

Resolving Staff-Principal Concerns

Addressing Staff-Principal Concerns

Every school staff must work closely together. Differences of opinion that can lead to conflict are inevitable when staff members are working together to address so many issues. Depending on what the issues are, there are various ways to make them known to the principal. It is not enough, nor is it always effective to simply confront the principal with everything that the staff opposes.

By assuming a problem-solving approach when discussing sensitive issues, it is more likely that solutions acceptable to everyone will be achieved. All staff members must be prepared to offer alternatives and solutions that everyone can assist in implementing. The principal should also involve staff in the early stages of certain issues to help reduce the possibility of problems developing later.

If the problem has to do with school policies and practices, such as the school code of conduct, or office support for behavioural expectations, introduce the issues for discussion at a staff meeting in a structured, professional way. Focus on the issue and joint problem solving. Avoid personal criticisms of the school administration.

If the issue has to do with an individual matter, such as assignment, performance appraisal, or the way you are treated by the principal, it is best handled by requesting a meeting with the principal to discuss the issue. You should also contact your local president and/or Professional Relations Services (PRS) at ETFO, as it may be advisable to have a Federation representative present in the meeting. The representative can help facilitate the discussion, and act as a third party to ensure that both you and the principal are being heard and understood.

Do not assume that because you are in conflict with the principal that you are being harassed. If you feel you are being treated unfairly, consult with PRS first to check out your perceptions and options. Your board's harassment policy may apply to the situation, and/or your collective agreement may contain language that would allow you to grieve the alleged harassment.

Involvement of a Superintendent

In situations involving a group of staff, the school superintendent should not become involved until the staff members have made every attempt to communicate their concerns to the principal. If staff members feel their concerns have not been understood or addressed, they should contact the Federation before taking any further action. There may come a point at which it is necessary and appropriate to involve the superintendent, but the Federation should be consulted prior to taking this step.

Although principals are not members of the Federation and are, therefore, not subject to the Ontario Teachers' Federation code of ethics, the professionalism of the staff, and the manner in which these sensitive issues are addressed, are important. All teachers and principals are members of the

Ontario College of Teachers, and designated early childhood educators are members of the College of Early Childhood Educators. The professional misconduct regulations clearly address the issue of professionalism. Alleged violations of the regulations are subject to the College's investigation and discipline procedures.

Role of the Local President

Members should contact the local president to discuss a situation. The president will try to help members deal with their concerns by:

- suggesting they call PRS directly;
- suggesting that an individual or small group of staff approach the principal;
- offering to attend a meeting with a staff member and the principal to address concerns; and
- discussing options available for dealing with the concerns in a professional way.

Tips for Resolving Conflicts

When attempting to resolve an individual or group conflict, take a step back and try to:

- consider the issue, not the person and emotions involved;
- see the problem from the other person's perspective;
- listen attentively and reflect upon what is said;
- determine what degree of compromise you would be willing to live with;
- specify what each person can do to improve the working relationship; and
- evaluate whether or not expectations are realistic, reasonable, and achievable and identify possible alternatives and workable solutions.

Working Together to Find Solutions

Teachers and principals must work together utilizing the strengths and ideas of all staff members to create the best possible working and learning environment. The concerns of the staff need to be raised at staff meetings and openly discussed with the principal. The principal should know what the specific concerns are and how the staff is willing to assist in improving the situation. Lack of communication and consultation do not allow for the maximum use of the variety of talents and abilities that are a part of every staff.

It is important that members try to work with the principal to effect changes that might be necessary to improve the working and learning environment. It is equally important to recognize that change is a gradual process, and that not all changes will be immediate. If, however, there is no commitment to change or no acknowledgement that change is necessary, and if staff members believe that the situation is causing them to be less effective in their jobs, the Federation should be contacted for assistance.

When staff and the principal jointly agree to involve the superintendent and/or the Federation, they are showing a willingness to explore the situation.

Sometimes, with the support and commitment of all involved, an outside facilitator can be a very effective resource for assisting the school staff in resolving their problems.

Everyone involved must be willing to be part of the solution by considering compromises and reasonable alternatives.

Professional Harmony

The entire school staff is interdependent. Its members must rely on each other and be able to resolve their differences. There are too many pressures on educators today to allow staff-principal conflicts to erode the professional harmony that is a basic necessity in every effective school.

PRS staff and local presidents are committed to assisting members in identifying concerns in the workplace and in reaching mutually agreeable solutions.

For further information on conflict management, see ETFO's publication, *After the chalk dust settles*. It may be purchased through shopETFO.

For more information, contact Professional Relations Services Staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836 at the provincial office.

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