

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide is to give everyone—parents,* educators, and community members alike—the information to take part in the co-operative, creative problem-solving process of informal dispute resolution. It is intended to serve as a resource support to local school and school division** dispute resolution policies and practices. Many schools and school divisions have dispute resolution policies in place, and for them it will serve as supplemental material.

Manitoba schools are diverse centres of learning and activity. Educators, parents, and administrators work together on a daily basis to create safe, respectful, and positive schools where each student has the opportunity to do his or her best. We all co-operate to make this happen. But even in the most positive school environment, disagreements or misunderstandings are bound to come up.

Different opinions are a natural part of working relationships. Sometimes these differences can lead to disagreements or even disputes. This, in itself, is neither positive nor negative. It is the way in which we choose to handle these differences that can lead to positive or negative outcomes. When we try to solve our problems in a fair and co-operative way, we are able to resolve our differences positively. This, in turn, helps build a positive environment in our schools. We all benefit from a positive school environment. It is the student who benefits the most.

A positive school environment is a place where each person's opinions are allowed and expressed, respected, and listened to. In order for this to take place, each person in the education system must feel included. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth stands behind this principle:

Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued and safe. An inclusive community consciously evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of citizenship. In Manitoba we embrace inclusion as a means of enhancing the well-being of every member of the community. By working together, we strengthen our capacity to provide the foundation for a richer future for all of us. (*Philosophy of Inclusion*, Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001.)

Working together to create the kind of environment where disagreements do not become disputes is a worthwhile goal. It is important to keep in mind, however, that dispute resolution is not about avoiding dispute at all costs. When we take positive approaches to resolving our disputes, we are creating opportunities to build strong working relationships. When our relationships are built with trust, respect, and creative problem solving, we are setting positive examples for our students.

* The term "parent" is used throughout this document to refer to parents, guardians, or others who have responsibility for caring for students.

** Parents whose children attend independent schools should contact their school for information about local governance.

There are many approaches to dispute resolution. They range from informal to formal. Informal approaches include problem solving, negotiation, and conciliation. These are the most efficient approaches to resolving disputes; they are also the most flexible, productive, and rewarding. The more informal the approach, the more control people have over the outcome. When we are willing to begin a dispute resolution process by sitting down and talking with the person or people who are the most directly involved, we are creating an opportunity for everyone to achieve their goals.

While there are many benefits to informal dispute resolution, it may not be possible in all situations. If a child is in need of protection, informal approaches cannot be used. If legal issues are involved, informal approaches may not be advisable.

It is important for everyone, especially the student, that adults resolve disputes as quickly and reasonably as possible. The way in which we come together to resolve our differences not only shapes the relationships among our schools, families, and communities, it shapes the students' experience in the education system.

Dispute resolution has been studied, taught, written about, and discussed. Workshops, seminars, courses, pamphlets, and books are widely available. Organizations, ranging from schools to government departments to banks, have adopted dispute resolution policies. These policies outline what to do once a dispute arises, and what steps can be taken to see it resolved positively.

It is the right of every child in Manitoba to receive an education. It is the responsibility of each one of us to work together to give each child the best education possible.

Note: This is not a policy document. This is a resource provided by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth to support dispute resolution at the local level, where most decisions about day-to-day school matters are made. The Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth makes decisions based on a wide range of "big picture" responsibilities having to do with education matters throughout the province.

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth is available to provide information about a wide range of topics, including information that can be helpful for people who are trying to resolve disputes. Support from Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth may also be available when more direct facilitation might help people move towards resolution.

"By working together, we strengthen our capacity to provide the foundation for a richer future for all of us."

(Philosophy of Inclusion, Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001.)