



Uniform Complaint Policy and Procedures Administrative Regulation

The Cottonwood School (“Charter School”) complies with applicable federal and state laws and regulations. Charter School is the local agency primarily responsible for compliance with federal and state laws and regulations governing educational programs. Pursuant to this policy, persons responsible for compliance and/or conducting investigations shall be knowledgeable about the laws and programs, which they are assigned to investigate.

Scope

This complaint procedure is adopted to provide a uniform system of complaint processing (“UCP”) for the following types of complaints:

1. Complaints alleging unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation or bullying against any protected group on the basis of the actual or perceived characteristics of age, ancestry, color, mental disability, physical disability, ethnic group identification, immigration status, citizenship, gender expression, gender identity, gender, genetic information, nationality, national origin, race or ethnicity, religion, medical condition, marital status, sex, or sexual orientation, or on the basis of a person’s association with a person or group with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics in any Charter School program or activity.
2. Complaints alleging a violation of state or federal law or regulation governing the following programs:
 - Accommodations for Pregnant, Parenting or Lactating Students;
 - Education of Students in Foster Care, Students who are Homeless, former Juvenile Court Students now enrolled in a public school, Migratory Children and Children of Military Families;
 - Every Student Succeeds Act;
 - Migrant Education Programs;
 - School Safety Plans.
3. Complaints alleging that a student enrolled in a public school was required to pay a pupil fee for participation in an educational activity as those terms are defined below.
 - a. “Educational activity” means an activity offered by the charter school that constitutes an integral fundamental part of elementary and secondary education, including, but not limited to, curricular and extracurricular activities.

- b. “Pupil fee” means a fee, deposit or other charge imposed on students, or a student’s parents/guardians, in violation of Education Code section 49011 and Section 5 of Article IX of the California Constitution, which require educational activities to be provided free of charge to all students without regard to their families’ ability or willingness to pay fees or request special waivers, as provided for in *Hartzell v. Connell* (1984) 35 Cal.3d 899. A pupil fee includes, but is not limited to, all of the following:
 - i. A fee charged to a student as a condition for registering for school or classes, or as a condition for participation in a class or an extracurricular activity, regardless of whether the class or activity is elective or compulsory or is for credit.
 - ii. A security deposit, or other payment, that a student is required to make to obtain a lock, locker, book, class apparatus, musical instrument, uniform or other materials or equipment.
 - iii. A purchase that a student is required to make to obtain materials, supplies, equipment or uniforms associated with an educational activity.
- c. A pupil fees complaint and complaints regarding local control and accountability plans (“LCAP”) only, may be filed anonymously (without an identifying signature), if the complaint provides evidence or information leading to evidence to support an allegation of noncompliance with Education Code sections 52060 - 52077, including an allegation of a violation of Education Code sections 47606.5 or 47607.3, as referenced in Education Code section 52075, regarding local control and accountability plans.
- d. If Charter School finds merit in a pupil fees complaint, or the California Department of Education (“CDE”) finds merit in an appeal, Charter School shall provide a remedy to all affected students, parents/guardians that, where applicable, includes reasonable efforts by Charter School to ensure full reimbursement to all affected students and parents/guardians, subject to procedures established through regulations adopted by the state board.
- e. Nothing in this Policy shall be interpreted to prohibit solicitation of voluntary donations of funds or property, voluntary participation in fundraising activities, or

Charter School and other entities from providing student prizes or other recognition for voluntarily participating in fundraising activities.

4. Complaints alleging noncompliance with the requirements governing the Local Control Funding Formula (“LCFF”) or LCAP under Education Code sections 47606.5 and 47607.3, as applicable. If Charter School adopts a School Plan for Student Achievement in addition to its LCAP, complaints of noncompliance with the requirements of the School Plan for Student Achievement under Education Code sections 64000, 64001, 65000, and 65001 shall also fall under this Policy.

Complaints alleging noncompliance regarding child nutrition programs established pursuant to Education Code sections 49490-49590 are governed by Title 7, Code of Federal Regulations (“C.F.R.”) sections 210.19(a)(4), 215.1(a), 220.13(c), 225.11(b), 226.6(n), and 250.15(d) and Title 5, California Code of Regulations (“C.C.R.”) sections 15580 - 15584.

Complaints alleging noncompliance regarding special education programs established pursuant to Education Code sections 56000-56865 and 59000-59300 are governed by the procedures set forth in 5 C.C.R. sections 3200-3205 and 34 C.F.R. sections 300.151-300.153.

Charter School acknowledges and respects every individual’s rights to privacy. Unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation or bullying complaints shall be investigated in a manner that protects (to the greatest extent reasonably possible and as permitted by law) confidentiality of the parties, including but not limited to the identity of the complainant, and maintains the integrity of the process. Charter School cannot guarantee anonymity of the complainant. This includes keeping the identity of the complainant confidential. However, Charter School will attempt to do so as appropriate. Charter School may find it necessary to disclose information regarding the complaint/complainant to the extent required by law or necessary to carry out the investigation or proceedings, as determined by the Executive Director or designee on a case-by-case basis. Charter School shall ensure that complainants are protected from retaliation.

Compliance Officers

The Charter School designates the individual(s) identified below to receive and investigate complaints and ensure compliance with law.

