

# Susie King Taylor Community School Conflict Resolution & Grievance Policy for Students, Parents and the Community

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## Introduction

In any community, conflict is inevitable. How we deal with that conflict as a community determines how resilient we are, and has a direct impact on our collective success. We understand that when our children are involved, those conflicts are extremely personal.

The Governing Board and Administration of Susie King Taylor Community School both have the ultimate goal of our students' well-being, and reserve the right to interpret school rules, guidelines, policies and personnel issues fairly, without retaliation, and with respect to all parties involved.

We see conflict as a chance for growth and improvement. The steps in the conflict resolution and grievance policy reflect the Susie King Taylor Community School's values. We encourage staff, faculty, families and board members to model the behavior stated in the core values. Taking the courageous steps to utilize this process, and constructive conflict resolution practices, demonstrates transformative teaching and learning, developing the capacity for responsible choice and responsibility to others.

## Purpose and Goals of the Grievance Policy

This policy exists to give the Susie King Taylor Community School a framework to resolve conflicts in a way that promotes justice, equity and growth. In any community, there will be disagreements, misunderstandings and conflict. Our goal is to resolve those issues as early in their existence as possible by including the people most directly involved in an intentional process that leads to building shared understanding, resolution and positive outcomes for all involved where possible.

For our purpose, we're using "grievance" as any complaint or issue surrounding school policy or procedure, concern over the actions of another community member (which includes staff, administration and board members), or misunderstandings that develop between members of the community. If the issue is related to health or safety, it should be taken directly to the Administrator.

**Note:** This policy is for grievances between members of the community and members of staff, administration and the board. Because staff are employees of the school, they have slightly different requirements in a policy. Their policy is in the employee handbook distributed to staff every school year.

## Grievance Coordinator

We know this process can be intimidating. The Grievance Coordinator is a member of the board trained in conflict resolution, and who knows this policy, who can help you navigate the process, answer any questions and make sure the process is followed by all sides. You can email them directly at [grievances@sktcs.org](mailto:grievances@sktcs.org).

## No One Should Ever Feel Alone

Being in conflict is stressful. We don't want anyone to feel alone during this process. At any of the meetings outlined in the processes below, anyone involved is free to bring someone with them for support. It could be a family member, clergy, friend or another member of the community. They aren't there to speak in the meeting, but to be a support for you during the process.

## Foster Parents

DFCS is required to ensure that every source of support for the foster parent is arranged. The foster parent can request assistance from the local county department liaison, the Office of the Child Advocate, and the state foster parent liaison (if one exists). Additionally, the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia provides trained advocates to assist and support foster parents throughout the process. Foster parents can contact the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia at 1-877-804-6610 or at [www.afpag.org](http://www.afpag.org) to make an advocate request.

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## The Conflict Resolution Process and Tools

At Susie King Taylor Community School, we try to follow this process whenever a conflict arises. The broad strokes of the process are:

1. Express your concern to the other party in the conflict with the goal of resolving the concern. Explain how the concern affects you personally, propose what you feel would be an appropriate remedy, and ask for the other party's help in coming up with a solution suitable to both parties.
2. If you are unable to resolve the conflict with the other party one on one, the next step is to go to the supervising party. In most cases at the school, that would be the Administrator.
  - a. The Administrator will hear both sides' view of the conflict, and feelings on the appropriate remedy.
  - b. The Administrator will help both parties process the conflict and come to a resolution.
3. If no solution can be found with the supervising party, the last step is to take the conflict to the governing board.

In order to successfully resolve conflict, we suggest the following practices when approaching conflict resolution that have proven successful in the past:

- **Clarifying and focusing:** Sometimes, what we perceive as the issue is a symptom of something else and not the root cause. The first step in resolving the conflict is agreeing on what the conflict is, and then figuring out who needs to be involved in resolving it. In order to solve the root problem, we need to be willing to explore it collaboratively.
- **Active listening:** When we are presented with a conflict, our natural instinct is to defend ourselves. Unfortunately, that gets in the way of resolving the conflict when we're not open to examining the issue and potentially changing our behavior. The first step in doing that is to actively listen to the other party with openness and empathy and attempt

to understand their point of view. That doesn't mean you have to agree with them. It just means you do your best to understand where they're coming from.

