

## **COMPLAINTS & GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE [6-301]**

### **1. Introduction**

Rivergum Christian College has developed this complaints and grievance procedure to meet the guidelines of best practice and help resolve and - where possible - avoid potential problems.

### **2. The Nature of Complaints**

There are essentially four areas of complaints:

- Parents and Guardians
  - Students
  - Staff
  - Public
- a) The Education Act 1999 has, as a condition of registration and re-registration, a requirement that every school employs a dispute resolution procedure.
  - b) While parents will often wish to raise issues on behalf of their children, there are other issues that students may choose to raise on their own behalf and which are best raised by them.
  - c) Complaints from members of staff about aspects of their work are covered in the grievance section of the Staff Handbook.
  - d) Complaints from members of the public will be treated in a similar way to complaints from the parents, although most complaints from the public will normally be referred directly to the Principal.

### **3. Open Organisation: Climate and Culture**

In order to develop an open organisation it is essential that parents feel that the college is open to their concerns. The interests of the school are better served when parents are able to express their concerns to a member of staff as opposed to sharing their dissatisfaction with others. It is important that parents feel valued and involved with the college and they are encouraged to express their views.

An open school is one where:

- i) Parents and students feel listened to
- ii) Parents feel comfortable in contacting the Principal, teachers and other staff
- iii) Staff are comfortable in dealing with complaints

### **4. Effective Complaining**

- a) An effective complaints procedure can diffuse problems and can provide the school with helpful information.
- b) Complaints treated as constructive suggestions can be used to improve standards and may prevent cause for further complaint.
- c) A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem. Even unjustified complaints may indicate areas that can be improved.
- d) A complaint may be made by a parent if a parent thinks that the school has, for example:
  - i) done something wrong
  - ii) failed to do something it should have done
  - iii) acted unfairly or impolitely
- e) A complaint may be made about:
  - i) the college as a whole
  - ii) a particular element or group within the school
  - iii) an individual member of staff
- f) All complaints need to be handled seriously. A gentle expression of concern, or a simple query, may grow into a major matter if parents feel that they have been brushed aside, or not taken seriously. Often matters that have the potential to become very problematic can fade into insignificance if they are handled well in the initial stage.
- g) Procedures need to be flexible to handle both formal complaints and the informal raising of issues.
- h) Complaints against members of staff need particularly sensitive handling.
- i) **All complaints need to be recorded.**

## 5. Lines of Approach

- a) As Rivergum Christian College teaches Biblical guidelines for all areas of life, we wish to take the Bible's advice also in the area of dealing with conflict and disagreements.

Proverbs 25:8-10 contains wisdom: *"Don't be hot headed and rush to court. You may start something you can't finish and go down before your neighbour in shameful defeat. So, discuss the matter with him privately. Don't tell anyone else lest he accuse you of slander and you can't withdraw what you said."* (Living Bible)

Matthew 18:15-17 likewise instructs us: *"If a brother sins against you, go to him privately and confront him with his fault. If he listens and confesses it you have won back a brother. But if not, then take one or two others with you and go back to him again, proving everything you say by these witnesses. If he still refuses to listen, then take your case to the church and if the church's verdict favours you, but he won't accept it, then the church should excommunicate him."*

Following this line of wisdom, we publish the following procedures so that all members of the community have a clear understanding of the course of action to follow in dealing with concerns, grievances and conflicts.

- i) Clearly identify the issue.

If the issue relates to day-to-day life of the school, (e.g. teaching, learning, discipline, playground activities etc.) please follow the steps from point ii) below - BUT if the concern relates to an allegation of criminal or inappropriate behaviour towards a student or other member of the school community by a college employee or volunteer, the matter can be addressed to the Association Board. The college Board takes all such allegations extremely seriously. Requests for a formal investigation can be made in writing to the Principal or Board Chairperson or by contacting them directly and completing a formal statement of concern.

If your concern is regarding the Principal or a member of the Board, then you have a right to take your complaint to the Association of Independent Schools South Australia ([www.ais.sa.edu.au](http://www.ais.sa.edu.au)). **It should be noted throughout that neither the South Australian Minister for Education or the Department for Education has any power to directly intervene in any complaints relating to the operations of a non-government school.**

- ii) Discuss the issue.

