

Parental Complaints – What information should teachers expect?

No one likes to be invited to the principal's office to find out that there is a parental complaint about them. However, if it is handed sensitively and consideration is given to all party's feelings then there is no reason that extra, undue stress is added to an already unpleasant situation. While parents should rightly expect to be treated with courtesy and their complaint dealt with in both a serious and timely manner, teachers should also expect no less.

Unfortunately, many INTO members have recently been in contact with Northern Office recently because they have not been afforded this consideration. In some cases members have been summoned to their principal's office and verbally told of a complaint which they have been expected, without notice, to respond to with a note taker recording their response.

This type of management reaction to a parental complaint is totally unacceptable and INTO members are encouraged not to engage in these situations. They should simply excuse themselves from any meeting until they have sought advice and assistance from their union representative at the school. A member of staff who is the subject of a complaint must be provided with the full detail of any allegations made against him/her with reasonable time provided before being required to respond to the matters raised. On many occasions this may be best achieved by providing the member of staff with a copy of the complete letter so that they can have some time to peruse the contents of the complaint and respond appropriately.

Occasionally parents ask that the teacher not be furnished with the content of the letter of complaint and unfortunately principals have agreed to this request. However, INTO advise principals that in these circumstances they cannot simply agree to this request and instead they should explain to parents that they have an obligation, at the very least, to provide a redacted copy of the complaint to the teacher. In these circumstances principals or chairs of governors, when dealing with complaints against principals, must take into account the guidance provided by the Information Commissioner's Office (I.C.O) in relation to access to information.

When a written complaint is received, the principal or chair of governors should discuss with the parent the disclosure of the complaint to the teacher. In line with I.C.O's advice, schools must establish if the letter of complaint describes a teacher's behaviour and if it does then the teacher, whose behaviour is described, will have subject access rights and therefore all parts of the letter referring to the teacher's conduct must be disclosed to the teacher. All of the information that does not directly deal with the allegation against the teacher can be redacted, however only the information that is then provided to the teacher should be considered in the subsequent investigation and it is this information that the teacher should be asked to respond to.