1. PURPOSE

1.1 Mercy Education is committed to justice which necessitates resolution of conflict arising from complaints and concerns. When conflict arises, all who are associated with Mercy Education are called to show respect for others and to act with compassion and courage. Complaint resolution procedures provide the opportunity to promote service, develop understanding, prevent further issues and ensure just outcomes.

1.2 At St Joseph’s College we are committed to providing a safe work environment for all employees, students and families.

1.3 The purpose of this document is to provide a structure by which employees / students / families can have concerns and complaints addressed in a manner where justice and respect underpin the process and outcome.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 In a Catholic school, pastoral care involves concern for the growth of both staff and students. The purpose of the St Joseph’s College Complaints and Concerns Policy is to promote the pastoral care of teachers and students, as well as meeting our obligations of addressing the legitimate concerns of parents, caregivers, students and colleagues.

2.2 This policy recognizes that if there is a practice which is detrimental to the students’ welfare or learning, then this situation or incident needs to be addressed and changes made to this practice. In order to meet a standard of best practice St Joseph’s College has developed this complaints procedure to help resolve and where possible avoid potential problems.

2.3 The term Staff is defined as the Principal, Deputy Principal/s, Heads of School, House Leaders, Domain Leaders, Pastoral/Welfare/Support staff, Homeroom Teachers or subject teachers.

3. DEFINITION

3.1 A complaint or concern relates to a perception of unjust treatment that causes resentment and is seen as grounds for action; such a complaint could be judged eventually as justified or not.

3.2 The complainant is the person raising the concern.

3.3 The subject of the complaint is the person, persons or organization against which a complaint is made.

3.4 Concerns can be between any combinations of parents, staff, volunteers, students, Principals, Mercy Education Board.
4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

4.1 Mercy Education acknowledges that the nature of school communities will inevitably, at times, lead to a lack of harmony where some individuals or groups will consider that their rights or responsibilities are being eroded.

4.2 As the delegated authority for schools governed by Mercy Education, the Board of Mercy Education will be ultimately responsible for investigation of complaints concerning Mercy schools.

4.3 All Mercy Education schools require policies and procedures allowing members of the school community to express complaints and seek remedies. Such documents should:

- include the contact details of the relevant personnel
- be readily available to parents, students and staff
- be in alignment with this document (1.06A) and the associated procedures document (1.06B).

4.4 Complaints will be responded to in a prompt, impartial and just manner.

4.5 Conflict resolution processes will reflect the principles of participation, co-responsibility and subsidiarity.

4.6 Complaints will be initially responded to at the lowest possible level, taking into account the seriousness of the complaint, and escalated if and when a satisfactory resolution is not obtained. Mercy Education acknowledges that most complaints are dealt with most effectively at the school level. This may be modified by the nature of the concern and the wishes of the person who is seeking a resolution of the concern. Mercy Education has a role where this has not proved satisfactory or is not appropriate due to the sensitivity of the issue.

4.7 Complainants will be encouraged to address their issues with the subject of their complaint personally in the first instance without third party involvement. Assistance will be provided where appropriate.

4.8 Wherever possible, concerns should be resolved by a process of discussion, cooperation and conciliation. The aim is to reach an acceptable outcome that minimizes any potential detriment to ongoing relationships.

4.9 Both the person raising the complaint and the subject of the complaint will receive appropriate information, support and assistance in resolving the concern.

4.10 No person will be victimized because they raise a complaint or are associated with a concern.

4.11 Members of a school community should not instigate complaints that are frivolous, vexatious or malicious. All individuals are expected to participate in the complaint resolution process in good faith.

4.12 All signed, written complaints addressed to Mercy Education Limited, Principals or staff of Mercy schools will receive a response.

4.13 In the case of an informal verbal complaint, the complainant will be encouraged to document the issue. If this does not occur, the complaint will be assessed as to whether it merits further investigation.

