

A Parents' Guide to

- Resolving School Concerns and Complaints
- Reporting Acts of Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment or Intimidation Against Students
- Ombudsman Services



HOWARD COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Resolving School Concerns and Complaints

Howard County Public School System employees are committed to parental, family and community involvement in the educational process. Parents, families and community members are active partners in educating children and assume a vital role in ensuring success in school. There will be times when a parent, guardian or custodian may need to ask school system employees to address a concern. This document outlines the steps for responding to parental school-based concerns so that inquiries or problems are resolved as quickly and satisfactorily as possible.

When issues arise, we encourage parents to direct their concerns to the persons most closely involved. However, when the informal process fails to provide resolution, a parent may file a formal complaint and seek review at a higher administrative level. In both processes, the intent is to protect the confidentiality and preserve the dignity of everyone involved.

The school system has both informal and formal processes for responding to parental inquiries, concerns and complaints. Exceptions to these procedures are noted for issues where an alternative process is specifically provided by statute or other regulation.*

Informal Process

1 The first level in resolving concerns and issues is to address them with the school staff member who is most closely and directly involved. Through a process of cooperative agreement, the affected individuals can usually reach a mutually effective resolution.

If the issue cannot be resolved at this level, the parent should be referred to the school's administrative team (the principal or assistant principal).

2 The second level in resolving the concerns is to contact a member of the school's administrative team. The administrator will take into consideration

the needs of all parties as well as all applicable HCPSS policies and procedures.

- a. The administrator will confirm that the parent has attempted to resolve the issue or concern with the classroom teacher or other school-based staff member, when appropriate.
- b. If the concern requires the involvement of other Central Office departments, the administrator will assist the parent in accessing the appropriate office and provide a synopsis of the concern to that office (e.g., transportation, special education, curriculum, food services). Central Office personnel will respond to the parent within 10 school days and inform the principal of the response.

If the concern has not been resolved through the informal process, the parent may submit a written request for a formal meeting with the principal.

Formal Process

1 The first level in the formal process is to request a meeting with the school administrator in writing, outlining specific concerns by completing Part I of the Parent Concern Form.

- a. The principal or his designee will contact the parent within three school days to arrange a mutually agreed upon meeting date and time. The principal or designee will furnish the parent with a copy of this document that explains the formal process.
- b. The principal will formally document any agreements that are made at the meeting. The principal will follow up the meeting by completing Part II of the Parent Concern Form, summarizing the outcome of the meeting, identifying areas of agreement, and laying out steps to address any issues still unresolved. This response will be sent within 10 school days from the date of the meeting.

If a concern cannot be reasonably resolved within the 10 school days, the principal may extend the time for not more than 10 additional school days. The parent will be informed of the extension in writing.

- c. The parent will sign and return the Parent Concern Form. Signing indicates receipt of the form.

If the issue is not resolved satisfactorily, or the concern directly involves the principal, the parent will be referred to the appropriate Administrative Director in the Division of Instruction. The principal will forward copies of all applicable documentation to the Central Office, including the Parent Concern Form. Parents may also submit applicable documentation.

2The second level in the formal process is a review by the appropriate Administrative Director. Upon receipt of the referral, the Administrative Director will:

- a. Contact the parent.
- b. Confer with the parent, principal, and other appropriate staff members regarding the concern.
- c. Complete the Parent Concern Form, documenting any decisions or agreements made and forward copies to the principal and parent within 10 school days of receipt of the request.

3If the parent is not satisfied with the decision of the Administrative Director, the parent may request that the matter be reviewed by the Chief Academic Officer, the Superintendent's designee. A parent desiring this review must submit a written request to the Chief Academic Officer explaining the concern and clearly stating the outcome or relief desired by the parent. The Chief Academic Officer will review the documentation and provide a written response to the parent's request within 15 school days of receipt of the request.

The services of the Ombudsman are available to any individual who feels their concern or complaint has not been satisfactorily addressed through these established processes.