Arrange an interview with the person who is directly involved with the concern or conflict. This will involve making an appointment either by phoning or sending an enveloped note in the student diary or communication book. On many occasions it is helpful to have the concern written down as writing helps clarify the problem and allows time for the other person to collect their thoughts as well as any necessary documentation.

Thoughts to keep in mind:

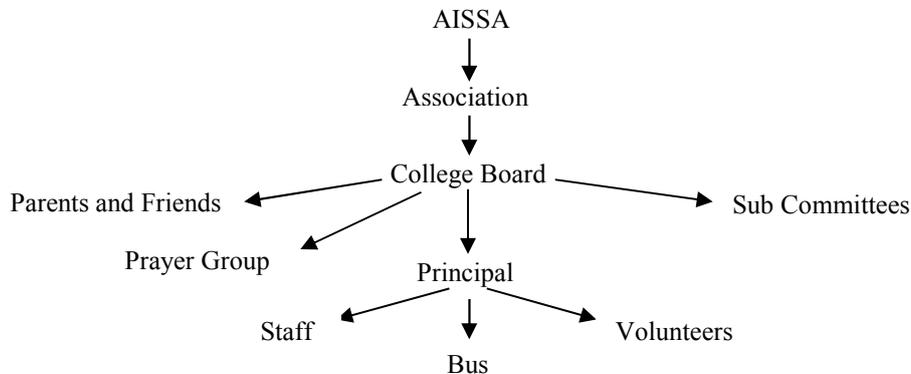
- Start with prayer
- Sort out the problem, rather than trying to sort out the person
- Deal with facts not guesses or rumours
- Verbalise feelings rather than acting them out
- Avoid unhelpful emotions that cloud the negotiations and the issues
- Be committed to giving more than taking
- Be prepared to forgive, rather than judge
- Finish with prayer

- iii) If there is no resolution.

- If the other person involved refuses to resolve the concern, take someone with you and try again.
- If the person continues to resist resolving the concern or is unable to, make an appointment with someone who holds a position of responsibility above that person within the College. The leader chosen will depend upon the nature of the concern (see the Grievance Procedure Flow Chart below).

- iv) If staff are approached about a matter that lies outside their area of responsibility, they will refer the person to the appropriate person or department.

**Grievance Procedure Flow Chart**



**6. Reducing Anxiety**

As the person complaining may feel vulnerable, the college can reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be dealt with. The following factors will assist in reducing anxiety:

- a) Information about the complaints procedure should be clear.
- b) Complaints are to be acknowledged as soon as practical, but within a maximum of five days.
- c) The issue is to be dealt with as quickly as possible.
- d) The complainant shall be kept informed of what is happening to their concern or complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be received.
- e) The nature of the complaint and complainant’s concerns should be clear. If it is not immediately obvious:
  - i) the complainant may need more time to explain
  - ii) they could be asked to put their complaint in writing
  - iii) it may be helpful to discuss possible outcomes
- f) The complainant needs to feel that their views matter.

**7. Recording**

- a) As mentioned in point 4 i) above, all complaints must be recorded.
- b) These records should be kept in a confidential file and cross-referenced with other files as necessary.
- c) The file needs to contain simple but clear notes of *all* conversations with the complainant regarding the issue. This includes chats and telephone calls, as misunderstandings can easily arise.  
This is required because:
  - i) it may become the cause of future legal action
  - ii) patterns in the record may indicate a need for action
  - iii) it increases the accountability of the person to whom the complaint was made, to follow up the complaint and take appropriate action
  - iv) it allows the Principal to be able to check the log regularly
- d) The log entry for each complaint is to contain the following:
  - i) date when the issue was raised
  - ii) name of person lodging the complaint
  - iii) name of student
  - iv) brief statement of the issue
  - v) location of detailed file (if any)
  - vi) member of staff handling the issue
  - vii) brief statement of the outcome
- e) Complainants are welcome to ask for a copy of the record that the teacher, Principal or Chair makes of the discussion that they have shared.