4.14 Information in an anonymous complaint will be assessed as to whether it merits further investigation. The complaint and any action taken will be documented.
4.15 A non-judgmental and non-adversarial, restorative approach will be taken to resolving complaints and concerns. Parties will work together with respect and openness to reach fair and reasonable decisions.

4.16 Procedural fairness will be followed in all aspects of complaint handling, including:

- Giving the complainant the opportunity to present their case
- Informing the subject of the complaint that it has been received and what the allegations are
- Giving the subject of the complaint an opportunity to respond
- Advising all parties of the outcome of the investigation
- Informing parties of any avenue of review

4.17 Complaints and their resolution will be fully documented.

4.18 Complaints will be handled in a manner which is consistent with current Australian legislation and practice and relevant industrial agreements.

4.19 Mercy Education and the Principal are mindful of the impact any complaint or dispute may have upon a school in addition to its resolution, and will take steps to address this.

4.20 Appropriate levels of confidentiality will be adhered to at all times. Complainants should be advised that for legal reasons absolute confidentiality may not always be possible. These reasons include, but are not limited to, duty of care, workplace health and safety and mandatory reporting.

5. **SOURCE OF COMPLAINTS OR CONCERNS**

5.1 Complaints or concerns may arise from:
- parents (and caregivers)
- students
- the public
- staff

6. **RESPONSES TO COMPLAINTS AND CONCERNS**

6.1 As St Joseph’s College supports a House Pastoral Care system, the parent or caregiver would normally make initial contact to the Homeroom Teacher (Years 7,9-12), the Pastoral Care Teacher (Year 8). In instances of more serious concern a House Leader or Head of School is to be informed of any parent or caregiver complaints. This senior staff member will ensure that the matter is brought to the attention of the Deputy Principal or Principal.

6.2 If staff are approached about a matter that lies outside their area of responsibility it should be referred to the appropriate person. The parents or caregivers who made the complaint are to be informed when a matter is referred.

6.3 Matters incapable of resolution at a particular level should be referred to the appropriate senior staff member, with parents and caregivers kept informed of the action being taken. Senior staff will refer those issues that need to go directly to the Deputy Principal, with whom lies the responsibility for more serious concerns.

6.4 There may be some who will wish to go directly to the Principal with their concerns. This should be requested through the Personal Assistant to the Principal. However, the Principal may refer the concern to the level that he/she believes is most appropriate.

6.5 Responses to issues of serious concern will be communicated by the College Principal in verbal or letter form only - not electronic/email.

6.6 The processes for addressing any complaints or concerns raised by parties will be initiated as soon as possible and the person making the complaint or raising the concern will be informed about the progress of the complaint or concern as developments occur.
7. **REDUCING ANXIETY**

7.1 As the person expressing concern may feel vulnerable, the College can reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be handled.

7.2 The following factors will assist in reducing anxiety:
   a. Information about the complaints procedure should be clear.
   b. Complaints are to be acknowledged as soon as is practical, but within a maximum of five days. Staff are to inform parents or caregivers as to what is happening to their concern or complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it should be received. The issue is to be dealt with as quickly as possible.
   c. The nature of the complaint and what is concerning the complainant should be clear:
      i. If it is not immediately obvious the parents or caregivers may need more time to explain.
      ii. If the concern is deemed to be of a serious nature, the complainant will be asked to put that concern in writing.
      iii. It may be helpful to discuss possible outcomes.

8. **RECORDING**

8.1 The College is to keep an effective log of serious concerns. This may be required because:
   i. It may become the cause of future legal action
   ii. Patterns in the record may indicate a need for action
   iii. The Principal should be able to check the log regularly.

8.2 The log, to be maintained by the Personal Assistant to the Principal, is to contain the following:
   i. Date when the issue was raised
   ii. Name of all parties involved
   iii. Brief statement of the issue
   iv. Member of staff handling the issue
   v. Brief statement of the outcome.