*NOTE: The procedures outlined here are not to be used for resolving complaints that are specifically governed by other existing state or local regulations, such as student suspensions and expulsions, special education appeals, student transfers, requests for information under the Maryland Public Information Act, requests for reasonable accommodations/modifications under the Americans with Disabilities Act, or appeals filed under Section 4-205 of the Education Articles of the Annotated Code of Maryland. Equity assurance issues governed by Policies 1010, Discrimination, and 1020, Sexual Harassment, may be referred directly to the Equity Assurance Office. Specific information regarding these processes can be obtained from the school or the Public Information Office at the Department of Education. ♦

Reporting Acts of Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment or Intimidation Against Students

It is a belief of the Howard County Public School System that all students have a right to learn in a safe and nurturing educational environment. To ensure this happens, the system has adopted a strategic goal that calls for each school to provide a safe and nurturing school environment that values diversity and commonality. Howard County's safe-school efforts are supported by legislation passed by the 2005 Maryland General Assembly.

The *Safe Schools Reporting Act*, effective July 1, 2005, requires all Maryland school systems to report incidents of harassment and intimidation against students attending public schools.

The data collected through this reporting system will provide educators with valuable information about the incidents of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation occurring in Howard County schools. The information will be extremely helpful to school officials and local School Improvement Teams as they work to identify and implement appropriate strategies to improve school climate.

The law provides for any staff member, student, parent or guardian, or close adult relative of a student to report an incident of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation that occurs on school property, on a school bus, or at a school-sponsored activity or event off school property. Incidents of cyberbullying occurring from a student's home that impact another student's well-being at school, may also be reported. School systems are then required to provide the Maryland State Department of Education with the following information:

- A description of the act constituting the bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation
- The age of the victim and alleged perpetrator
- The allegation of the alleged perpetrator's motive
- A description of the investigation of the complaint and any corrective action taken by the appropriate school authorities
- The number of days a student is absent from school, if any, as a result of the incident
- The number of false allegations reported

The Maryland State Department of Education defines bullying as:

“Intentional conduct, including verbal, physical, or written conduct, or an intentional electronic communication that creates a hostile educational environment by substantially interfering with a student’s educational benefits, opportunities, or performance, or with their physical or psychological well-being and is: motivated by an actual or a perceived personal characteristic including race, national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, ancestry, physical attributes, socioeconomic status, familial status, physical or mental ability or disability, or threatening or seriously intimidating; and occurs on school property at a school activity or event or on a school bus; or substantially disrupts the orderly operation of a school or workplace.”

This may include the following specific behaviors:

- Hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting, hair pulling, or throwing something
- Getting another person to hit or harm the student
- Teasing, name-calling, critical remarks, or threatening, in person, by email or text message
- Bullying by demeaning and making the target of jokes
- Rude and/or threatening gestures
- Excluding or rejecting the student
- Intimidation, extortion, or exploitation
- Spreading rumors or gossip that is harmful
- Cyberbullying

Reporting Harassment or Intimidation

Forms for reporting acts of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation are available in all Howard County public school guidance offices, front offices, and on the school system’s website at www.hcpss.org.

What Howard County Schools Are Doing about Bullying

- Board of Education Policy 1060, Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment or Intimidation, was approved and went into effect July 1, 2009. This policy is on the HCPSS website.
- The Superintendent formed an anti-bullying task force in the spring of 2005 to:
 - Review available, related data.
 - Review promising approaches to addressing bullying in schools.

- Recommend a systemic approach to reduce bullying and help students who encounter bullying.
- Review related curriculum and policies.
- Identify budgetary implications for recommendations.
- Anti-bullying training is available to school staffs.
- All local School Improvement Plans must include strategies and activities to address the school system’s safe schools goal.
- Guidance counselors and other school staff will present age-appropriate information to students about reporting incidents of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment or intimidation.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Safe Schools Reporting Act

Q. Once the *Harassment or Intimidation (Bullying) Reporting form* is received, what happens next?

A. Once a form is received from a staff member, student, parent or other close adult relative, the principal or assistant principal initiates an investigation and takes corrective action. These actions may include, but are not limited to, a student conference, student warning, letter of apology, counseling, parent phone call, parent conference, detention, in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension. Information from the *Harassment or Intimidation (Bullying) Reporting form* is entered into a database and reported to the Maryland State Department of Education.

