

Fact Sheet

The Victorian Government is building the Education State, where every Victorian has an equal right to the knowledge and skills needed to shape their lives. Part of this work is to promote inclusive practices in schools so they can better support all children and young people. An enhanced school dispute resolution process will ensure that where some parent and student complaints cannot be resolved, the Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution (the Independent Office) is available to assist.



WHAT IS THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE FOR SCHOOL DISPUTE RESOLUTION?

The Independent Office brings an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) approach to complex disputes about government schools. Members of the Office are independent experts who will focus on a resolution to the dispute through a simple, fair and timely process. Each individual matter will be treated according to its needs, and Office members will take a flexible approach to help reach an outcome.

WHY HAS THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE BEEN ESTABLISHED?

The Independent Office adds new independence, expertise and timeliness to safeguard a fair system for all. It helps members of the school community to resolve complex issues through a simple, and fair and timely process. The Independent Office adds new capacity to the third tier of escalation for eligible matters. It strengthens the existing complaints resolution process and helps to ensure all Victorian government schools are supported with expert advice, and remain inclusive and accessible for all.

The Independent Office model was co-designed with stakeholders to reduce the risk of school disputes becoming long-running, distressing and costly.

WHO RUNS THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE?

The Independent Office is independent of the Department of Education and Training (the Department). It is overseen by an independent Chair and two Deputy Chairs, who are experts in ADR.

The Office includes pools of independent experts to help problem solve complex issues. These experts can be drawn upon depending upon the needs of each matter, including:

- Experts in school education
- Experts in the potential topics of dispute (e.g. child development, cultural liaison, disability, family disputes, mental health, and bullying prevention)

WHAT KIND OF DISPUTES WILL THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE RECEIVE?

The Office will receive current complex disputes that have not been resolved by the Department's usual complaints process. Eligible matters will be referred to the Office by the Central Complaints Team in the Department. You can also contact the Independent Office directly if you think your matter should be considered by the Office. It must be suitable for ADR.

The Office will consider escalated complex disputes related to school based decisions or actions, for example: access and inclusion issues, wellbeing and engagement issues, management of medical issues, responses to bullying, appropriate settings for students at risk or disengaged students, and other decisions or actions under school based policies.

I HAVE AN ISSUE TO DISCUSS, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Increased support for schools and regions to resolve complaints at a local and regional level are also being put in place, as part of a new *Responsive School Complaints Framework*. Parents and students should always talk to school staff in the first instance, as they are best placed to discuss any concerns.

- 1 **Step one:** The classroom teacher or year level coordinator may be able to help you. If you need to make a formal complaint, raise this with the Assistant Principal or Principal in the first instance.
- 2 **Step two:** If the school cannot resolve your concern, you can raise your complaint with the local regional office. A Community Liaison Officer may be appointed by the Area Executive Director to work with you, the school and other local experts to help resolve the complaint.
- 3 **Step three:** If the matter remains unresolved, you can contact the Department's Central Complaints Team. If it still can't be resolved quickly, the matter can be referred to the Independent Office. You can contact the Independent Office directly if you think your matter should be considered by the Office.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I GO TO THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE?

Each individual matter will be treated according to its needs. An individual matter may be managed by the Chair of the Office, the Deputy Chair, or an individual Expert. In some circumstances, two or three members of the Office will convene as a group to work on a matter. All members of the Office will adopt ADR approaches to resolving matters, with the primary focus on achieving an outcome acceptable to all involved.

Support will be made available to help those involved work towards a solution. A member of the Independent Office will contact the parent or mature student, as appropriate, and either the central office, regional office or school; the Independent Office can collect information, and may arrange a meeting at a mutually agreeable location. Someone from the Office may also help participants prepare separately for the meeting. At this meeting, also called a

conciliation conference, a support person can help you discuss the matter. Subject matter experts can help to problem solve the issues.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE DISPUTE REMAINS UNRESOLVED?

Where it is not possible to resolve a matter, the Independent Office can then assess the information it has and make recommendations to the Department about what to do. The Independent Office will not have authority to impose or apply an outcome.

Having the matter received by the Independent Office does not remove the right to contact other entities such as the Victorian Ombudsman, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) or the courts. However, if other entities are used, then the Independent Office will have to stop working on the matter.

CONTACTING THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE

Email: school.resolution@edumail.vic.gov.au

Phone: 1300 017 593

Postal address: Level 4 Casselden Place, 2 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, 3000

Website: www.schoolresolution.vic.gov.au

“We’re here to help resolve complex disputes that haven’t been resolved at the school or Department level. We work with everyone to discuss and problem-solve the issues. We use a simple, fair and independent process with the student at the centre, because everyone wants the best for the student and their education.”