## 8. Confidentiality

- a) Confidentiality is an important issue for students, parents and staff. It is essential that any complaint is treated in a confidential manner and with respect.
- b) Parents often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the college's policy that complaints made by parents are not to rebound adversely on their children, and similarly complaints raised by students should not rebound on them or on other students.
- c) It may be possible to deal with a problem without naming individuals however even if no names are given the source of the complaint may still be clear. Depending on the nature of the complaint and on the circumstances, it may be impractical to investigate without identifying the member of staff or the child.
- d) Members of staff are rightly concerned that they should know about complaints that might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be made known to them and may need to be revealed, in part or whole, to those who need to be consulted.
- e) The college will ensure that training is made available to help staff deal not only with complaints made to them, but also with complaints that are made about them.
- f) The college is also aware there is a need to provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made. This would normally be provided by a colleague who is not otherwise involved.
- g) If a situation involves the Police then the Principal, or the next most senior staff member if the Principal is unavailable, must ensure that the Chairman of the Board is informed as soon as possible, and if it involves an allegation of abuse, must take responsibility for convening the Board.

## 9. Anonymous Complaints

- a) Anonymous complaints may be where there is no indication of either name or address, or where the complainants say that they do not wish to be identified. They may come from members of the public, parents or students.
- b) Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of students will normally be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders to all about college expectations.
- c) Parents and students are encouraged to provide their names and should be given reassurance on the issue of confidentiality. If they persist in wishing to remain anonymous, it is at the Principal's discretion as to what action, if any, should be taken.
- d) Anonymous complaints are to be recorded in the log.
- e) Anonymous allegations should be monitored closely, but no action taken until there is more certainty about the veracity of the allegation.

## 10. Resolution

- a) Sometimes the very acknowledgment of an issue by the college brings relief to parents. Satisfaction for a complaint may come from any of the following:
  - i) knowing that changes have been made, and that matters will be different in the future
  - ii) knowing that the college is now alert to a possible problem
  - iii) feeling that their concern has been considered seriously
  - iv) an outcome which may be different from the one they sought, but which they perceive to be well-considered
  - v) a considered letter
  - vi) an apology
- b) If time has been needed to consider matters, parents should receive a report letter. This should cover:
  - i) the issues raised
  - ii) how the issues were considered
  - iii) the people consulted
  - iv) the action that is to be taken
  - v) an apology, if appropriate

## 11. Intractable Complaints

- a) There may be a small minority of persistent or aggressive complainants who will never be satisfied. The college may discover upon investigation that the complaint was without foundation or motivated by malice. Nevertheless, it is wise to treat all complaints seriously and to follow the procedures.
- b) Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes intractable, it may be due to its nature or the way in which it was handled, or possibly because the complainant perceives the college to have 'closed ranks' against him or her.
- c) There are different stages of action to be taken with intractable complaints:
  - i) Referral to the Chairman of the Board
    - i. The Chairman may be able to offer a new approach to the matter, and this may satisfy the complainant. The Chairman's response should be clear and detailed, and should offer a meeting if the parents remain troubled.
    - ii. In most cases, the procedure will be that the Principal refers the matter to the Chairman of the Board and informs the complainant that this stage has been reached. Where a complainant believes that the complaint has been mishandled by the Principal they may write directly to the Chairman.
    - iii. If the concern relates directly to a member of the Board, the complainant should make an appointment with the Principal to discuss this matter.
    - iv. The Chairman should discuss the matter fully with the Principal and be provided with the relevant documentation. If a briefing is required from a member of staff, this should occur in the presence of the Principal.
    - v. The Chairman should respond to the complainant, notifying them that he/she is reviewing the matter, asking if they wish to add anything further and providing a date by which they may expect a response.
    - vi. If the concern relates to the actions of the Principal, the complainant may take their concern to the Chairman of the Board.
  - ii) Meeting with the Chairman of the Board
    - i. If a meeting is requested, the Chairman offers to meet the parents at a time convenient to them. Those involved are:
      - the Chairman of the Board
      - the Principal and, at the most, one other member of staff
      - the complainant
    - ii. Complainants are permitted to bring with them a supportive friend who is not involved with the complaint.
    - iii. Legal representation is not appropriate at this stage.
    - iv. The Chairman, after questioning and listening to the complainant and the Principal, may be able to find a solution. If this is not possible, and complainants wish to take the matter further, the Chairman could consider seeking the advice of an independent arbitrator or setting up a conciliation committee.

