
Dispute Resolution (Parents) Policy

Date: March 2022

Next Review: March 2025

1. Preamble

- 1.1. At Swan Hill Christian School (SHCS), a high value is placed on sustaining relationships within the school community that are characterised by justice, respect, compassion, honesty, trust and grace.
- 1.2. As a Christian community, SHCS strives for harmony and good relationships. However, it is recognised that disputes will arise within the school community from time-to-time and these need to be satisfactorily and promptly resolved. Members of the school community are encouraged to endeavour to resolve any dispute they may have at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 1.3. It is desired that members of the school community are able to resolve disputes to their satisfaction internally, without feeling that they have to refer to external organisations or authorities for assistance.
- 1.4. The process of dispute resolution should always be characterised by love, honesty, respect, fairness, justice, forgiveness and confidentiality.
- 1.5. The Bible gives clear direction in relation to this matter, including in the following verses:
 - Matthew 18:15-16 says, "If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him – work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along ... and try again."
 - Ephesians 4:2-3 says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."
 - Colossians 3:13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another."
- 1.6. Clear policies and procedures need to be in place to assist with the dispute resolution process.

2. Purpose

- 2.1. As a Christian community, SHCS seeks to maintain and, when necessary, restore peaceful relationships among all community members. In the first instance, this is out of obedience to Scripture (John 13:34, Rom 12:18) and for our commitment to caring for each other (Luke 10:27).
- 2.2. This policy also exists to ensure that SHCS has a just, effective and efficient process to deal with concerns or grievances that parents and guardians may have from time-to-time.

3. Scope

- 3.1. This policy applies to disputes involving parents and guardians within the SHCS community in relation to an operational matter. It does not apply to concerns of staff members or students.

4. Definitions

- 4.1. *Dispute* refers to a difference of opinion, disagreement, complaint, concern or grievance.
- 4.2. *Operational matter* refers to a matter that relates to day-to-day operations and/or management.

5. **Guiding Principles**

- 5.1. As a Christian community, mindful that we bear witness for God in this world, we strive to maintain an environment of unity in Christ, and acknowledge that in the Scriptures we each are urged to:
- 5.2. "... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:1-6)
- 5.3. In light of item 5.1 above, we strive as a community to maintain unity and peace through open communication and respect for one another, recognising that unity does not mean conformity.
- 5.4. We embrace the opportunity that productive disagreement or conflict can provide, and we welcome and value diversity of opinion. While able to cause tensions, differences need not be threatening; they can be God's way of enriching our community.
- 5.5. Conflict generally will involve both disagreements or conflicts over a substantive issue and the fracturing of a relationship. We recognise that real resolution involves the preservation or restoration of the relationship as well as working through the substantive issues of the disagreement or conflict. We commit to working to achieve true and complete reconciliation in resolving concerns, disagreements and conflicts within the community.

6. **Process for Managing a Disagreement or Conflict**

- 6.1. The Bible provides us with great wisdom for dealing with disagreement and conflict. It commands and challenges us to bring honour and glory to God through all of our interactions, during times of peace or conflict with one another. When people have a disagreement or conflict within our community, we strongly encourage them to be guided in their one-to-one interaction by the peace-making principles, found throughout the Bible and particularly in Matthew 5 & 18, in order to resolve the substantive and relational issues at the heart of the disagreement or conflict.
- 6.2. Any parent involved in the SHCS community has the right to raise a concern and have it responded to promptly, fairly and without fear of repercussion. Information regarding the process for making enquiries, or raising concerns, will be made available to all members of the SHCS community.
- 6.3. Members of the SHCS community have a responsibility to raise their concerns at the earliest possible time. Generally, the greatest success in resolving issues is where they are addressed as soon as they arise.
- 6.4. If a disagreement or conflict arises between a parent/guardian and a staff member or other community member, the people involved must first meet together to clearly and respectfully discuss the issues involved and attempt to resolve the matter. Issues may be able to be resolved at this one-to-one level, with forgiveness and restoration being the optimal conclusion.
- 6.5. Where an issue is raised, everyone involved is expected to treat one another as they would wish to be treated, and speak to one another with respect and expectation of understanding and resolution. Once a concern has been raised, the person raising the concern shall be informed of the capacity to access mediation at any stage throughout this process. Where a mediator is involved, that person will be independent and acceptable to both parties.

