PUBLIC COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS – GUIDELINES

A. The purpose of any complaint resolution process is to give the person(s) complaining an opportunity to be fully heard and a prompt, fair and reasonable response to their concern.

B. The following guidelines are established for all staff members in dealing with questions, concerns or complaints.

1. Be courteous. Even though people are sometimes upset or impatient with a particular situation, everyone is entitled to a courteous hearing.

2. Be patient. When people are upset or under the pressure of making a complaint, they often have trouble expressing themselves clearly. Do not hurry them or try to put words in their mouth.

3. Be a good listener. Give the person a careful hearing. Often, people find their own solutions to problems if they simply have an opportunity to vent their emotions or to “talk through” the problem.

4. Ask clarifying questions if necessary. Give the person an opportunity to thoroughly state his or her concern first, preferably without interruption. Then, if necessary to clarify the exact nature of the concern, ask questions. Do not be argumentative or defensive. Try not to “lead the witness”. You are after accurate, factual information.

5. Once you have clarified the concern, restate it succinctly and ask for confirmation.

6. Ask the person what remedy he/she expects. Find out what he/she wants done about the situation.

7. Do not be too hasty to respond or to make a commitment. Usually you are only hearing one side of the story. Sometimes a simple explanation of procedures or why the situation cannot be responded to as the person wishes is sufficient. If the person needs help following the proper procedure, give or get him/her the help. Offer to investigate, to consult with whomever else you need input from to reach a balanced judgment in the situation, and a firm commitment on when you will respond. Then keep your promise.
8. Even if you are confident you have all the facts and are totally in control and are anxious to dispose of the matter, it is often wise to allow yourself a cooling off period, to “sleep on it”.

9. At some point in the process, it may be appropriate to ask the person to reduce his or her concern or complaint to writing. Remember, however, that this usually tends to solidify positions and reduce the number of options available in dealing with the situation.

10. If it becomes apparent that the matter is out of your province, say so. Explain courteously why someone else in the organization is better qualified or has the authority to deal with it; then assist the person with the concern in making arrangements to see that person.

11. Make a note of the conversation. Then, if the person carries the concern further, or the situation reoccurs, you will have your notes to refer back to. Do this as soon after the interview as you can while the situation is still fresh in your mind and while any rough notes you may have taken during the meeting still make sense to you.

12. If you pass the situation on to someone else in the organization to deal with, share your notes.

13. Follow up. If the concern or complaint is valid, do what is necessary to remedy the situation.

C. With a “hostile” situation:

1. If confronted by a whole delegation, ask that they allow one person to act as spokesperson for the group. Keep steering comments from others back to that person.

2. Have a witness. If confronted with hostile accusations, it may be wise to ask another person – another administrator other appropriate person – to sit in, both to help you sort out the concerns afterward and to provide some corroboration of what you say. Be sure this second person understands his or her role and lets you handle the dialogue. Beyond perhaps an occasional clarifying question, this person should only speak at your invitation. A good task for him or her is to take the notes.
3. If the person(s) with the concern show up with legal counsel, it is usually wise to postpone the meeting until you, too, can have counsel present.

4. You do not have to tolerate violent or abusive behavior. Make allowances for honest emotions, but if the person(s) attempts actual violence, makes serious threats, or is abusive, terminate the meeting. Obtain help if you need to.

D. Special situations:

1. Complaints against an employee are to be brought to the attention of that employee promptly. Communicate the complaint dispassionately; do not join the ranks of the accusers. Do not hail the person complained against into the meeting without a chance to hear and react to the complaint first. Set up a subsequent meeting with the complaining party, if appropriate.

2. If the complaint is against an employee not under your supervision, bring it to the employee's attention through his/her supervisor.

3. Accusations that the school district or its employees are violating the law or state or federal regulations or are engaged in illegal or immoral conduct, should be brought to the superintendent's attention promptly.

EXHIBIT

Approved: July 21, 1987