## 12. Training

Given the diverse nature of complaints, the college is to provide training so that all staff know how to carry out their responsibilities.

Training should cover:

- a) the complaints procedure
- b) communication skills, such as listening, questioning and calming
- c) handling complaints, negotiation and mediation skills
- d) skills in observing, recording and reporting
- e) the benefits of handling complaints well and the consequences of handling them badly

## 13. Student Complaints

- a) Full details of how students can deal with grievances are contained within the 'Grievance Policy for Students' and the 'Anti-bullying Policy'.
- b) As we are aiming to grow our students to maturity, the principles that apply to parental complaints also apply to complaints and concerns from students.

In support of this, teachers will:

- i) Specifically teach conflict resolution skills.
- ii) Educate children about the college's grievance procedures and how to apply them.
- iii) Teach rather than condemn children who express their grievances in an inappropriate manner.

#### **14. A Leaflet for Parents**

A leaflet explaining the recommended complaints system used by parents at Rivergum Christian College is attached at Appendix A. This leaflet is to be provided to parents when joining the school and will be included in the Family Handbook.

#### **15. A Leaflet for Students**

A leaflet explaining the elements of the recommended complaint system as used by students at Rivergum Christian College is attached at Appendix B. This leaflet is to be distributed to families, displayed in the classroom and discussed with the class at least annually.

#### **16. Key Principles**

A summary sheet detailing the key principles for the handling of complaints at Rivergum Christian College is attached at Appendix C.

#### **17. Related Policies and Documents**

6-102 Anti Bullying, Harassment, & Cyber Bullying Policy

4-001 Staff Handbook – 'Grievance' section

Child Protection Policy and appendices

Guidelines for Staff - Applying the 'Complaints and Grievance Procedure' and the 'Grievance Policy for Students'

Guidelines for the Principal - Applying the School's Grievance Procedures and Policies

Guidelines for the Board – Responding to Complaints

#### **18. Conclusion**

If a concern or complaint is dealt with seriously and sensitively at an early stage, it is likely to have a satisfactory outcome. Having a good complaints procedure will also reflect positively on the ethos and values of the school.

#### **19. Acknowledgement**

Rivergum Christian College wishes to thank *Great Southern Grammar School, WA* for allowing us to base our Complaints and Grievance Procedure on theirs.

**It should be noted throughout that neither the South Australian Minister for Education or the Department for Education has any power to directly intervene in any complaints relating to the operations of a non-government school. Therefore, as a member of the Association of Independent Schools South Australia (AISSA), Rivergum Christian College advises that, should a complaint escalate beyond internal handling, AISSA may be able to provide some (limited) assistance.**

## *Matters of concern - Information for parents*

Rivergum Christian College welcomes suggestions and comments from parents and takes seriously any complaints and concerns that may be raised. This leaflet will demonstrate our complaints system.

### **A complaint will be treated as an expression of genuine dissatisfaction that needs a response.**

We wish to ensure that:

- Parents who want to make a complaint know how to do so
- We respond to complaints within a reasonable time and in a courteous and efficient way
- Parents realise that we listen and take complaints seriously
- We take appropriate action with the full knowledge of the parent concerned

### **"How should I complain?"**

When you contact the college, ask to make an appointment with the appropriate staff member and be as clear as possible about what is troubling you. Please start with the person most closely concerned with the issue, as they may be able to sort things out quickly and with the minimum of fuss. However, you may prefer to take the matter to the Principal.

### **"I don't want to complain as such, but there is something bothering me..."**

The college is here for you and your child and we need to hear your views, concerns and ideas. Contact a member of staff as described above.