- 6.6. Where resolution is not achieved at a one-to-one level, the Bible provides a clear process for continuing to bring glory to God through our interactions, even in times of disagreement or conflict. Under the Matthew 18 biblical principle, where the people involved in a disagreement or conflict fail to reach a resolution in a timely manner, they should request a person with pastoral responsibility for them to assist them to come to a resolution and restoration of their relationship.
 - 6.7. Within the context of SHCS, this will generally mean referring the matter to a relevant staff member to facilitate further discussion between the parties involved.
 - 6.8. Every person involved in a disagreement or conflict has both the right to confidentiality, and the responsibility to maintain confidentiality. Where it is deemed appropriate to inform other people of the disagreement or conflict, every person involved will be informed of this and the reasons for involving another person.
 - 6.9. While resolving a disagreement or conflict can be an ongoing, lengthy and potentially frustrating process at times, it is the best possible way to bring about actual resolution of both the relational and substantive issues between the people involved. Therefore, where those involved remain willing to participate in this process, SHCS will support their efforts in whatever manner may be appropriate and required. This may include bringing in outside resources to assist the people involved in bringing about resolution.
 - 6.10. If a parent approaches another SHCS community member in circumstances where application of this policy would be appropriate, the person approached needs to insist that the person involved follow the proper procedure. The first step will be to meet directly with the person with whom they have an issue.
7. **Process for Managing Formal Complaint Proceedings**
- 7.1. It may happen that resolution is still not reached, even after sustained effort and despite following the steps outlined above, or there is unwillingness by a party to engage in the prescribed process. In such circumstances, formal complaint proceedings will need to take place in order to bring about some form of resolution regarding at least the substantive issues of the disagreement or conflict.
 - 7.2. In order to initiate formal complaint proceedings, any party to the issue (or the facilitator) may make a written complaint addressed to the Principal. Where a disagreement or conflict involves the Principal, the matter should be referred in writing directly to the Board Chairman.
 - 7.3. Note that the escalation described in item 7.2 above should not happen while there is still the chance for resolution to be achieved through continued discussion, because it limits the possibility to resolve the relational difficulties that are often central in a conflict.
 - 7.4. Any written complaint to initiate formal complaint proceedings must contain sufficient and specific detail of the basis of the disagreement or conflict, whilst having regard for matters of confidentiality and competing duties of care.
 - 7.5. Upon receiving a written complaint, the Principal or Board Chairman is responsible for undertaking formal complaint proceedings, with intent to resolve the substantive issues of the disagreement or conflict.
 - 7.6. SHCS is committed to dealing promptly with issues and disputes as they arise.
 - 7.7. At the time the written complaint is acknowledged, a timeframe for the formal complaint proceedings shall be discussed and agreed to.

- 7.8. When undertaking formal complaint proceedings, the Principal or Board Chairman shall ensure that all relevant parties:
- are informed in writing of the complaint;
 - have the opportunity to place their version on the record; and
 - are informed that they have the opportunity to bring a support person to a meeting if they wish.
- 7.9. The Principal or Board Chairman shall assist the parties to formal complaint proceedings to attempt to reach a resolution, personally or through a delegate, by facilitating a meeting and mediating discussion.
- 7.10. Procedural fairness must be exercised in any formal complaint proceedings. This ensures that all parties involved will receive a fair hearing and any final decision will be made without bias. The principles of procedural fairness are as follows:
- The person considering the issue will act impartially
 - Anyone involved has the right to be heard fully
 - Anyone involved has the right to have a support person present
 - All relevant information will be considered
 - Where a conflict of interest arises or is perceived to arise, a mutually acceptable independent person may be brought in
- 7.11. Accurate and appropriate notes of meetings will be kept with due regard to the confidentiality of the people involved.
- 7.12. Subsequent to these proceedings, the Principal or Board Chairman may initiate appropriate action within the school community, where agreed by the parties involved, as part of any resolution to the disagreement, conflict or complaint.
- 7.13. The Principal or Board Chairman shall maintain records of the formal complaint proceedings and the outcome. These records will include any statements made by the parties involved, and will be kept and used in accordance with the conditions of the Commonwealth Privacy Act (1988).
- 7.14. If a resolution has not been reached within the initially agreed timeframe (or extended time as mutually agreed), any of the parties involved may request that the matter be referred, with full details, to the Principal or Board Chairman, who may make further enquiry or meet with the people involved if deemed appropriate.
- 7.15. Further to item 7.14 above, the Principal or Board Chairman shall make a decision regarding the substantive issues with reference to all the written material provided, and shall inform each party of the decision made.
- 7.16. Any request for review of the process and outcome of the decision made by the Principal or Board Chairman may be addressed through the Board. However, it should be noted that the role of the Board in day-to-day operational matters is to ensure that matters have been handled in accordance with policy and procedure. All parties to the formal complaint proceedings shall be notified of the findings of any Board review.
- 7.17. At the end of any conflict resolution process, actions taken shall be evaluated and procedures reviewed. This evaluation and review shall be initiated by the facilitator at the level of resolution (e.g. Principal or Board-appointed facilitator).