- **“I” Messages:** One of the most effective ways to express the effects of a conflict are to say how they affect you personally. Using statements like “I feel attacked when you talk to me like that” instead of “stop yelling at me” help build empathy with the other party and are more likely to make them feel less defensive.
  - **Unity in the decision:** The goal of resolving the conflict is to get everyone involved to agree on the resolution and come away feeling like they were a part of the solution and not the “victim” of it. This process involves negotiation, compromise and empathy. We know it is *not easy*! But, coming to unity as early as possible and doing the hard work up front almost always keeps problems from coming back up later and reduces the number of unintended consequences. It's also a great way to build trust among the community and ensure its long-term growth and survival.
  - **Don't assume intent:** Focus on how the action affected you, not on possible motives. It will make resolving it easier and any conversation about it more effective if you can focus on how the action affected you personally and let the other person come to the realization of how their actions impact others. It's much easier (and often more effective) to call someone “in” by expressing how their action affected you, than it is to be seen as calling them “out” on what you perceive their intent to be.
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## Informal Complaints

There are two types of issues covered in this document: Informal Complaints and Formal Grievances. It's hard to define the first without defining the second.

A [Formal Grievance](#) is a serious allegation of improper activities or behaviors that require a timely and direct intervention with the Administrator to resolve. Formal Grievances are likely to involve, but not limited to:

- Allegations of significant breaches or violations of school policy or procedure.
- Any actions or behavior that create a public safety or personal endangerment concern.

Informal complaints are pretty much everything else. They require communication between the parties involved and need to be resolved, but don't reflect the kinds of serious breaches of policy or behavior that warrant a formal grievance.

The process for resolving informal complaints looks a lot like the one presented in the introduction. This process exists to give the school community a framework for resolving issues before they become formal grievances.

The process is:

1. If the complaint involves school staff (teachers, administration, etc), the concerned party should request a meeting with the staff member in question. It needs to be a scheduled meeting to give everyone involved a chance to prepare.
  - a. The meeting exists to openly discuss the issue with the goal of resolving it. That means it needs to be done with empathy, active listening and without personal attacks or insults.
  - b. Anyone involved may request another person attend the meeting as support. It could be a friend, family member, mentor, or clergy (but not limited to those). The other person is there as an observer and not as a mediator or participant.
  - c. The meeting should be recorded, either a full audio recording or thorough written notes taken by school staff. If there's no recording, the written notes should be signed by both parties as an accurate representation of what was discussed. Recordings and notes will be made available to all parties.
  - d. Any party in the meeting who feels threatened, intimidated or unsafe may end the meeting at any time and move to the next step.
  - e. It's acceptable to have multiple meetings to resolve the issue as long as all parties feel progress is being made.
2. If the issue isn't resolved through a direct meeting, either party may schedule a meeting of all parties with the Administrator. If the initial conflict is with the Administrator, either party may move directly to step 3.
  - a. The notes and/or audio from the first meeting(s) in advance of the meeting.
  - b. The meeting will be scheduled by the Administrator at the first available time convenient to all parties.
  - c. The goal of this meeting is to resolve the issue. The same active listening and empathy outlined in the first step should be used here.
  - d. The same rules about notes and audio recordings from step one apply to this step.
3. If no resolution can be reached in steps one and two, the concerned party or Administrator can request the concern be added to the agenda for the next Governing Board meeting by working with the [Grievance Coordinator](#), who will work with you to make sure there's as much detail as possible about the grievance, your proposed resolution to the situations and any questions you would like the board to answer. The Grievance Coordinator will probably ask clarifying questions and may request a meeting or phone call to get more detail before adding the item to the agenda.
  - a. If the issue relates to matters of personnel or specific to student(s), it will be discussed in closed session.