While our Chaplain is not a person in authority to receive complaints, they may be able to support and assist you to work through the grievance process.

### **"I am not sure whether to complain or not."**

If as parents you have concerns, you are entitled to raise them and we would encourage you to do so. If in doubt, you should contact us, as we are here to help.

### **"What will happen next?"**

If you raise something by telephone or face-to-face during an appointment, it may be possible to resolve the matter immediately and to your satisfaction.

If you have made a complaint or suggestion in writing, we will contact you within five working days to respond to your concerns and explain how the school proposes to proceed.

In some circumstances, the person you contact will need to discuss the matter further with other staff. If a detailed exploration of the issue is needed you may be invited to come in to discuss the concern with the staff member/s involved.

When the exploration of your complaint has concluded the appropriate staff member will communicate the outcome to you.



### **“What about confidentiality?”**

Your complaint or concern will be treated in a confidential manner and with respect. Knowledge of it will be limited to the Principal and those directly involved. The Chairman of the Board may also be informed.

It is the college's policy that complaints made by parents should not adversely affect their children.

We cannot entirely rule out the need to make third parties outside the college aware of the complaint, and possibly identify those involved. This would only be likely to happen where, for example, a child's safety was at risk or it became necessary to refer a matter to the police. You would be fully informed and involved in such action.

While information relating to specific complaints will be kept confidentially on file, we would point out that anonymous complaints may not be pursued.

Action that is needed to be taken under staff disciplinary procedures as a result of a complaint would be handled confidentially within the school by the Principal.

### **“What if I am not satisfied with the outcome?”**

We hope that you will feel satisfied with the outcome, or at least that your concerns have been fully and fairly considered.

If you are not satisfied, the Principal will offer to refer the matter to the Chairman of the Board. Alternatively, you may wish to write directly to the Chairman. The Chairman will call for a full report from the Principal and will examine matters thoroughly before responding. This may result in a positive solution, but if it does not, the Chairman will invite you to a meeting. You may wish to be supported by a friend, but legal representation would not be appropriate at this stage.

Rivergum Christian College recognises and acknowledges your entitlement to express concern and to complain and we hope to work with you in the best interests of the young people in our care.

## *Matters of concern - A leaflet for students*

Any problems, complaints or suggestions?  
If so, the school would like to hear.

### **"How do I make a complaint?"**

- By talking about it - or by writing it down if you find that easier.
- You can do it by yourself, or through your parents.

### **"Who do I make my complaint to?"**

- To the person you are unhappy with. First try talking with them on your own. This is Jesus' way.
- If that doesn't solve the problem, take someone with you – a friend, the chaplain, a parent or another staff member.
- Still having problems? Talk to the Principal.