8.3 Records of the complaint, the process for handling the complaint and any outcomes will be kept. Where the complaint is found to be vexatious or based on misinformation, etc. any record pertaining to the complaint or handling of the complaint will be kept in a file separate from the teacher or staff member concerned and the student.

8.4 Where a complaint is addressed or acted on, a copy of any reports related to the handling of the complaint will be provided to the teacher or staff member concerned. Teachers and members of staff will have access to the files kept on them by the College.

8.5 Policy and procedures at St Joseph’s College will be consistent with the procedures outlined in the Mercy Education Procedure 1.06A Complaints Management and 1.06B Complaints Management. Key Steps in the Management of Complaints in Mercy Schools.

9. **CONFIDENTIALITY**

9.1 Confidentiality is an important issue for students, parents, caregivers and staff. It is essential that any complaint be treated in a confidential manner and with respect.

9.2 Complainants often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the College’s policy that complaints made by parents and caregivers are not to rebound adversely on their children and similarly complaints raised by students should not rebound on them or on other students.
9.3 The question of confidentiality will be discussed sensitively and on an individual basis with the complainant. The College’s policy is to be carefully explained.

9.4 Members of staff are rightly concerned that they should know about complaints that might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be made known to them and those who may need to be consulted.

9.5 Confidentiality is a major issue in the handling of complaints. Confidentiality shall be maintained at all stages of the complaint procedure with communication limited to those people who need to be informed in order to resolve the complaint.

9.6 Members of our College community are encouraged to give their names and should be given reassurance on the issue of confidentiality. Anonymous complaints will not be acted upon officially.

10. RESOLUTION

10.1 Sometimes the very acknowledgment of an issue by the College brings peace of mind to parents and caregivers. Satisfactory resolution may come from any of the following:

   i. Knowing that changes have been made, and that matters will be different in the future
   ii. Knowing that the College is now alert to a possible problem
   iii. Feeling that their concerns have been considered seriously
   iv. An outcome which may be different from the one sought, but which is perceived to be well-considered
   v. A considered letter
   vi. An apology

10.2 If time is required to consider matters of serious concern, parents should receive a report letter. This should cover:

   i. the issues raised
   ii. how the issues were considered
   iii. the people consulted
   iv. action that is to be taken
   v. an apology, if appropriate

11. INTRACTABLE COMPLAINTS

11.1 Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes intractable it is the responsibility of the Principal to come to a decision that is appropriate for the welfare of all parties concerned.

12. TRAINING

12.1 The College will provide access to training to help staff deal not only with complaints made to them, but also to complaints that are made about them.

12.2 The College is also aware there is a need to provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made.

12.3 Training should encompass:

   i. The complaints procedure
   ii. Communication skills, such as listening, questioning and calming
   iii. Handling complaints, negotiation and mediation skills
iv. Skills in observing, recording and reporting  
v. The benefits of handling complaints well  
vi. The necessity to seek advice from experienced colleagues.

13. **A LEAFLET FOR PARENTS**

13.1 A leaflet explaining the recommended avenues for expressing concerns at St. Joseph’s College is available from the College.

14. **STUDENT COMPLAINTS**

14.1 The principles that apply to parental complaints also apply to complaints and concerns from students.

14.2 There are, however, differences in approaches. One important difference is that students should be able to raise concerns with any member of staff with whom they feel comfortable.

14.3 In more complex situations, once the matter is resolved, a member of staff, designated by the Principal, should discuss the outcome with the student.

15. **A LEAFLET FOR STUDENTS**

15.1 A leaflet explaining the recommended avenues for expressing concerns at St. Joseph’s College is available from the College.

16. **CONCLUSION**

16.1 If a concern or complaint is dealt with seriously and sensitively at an early stage, it is likely to have a satisfactory outcome. A healthy complaints procedure is an integral part of the Catholic ethos and values of St Joseph’s College.