing or on the basis of written submissions, depending on the response of the appellant(s).

In the case of an oral appeal hearing, unless otherwise determined by the Appeal Committee, the following shall apply:

- The appeal hearing shall be in private, and everything said at the appeal hearing shall be confidential.

- Neither the parents nor the Headmaster will be entitled to put before the Appeal Committee any document or other evidence which did not accompany the notice of appeal or the Headmaster's response or was not provided to the Appeal Committee and the other party at least 14 days before the hearing date unless the Appeal Committee shall determine otherwise.
- The appellant(s) and the Headmaster may be accompanied to the hearing by one other person whose details must be provided in advance to the Secretary, together with a statement of the capacity in which they are attending. This may be a relative, teacher or friend, but legal representation will not normally be appropriate. Such person must undertake to respect the confidentiality of the appeal and shall not have the right to address the appeal hearing, unless expressly invited by the Committee.
- The Headmaster or appellant(s) must inform the Secretary to the Appeal Committee in advance if they wish to call any witness to give evidence before the Appeal Committee detailing the person they wish to attend, the purpose, and the role that person is expected to play.
- The appellant(s) will first set out their case, the Headmaster will respond, and the appellant(s) will have the opportunity to reply to any new material raised by the Headmaster before the Appeal Committee retires to consider and make its decision.

Within seven days of the appeal hearing, whether that hearing is oral or based solely on written evidence, the Secretary to the Appeal Committee will write to the appellant(s), the Headmaster, the Governors and, where relevant, the person complained about, setting out the decision of the Committee, the reasons for that decision, and any recommendations made.

The Appeal Committee's decision shall be final and not subject to further appeal. A statement to this effect will be contained within the letter detailing the decision of the Committee.

Other Considerations

Parents can be assured that all concerns and complaints will be treated seriously and confidentially. Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or body conducting an inspection under section 162A of the 2002 Act, as amended, requests access to them, or where disclosure is required under other legal authority.

Boarders and their parents can also contact Ofsted: Dr. Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director, Ofsted National Business Unit, Royal Exchange Buildings, St. Ann's Square, Manchester M2 7LA; 08456 404040 or 0300 123 4666; enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk. Boarders and their parents can also contact the Local Authority Designated Officer: Helen Windiate, West Kent Area Children's Officer, 17 Kings Hill Avenue, Kings Hill, West Malling, ME19 4UL; 01732 525035.

The correspondence address for the Chairman of Governors is Skinners' Hall, 8 Dowgate Hill, London, EC4R 2SP (Telephone: 020 7236 5629).