

Do you need help resolving a concern?

Information about support persons and advocates

This guide helps families, parents, carers, support persons and advocates understand the role of a support person and advocate and how they can assist in communicating or raising a concern with a school, or with making a complaint.

Some people have more difficulty than others in communicating or raising a concern with a school. It can be helpful to ask someone else to help you with this.

Anyone aged 18 or older can be a support person for a parent, carer, student or family member. Parents, carers, students or family members can also contact professional advocacy services for support.

The department is committed to resolving concerns about NSW schools locally where possible. However, the department's online [complaint form](#) can be used when a matter needs to be escalated further.

If an issue cannot be resolved locally, a support person or advocate can help make the process easier when making a complaint. This includes reasonable help and support to understand:

- how to communicate effectively with the school
- the process that will be followed to handle the concern or complaint
- the likely time it will take to resolve the concern or complaint
- what is going to happen next and when
- who to contact if there are any questions or concerns with the process
- what to do if the person raising the concern or complaint is unhappy with the way it is being handled or the outcome.

A support person or advocate should not be used as an interpreter. If an interpreter is needed for meetings or interviews, the school can arrange the appropriate service. Depending on availability, interpreting services may be provided onsite or via video or telephone. Just ask the school beforehand.

Before a support person or advocate gets involved, it can be helpful to think about their role - are they there to only provide support and assistance to the person, or are they there to help to find a resolution?



The role of a support person

A support person is someone 18 years or older who assists in resolving a complaint by providing practical and emotional support to the person making the complaint. A support person can:

- attend meetings
- speak at meetings if they have information that is relevant to the situation
- provide advice about rights and entitlements
- clarify the process or proceedings
- suggest a pause during meetings to support the person and provide advice or assistance
- hold a conversation with the person raising the complaint during the meeting, at their request
- take notes
- help with implementing outcomes.

A support person can ask questions and provide information. For example, if they were directly involved in a situation and have information about what happened, or if they have ideas about the way forward.

If a legal representative is acting as a support person, it is important they allow the person raising the issue to speak for themselves.

A support person is there to act as a witness or adviser.

It is not appropriate for a support person to provide information that the person raising the issue has told them – the support person's role is to help the person raising the issue or concern to tell their own story.





The role of an external advocate

An external advocate is someone 18 years or older who is authorised to speak for the person raising a concern or making a complaint, to support a positive resolution for that person. This person is likely to be from a professional advocacy service.

In most cases they will be involved when the person raising the concern does not have the capacity to effectively communicate or navigate the situation on their own. In addition to providing the same assistance as a support person, an advocate can also:

- provide any input into the discussions relating to the complaint, and
- agree to action being taken or not taken.



Working with schools - some tips

Schools want to resolve issues quickly and at the local level. We encourage parents, carers, family members, support persons and advocates to work collaboratively with the person managing the issue and school representatives. [Our tips and advice for effectively raising concerns or complaints](#) can be a good place to start.

- It can help to focus on the facts relevant to the concern or complaint and the outcomes for students.
- Communicate politely and calmly.
- While any person aged 18 or over can potentially support or advocate for a person raising a concern or complaint, the school can decide not to engage with a nominated person if they have reasonable grounds not to. For example, if it is reasonably perceived that the person may pose a risk to the health or safety of others, or where their entitlement to information about a child has been restricted by law.
- Generally, one person will be nominated to manage the process in raising a concern or making a complaint. In schools, this may be the principal or another member of the school staff.
- The school may decide to have another person present at meetings to support staff to provide expert advice in any discussion, observe, or take notes.
- Unless otherwise agreed, all details of a complaint and its resolution should remain confidential.

There are times when a person who is nominated as a support person or advocate may not be the best person to be involved in the resolution process. For example:

- When the support person or advocate has been directly involved in the situation and may not be able to act in the best interests of the person raising the concern or making a complaint.
- If a partner or family member is being considered as a support person or advocate, it should be remembered that personal information may be disclosed during a meeting that they may not have previously been aware of.

Meetings or discussions may be terminated if a person behaves in an unreasonable or unacceptable way. Unacceptable behaviour may include but is not limited to:

- rude or abusive language including use of obscenities and making sexist, racist or derogatory comments
- aggressive or intimidating actions such as violence and threatening gestures
- redirecting the meeting away from its stated purpose
- inappropriate and time-wasting communication
- making an electronic recording of a meeting or phone call without the consent of all the people who are participating in the meeting or phone call.

More information

For more information see our [tips and advice for effective complaining](#) and the quick reference guide to [making a complaint](#) about our schools.

Telephone interpreter service

Please contact the school if you would like more information. If you need interpreter assistance to contact the school, please call 131 450, tell them what language you need and ask the operator to phone the school. The operator will get an interpreter on the line to assist you with your conversation. You will not be charged for this service.