

Disputes and disagreements are a fact of life. Even in schools – where we all believe we are acting in the best interests of the children – conflicts and differences of opinion can arise. A parent and a teacher may disagree about homework, a guardian may not share the same view as the principal on discipline given to a child and a school counsellor and a parent may not agree with advice provided to a classroom. Conflicts can arise in many situations and sometimes may not even be known to everyone involved in the situation. It can also be difficult to know where to start to deal with the problem.

Golden Horn School Council has developed the procedures set out below to help parents, guardians, teachers and staff resolve disputes and differences that affect our working together.

-- BUT WAIT, WHY CAN'T I JUST CALL UP THE OTHER PERSON AND JUST TALK TO THEM?

You can, and should. Most differences can simply be resolved by talking and listening. But sometimes we don't know where to start and sometimes the issue cannot be resolved by a phone call or short visit to the school. The purpose of this document is to

establish a predictable and understandable process for resolving disputes between parents/guardians and the principal and teachers or other staff within the school

ensure that parents, guardians, the principal, teachers and other staff are treated respectfully when conflicts arise

establish a system that encourages openness, transparency, equity and accountability between parents and teachers and other staff

-- H'MMM ...

-- OKAY, SO WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE A CONCERN?

The first thing you should do is think about what is bothering you. What facts do you have about the situation? Do you need more information – should you ask some questions? Once you have decided what it is that is bothering you you are ready to move on to Level One.

--- LEVEL ONE, WHAT IS THAT?

There is no magic in the name “Level One”. It is simply the first of three stages that may be used to bring people together to resolve a dispute. Most disputes will be resolved we hope using the Level One procedure.

The first step in a Level One dispute is to contact the other person to explain your concern and to arrange a time to get together to talk. Try and find a good time – when the demands of dinner, soccer or music class aren't looming – and remember that the principal and the teachers have families too!

When you get together, both of you must try and listen respectfully – let the other person finish what they are saying and try to listen with an open mind. Ask questions if you don't understand something or are unsure of what the other person is saying. The key thing is to listen and talk to each other.

If a parent or guardian wants to they can bring a person to support them – to take notes or to help clarify issues – but remember that this person is there to help you and so a support person should not be someone – or a parent or guardian of a child - who is involved in the issue.

If both parties think the issue is resolved, you should review the conclusion so that everyone has a similar understanding of what was talked about and decided. If you agreed to any specific actions it might be helpful to write these down. Consider meeting again in a few weeks to see if the issue is truly resolved or not and to see whether any more action is required.

If a solution is not agreed to think about whether another meeting – or may several meetings – might help resolve the issue. If more meetings don't look like the answer, maybe you need to move on to Level Two.

-- WE MET, I LEARNED SOME MORE ABOUT MY CONCERN, BUT I AM STILL CONCERNED!

If you still have concerns maybe it is time to bring in some more support and launch the Level Two procedure. Start by contacting the principal to explain the issue – tell her about the discussions that you had with the other person and what the result of the meetings were.

The principal will take on the job of letting the other person know that you want the principal involved in the disagreement. The principal should also remind parents and guardians that they can bring a support person to the meeting – and as before, because this person is there to help the parent or guardian the support person – or their children – should not be involved in the issue. If helpful, a school council member may be asked to come. If they do, their job is to help clarify the issue and identify potential solutions.

The principal may also suggest that the school counsellor or a member of the school-based team to attend. If either of these folks attend they are to assist in identifying solutions, and must be objective and provide the same information to everyone at the meeting.

Again, at the meeting ask questions if you aren't sure about something. Invite those people that are there to help if they have any suggestions or ideas on how to address the concern. Take notes if you want and be sure to take the time to listen and think about what is being said.

This is not the time to rush or to be rushed.

It may be helpful to have one of the support people take notes and prepare a summary of the meeting. Everyone at the meeting must get a chance to review these notes and if they don't say what you heard, ask questions or offer to provide a letter or note that summarizes your views.

If the issue seems to be resolved, take time as a group to review what was discussed to be sure that everyone has a similar understanding of what was talked about and decided. If you agreed to any specific actions it might be helpful to write these down. Consider meeting again in a few weeks to see if the issue is truly resolved or not and to see whether any more action is required.

If a solution is not agreed to think about whether another meeting – or may several meetings – might help resolve the issue. Would bringing some other resource people help resolve the concern? If you think so, let the others know and work together to make it happen.

-- LEVEL TWO SOUNDED GOOD, BUT MY PROBLEM IS WITH THE PRINCIPAL ... WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO....

Level Two won't work for you. If the disagreement involves the principal you should move right on to Level Three.

--HEY, I AM DONE MEETING – WE TRIED BUT COULDN'T COME TO A GOOD CONCLUSION. BUT I NEED A RESULT TO HELP MY KID!

At this point, things are likely getting very frustrating and everyone will be concerned about the effect on the kids and maybe the classroom. It is time to move to Level Three.

Level Three is not easy ... it will take work on everyone's part, but it is designed to bring matters to an end – an end that will let everyone involved move forward.

It starts with the person wishing to move the issue to Level Three writing a summary of their concern. The summary doesn't need to say it all, but it does need to say enough that someone not involved in the dispute – and likely not even aware of the disagreement – what the issue is. The summary should be given to the Chair of the School Council.

School Council will meet “in camera” about the concern – meaning that no one other than Council members will be there. All Council members must sign an oath of secrecy when they become Council members to ensure that they will keep matters like this confidential.

After they meet, Council will tell the principal and anyone else involved in the disagreement that a request was made for Level Three dispute resolution. Everyone will also be told by School Council what will happen next regarding the dispute.

*If School Council decides that the dispute is about a specific decision made by a teacher, the principal or other staff, School Council will call a meeting to hear from all of the people involved. At this meeting Council will provide an opportunity for everyone involved to present their views and to hear the concerns of others. Questions may be asked to explore the issue. After the meeting Council will tell everyone **whether it agrees with the decision or believes a different decision should be made**. It will provide its decision in writing.*

If School Council decides that the dispute is about an ongoing concern involving a student and a teacher, the principal or other staff members, Council will ask everyone involved if they are willing to work with an independent facilitator or mediator to find a reasonable and acceptable solution to the concern. If everyone agrees, the facilitator or mediator will work with those involved to find a solution. They will be asked to provide an overview of the results to School Council and a more detailed written summary of the conclusion to those involved.

H'MM ... I THINK I CAN WORK WITH THIS...