

# School Board to continue policy of no anonymous complaints

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The newly elected North Vancouver School Board has voted to approve a new process for handling parent complaints about School Board employees, processes, and materials, but after a lengthy discussion decided to continue the District's policy of not accepting anonymous complaints.

The updated Policy 406 is the result of work done through 2017 by a committee of parents, educators, and administrators, and aims to provide more clarity for parents while protecting complainants from retribution.

Director of Instruction Arlene Martin explained that the new Policy removes the word "complaint" from its title and replaces it with "concerns" and was intended to include a "problem solving orientation." Including parents and students in the language of the policy was considered important.

Under the new policy a parent concern will be handled through a five stage process, with the goal being to handle concerns as "near to the source as possible."

Parents will be expected to begin by presenting their concern to the teacher or employee involved. According to Martin the goal is to provide a response to parents within five days. If the parent isn't happy with the result they can escalate the complaint to the Principal of the school, then to the Director of Instruction for their family of schools. From there they can submit a written complaint to the Assistant Superintendent, then to the Superintendent.

If all of these fail to satisfy the parent or student, and if the concern "affects the education, health, or safety" of a student, parents can give a written Notice of Appeal to the Board of Education.

Trustee Cyndy Gerlach asked why the new policy specifically rules out anonymous complaints. Gerlach said "I struggle with this. As a school district we have a whistle-blower line. Any employee can make an anonymous complaint at any time. So why is the same affordability not provided to parents?"

Martin explained that this was discussed at length during several meetings before it was decided to retain that sentence. The committee members felt that the risk of damage that could be caused by unfounded anonymous complaints was sufficient to exclude them. Instead they adopted language to explicitly protect students and parents from retribution.

Gerlach asked why the school district would not allow anonymous complaints when it is possible to file an anonymous complaint with the Ministry of Children and Family when there is a suspicion of child abuse.

She is concerned that some parents will not make a complaint if they cannot do it anonymously, and that the five step process would lock parents into dealing with problem teachers before being allowed to escalate complaints.

Gerlach felt that "there are some times when the breakdown is so significant that (parents) can't talk to the teacher" and worries that that the Principal could refuse to escalate the complaint if parents refuse to talk to the teacher.

Trustee Megan Higgins admitted to having trouble imagining a situation where an anonymous complaint could be made given that any complaint would be about a student situation, and Trustee Mary Tasi Baker clarified that while Social Services may maintain confidentiality when accepting child related complaints, it was not an anonymous process. District staff assured the Board that parents always have the option of entering the complaints process at the point that is most comfortable.