- b. All other matters will be discussed in open session according to the agenda, as required by open meeting law.
  - c. All notes and/or audio should be given to the board clerk in advance of the board meeting where the concern is to be discussed.
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## Formal Grievances

Formal grievances are much more serious and require timely and direct intervention from the Administrator with all involved parties. Things that would fall under the formal grievance process include (but aren't limited to):

- Significant breaches or violations of school policy or procedure
- Any actions or behavior that may create a public safety concern or the possibility of endangering students, staff or the community.

**This process should be reserved for those kinds of serious issues.**

If you have a formal grievance:

1. You file a written grievance with the Administrator using the [Formal Grievance Form](#). The Administrator will do their best to resolve the grievance using the informal process, if deemed appropriate by the Administrator, within 5 business days from when they receive the grievance.
2. In the event that the no resolution can be found using the informal process, the Administrator will respond to the grievance with written recommendations within fifteen business days from the date of the receipt of the initial grievance.
3. If either party feels that the grievance isn't resolved after the written recommendations from step two, the dissatisfied party can request that it be added to the agenda for an upcoming Governing Board meeting by working with the [Grievance Coordinator](#), who will work with you to make sure there's as much detail as possible about the grievance, your proposed resolution to the situations and any questions you would like the board to answer. The Grievance Coordinator will probably ask clarifying questions and may request a meeting or phone call to get more detail before adding the item to the agenda.
  - a. If the issue relates to matters of personnel or specific to student(s), it will be discussed in closed session.
  - b. If the grievance is about policy, procedure or clarification of an issue not related to personnel, it will be discussed in open session, as required by open meeting law.

4. At any time during the formal grievance process, the Administrator can choose to refer the issue to the Governing Board for its consideration.
  5. If the matter isn't resolved to the satisfaction of all parties, any party may choose to pursue outside mediation, arbitration or litigation at their own expense, as laid out in the [Role of the Governing Board](#) section.
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## Grievance-Related Policies and Special Cases

### General Grievance Guidance

- The Governing Board, in general, will not handle a grievance based on hearsay or made on behalf of another parent, family or employee.
- The Governing Board, in general, will not handle a grievance if the informal process hasn't been attempted in good faith. The Grievance Coordinator will help you through any point in the process and is there to answer questions about the right place to address your issue.
- The Governing Board will not address grievances filed anonymously.
- The Governing Board, in general, will not address specific complaints about personnel decisions.

### The Role of the Governing Board

1. Individual Board members don't have the authority to resolve either informal or formal grievances. However, Board members can listen to any grievance from any party, but will not be able to act outside of the grievance process. Board members can answer clarifying questions about the process and where a particular concern might fall in the policy.
2. The decision of the Governing Board is final. If any party wishes to contest the Board's decision, we recommend using private mediation. If it can't be resolved through private mediation, then we suggest both sides agree to binding arbitration.

These terms are voluntary, and don't prevent any party from pursuing their due process rights through litigation if they decline mediation or arbitration. The Governing Board will assume no liability or cost in this case.

## Retaliation

Any attempt to intimidate or retaliate against anyone for raising an issue or participating in this process is forbidden. If anyone involved in the conflict resolution process, for either formal or informal grievances, feels they are being retaliated against, they should immediately contact the Administrator or Clerk of the Board.

## Grievances with Administration Decisions

If you have a formal grievance with a decision made by school administration, we recommend you follow the informal grievance process and try to work out your issue with the Administrator, as they're the one most able to resolve it quickly. If you can't resolve the issue using the informal process, then you should go to step 3 in the [Formal Grievances](#) section.

## Grievances with Board Decisions

If you have a conflict related to a board decision that involves the entire board, you would skip to step 2 in the [Formal Grievances](#) section, after filling out the [Formal Grievance Form](#) and request that an agenda item be added to the next Governing Board Meeting Agenda.