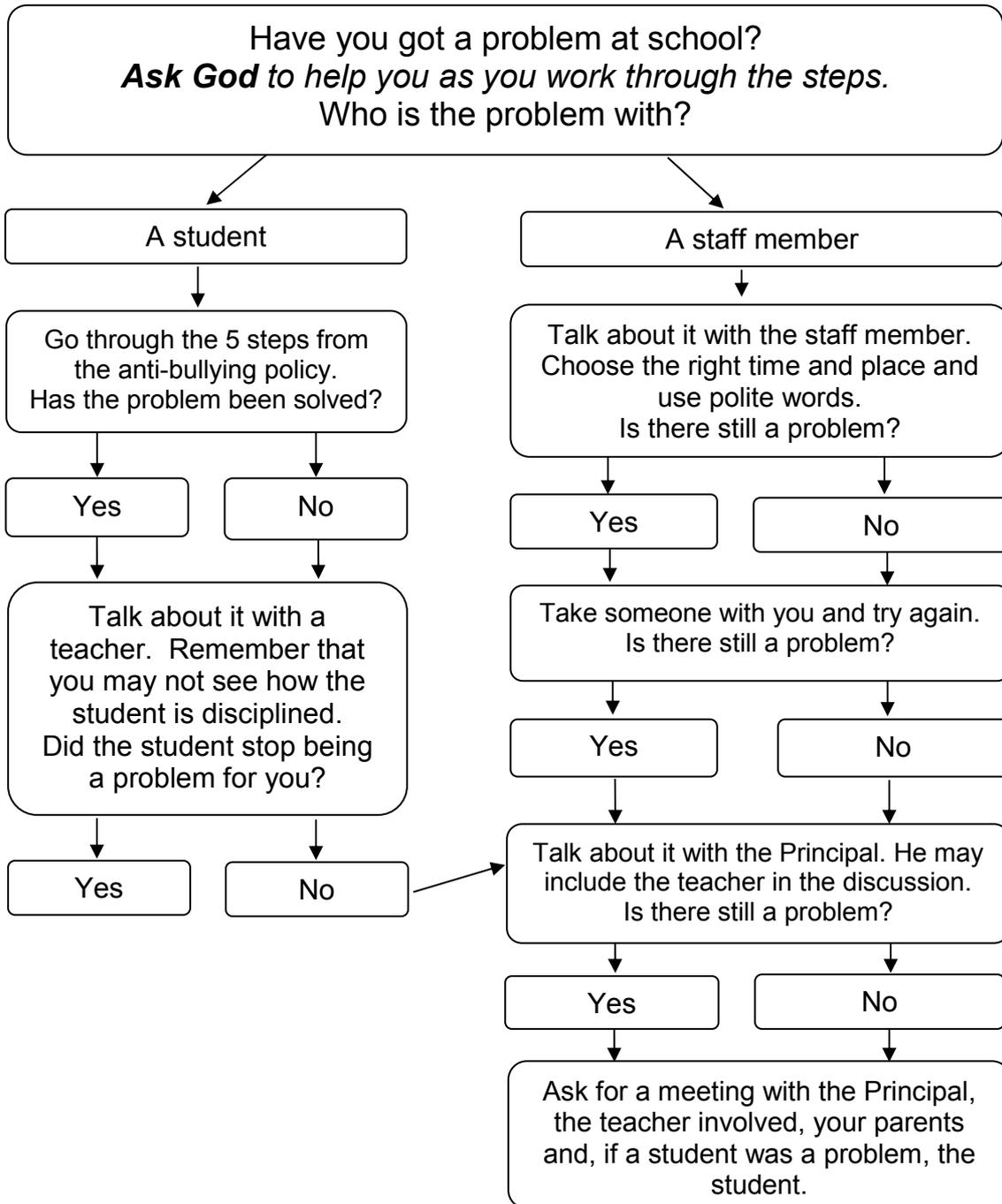
### **"Does it matter what the issue is?"**

- No, it can be a **big problem** or a **small one**. By discussing it, you may come up with positive ideas.

### **"Do others have to know?"**

- If you don't want anyone else to know, tell the staff - they will understand. (Sometimes staff will need to discuss the matter with another adult who can help.)

**Even if you find the issue hurtful or embarrassing, don't worry, it will only be discussed by staff who can help you.**



**Remember – this is about solving your problems  
and getting along, not about getting even.**

## **Appendix C**

### ***Key Principles***

The key principles for the handling of complaints at Rivergum Christian College are:

- The college is open to the concerns of parents and students
- Complaints are received in a positive manner
- Parents and students can expect to be taken seriously
- Information about complaints is clear and readily available
- Concerns are dealt with speedily and those who have raised them are kept informed about progress
- It is not acceptable for students to receive adverse treatment because they or their parents have raised a complaint
  - Clear confidential files and a log are kept
  - Confidentiality is respected and maintained as far as possible
  - Resolution of the matter is sought
  - Staff training covers the handling of complaints
- Following the Biblical principles of Matthew 18, complaints should be addressed to the person directly involved. If resolution is not achieved the complainant should take a friend with them. If resolution is still not achieved the complainant should address the complaint to the person's immediate superior and so on until resolution is achieved.
- The Chaplain can assist people through the grievance procedure.
- The ultimate aim of this procedure is not only justice and the righting of wrongs, but the restoring of relationships so that there is unity within the school community

*"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore."* Psalm 133:1,3b

*"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."*  
Colossians 3:12-14