Q. If my child is being bullied and my child or I chose not to complete the *Harassment or Intimidation (Bullying) Reporting form*, will there still be corrective action taken?

A. The HCPSS strongly encourages parents to complete the form so that we have accurate information about the incidents of bullying in our schools. Appropriate strategies and interventions can then be implemented to improve your child’s school’s climate. However, you do not have to complete the form for corrective action to be taken, but it is important that you or your child let someone at the school know that bullying is occurring. You or your child should report any instances of bullying or harassment to a school administrator, school counselor, school psychologist, nurse, teacher or other adult in the building.

Q. Will the *Harassment or Intimidation (Bullying) form* be a part of my child’s record?

A. In accordance with House Bill 383, the *Harassment or Intimidation (Bullying) Reporting form* is confidential and may not be made a part of a student’s permanent educational record. ♦

Ombudsman Services

A neutral, impartial, confidential advocate for fair and meaningful problem resolution processes.

The Board of Education of Howard County believes that an Ombudsman can facilitate positive relationships among the Board of Education, school system employees, and the public. The Ombudsman serves as a neutral party to collaborate with Howard County Department of Education staff and the community to resolve concerns in an equitable and timely manner.

Services of the Ombudsman include:

- Confidential discussion of your concern (consistent with law).
- Research applicable school system information.
- Review of applicable Board of Education policies and procedures.
- Referral to individuals who can help solve the problem.
- Referrals to appropriate school system and community resources.
- Assistance with the Problem Resolution Process (See *A Parents' Guide to Resolving School Concerns and Complaints*).
- Facilitate communication/discussion as needed.
- Assistance accessing formal processes.

The Ombudsman must follow Board of Education and HCPSS policies and procedures, and treat all parties fairly (See Policy 2030: Ombudsman). The Ombudsman does not act as an advocate for either side in a dispute and does not decide who is "innocent" or who is "guilty." The Ombudsman does not have the authority to change policy or force schools to take specific action. However, the Ombudsman will listen, review your situation, and assist with the timely and equitable resolution of your concerns.

How to Contact the Ombudsman

In person, at the Department of Education,
10910 Route 108, in Ellicott City.

By telephone at (office) 410-313-6850/(cell) 443-869-1474.

By e-mail at ombudsman@hcpss.org.

By private fax at 410-313-1590.

If English is not your first language, you may request that the school provide an interpreter.

When addressing your concerns with the Howard County Public School System, the following guidelines may be useful toward problem facilitation and resolution.

Suggested Guidelines for Effective Communications

Organize your thoughts.

- Clearly state the issue or the problem you are experiencing.
- Prepare/obtain supporting documents.
- Make a list of questions or points you'd like to make.
- Identify several possible solutions you think would resolve your concern.

Stay calm; maintain a civil tone.

- Focus on the facts, not on the person with whom you are discussing the issue.
- Avoid blaming, demands and "shoulds." Say "I believe..." "I feel..." rather than "You should..."

Clarify rather than assume.

- If you are not sure about something or what you heard, ask for an explanation or clarification.
- Try to understand the other person's view of the situation and the solutions they might propose.

Be flexible.

- Recognize that problems can be solved in more than one way.
- Be open to alternative solutions.

Keep records.

- Make notes of meeting dates and times, who you talked to and what was discussed.
- Save copies of letters, forms and other material related to your concern.

Source: Based in part on guidelines from the State of Washington, Office of the Governor, Office of the Education Ombudsman ♦

HOWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM
10910 Route 108 ♦ Ellicott City, MD 21042 ♦ 410.313.6600 ♦ www.hcpss.org

The Howard County Public School System does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, physical or mental disability, age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation in matters affecting employment or in providing access to programs. For more information, contact the Equity Assurance Office of the Howard County Public School System at 10910 Route 108, Ellicott City, MD 21042 or call 410.313.6654.