Human Resources
3921 Sandstone Drive, Suite 100
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

The compliance officer who receives a complaint may assign another compliance officer to investigate and resolve the complaint. The compliance officer shall promptly notify the complainant and respondent, if applicable, if another compliance officer is assigned to the complaint.

Should a complaint be filed against the Executive Director, the compliance officer for that case shall be the President of the Charter School Board of Directors.

The Executive Director or designee shall ensure that employees assigned to investigate and resolve complaints receive training and are knowledgeable about the laws and programs at issue in the complaints to which they are assigned. Training provided to such employees shall cover current state and federal laws and regulations governing the program, applicable processes for investigating and resolving complaints, including those alleging unlawful discrimination (such as discriminatory harassment, intimidation, or bullying), applicable standards for reaching decisions on complaints, and appropriate corrective measures. Assigned employees may have access to legal counsel as determined by the Executive Director or designee.

Notifications

The Charter School's UCP Policy and Procedures Administrative Regulation shall be posted in all school offices, including staff lounges.

The Executive Director or designee shall annually provide written notification of the Charter School's UCP to students, employees, parents/guardians of students, advisory committee members, appropriate school officials or representatives, and other interested parties.

The Executive Director or designee shall make available copies of this Policy free of charge. The annual notice of this Policy may be made available on Charter School's website.

The annual notice shall be in English. When necessary under Education Code section 48985, if fifteen (15) percent or more of the students enrolled in Charter School speak a single primary language other than English, this annual notice will also be provided to the parent/guardian of any such students in their primary language.

The notice shall include the following:

1. A list of the types of complaints that fall under the scope of the UCP and the state and federal provisions that govern complaints regarding child nutrition programs and special education programs.

2. A statement clearly identifying any California State preschool programs that Charter School is operating as exempt from licensing pursuant to Health and Safety Code section 1596.792(o) and corresponding Title 5 health and safety regulations, and any California State preschool programs that Charter School is operating pursuant to Title 22 licensing requirements.
3. A statement that Charter School is primarily responsible for compliance with federal and state laws and regulations.
4. A statement that a student enrolled in a public school shall not be required to pay a fee for his/her participation in an educational activity that constitutes an integral fundamental part of the Charter School's educational program, including curricular and extracurricular activities.
5. A statement identifying the compliance officer, and the identity(ies) of the person(s) currently occupying that position, if known.
6. A statement that the complainant has a right to appeal Charter School's decision to the CDE by filing a written appeal within thirty (30) calendar days of the date of Charter School's decision, except if Charter School has used its UCP to address a complaint that is not subject to the UCP requirements.
7. A statement that a complainant who appeals Charter School's decision on a UCP complaint to the CDE shall receive a written appeal decision within sixty (60) calendar days of the CDE's receipt of the appeal, unless extended by written agreement with the complainant or the CDE documents exceptional circumstances and informs the complainant.
8. A statement that if a UCP complaint is filed directly with the CDE and the CDE determines that it merits direct intervention, the CDE shall complete an investigation and provide a written decision to the complainant within sixty (60) calendar days of receipt of the complaint, unless the parties have agreed to extend the timeline or the CDE documents exceptional circumstances and informs the complainant.
9. A statement that if Charter School finds merit in a UCP complaint, or the CDE finds merit in an appeal, Charter School shall take corrective actions consistent with the requirements of existing law that will provide a remedy to the affected student and/or parent/guardian as applicable.

10. A statement advising the complainant of any civil law remedies that may be available under state or federal discrimination harassment, intimidation, or bullying laws, if applicable, and of the appeal pursuant to Education Code 262.3.

11. A statement that copies of the Charter School's UCP shall be available free of charge.

Procedures

The following procedures shall be used to address all complaints which allege that Charter School has violated federal or state laws or regulations enumerated in the section "Scope," above. The compliance officer shall maintain a record of each complaint and subsequent related actions for at least three (3) calendar years.

All parties named shall be notified when a complaint is filed, when a complaint meeting or hearing is scheduled, and when a decision or ruling is made.

Step 1: Filing of Complaint

Any individual, including a person's duly authorized representative or an interested third party, public agency, or organization may file a written complaint of alleged noncompliance or unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation or bullying pursuant to this Policy.

A complaint of unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying may be filed by a person who alleges that he/she personally suffered unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying, or by a person who believes any specific class of individuals has been subjected to unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying, or by a duly authorized representative who alleges that an individual student has been subjected to discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying. The investigation of alleged unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying shall be initiated by filing a complaint no later than six (6) months from the date when the alleged unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying occurred, or six (6) months from the date when the complainant first obtained knowledge of the facts of the alleged unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying, unless the time for filing is extended by the Executive Director. The period for filing may be extended for up to ninety (90) days following the expiration of the six-month period by the Executive Director or designee for good cause upon written request by the complainant setting forth the reasons for the extension. The Executive Director shall respond immediately upon a receipt of a request for extension. The complaint shall be presented to the compliance officer who shall maintain a log of complaints received, providing each with a code number and a date stamp.

Complaints filed pursuant to this Policy must be in writing and signed by the complainant. A signature may be handwritten, typed (including in an email) or electronically generated. Only complaints regarding pupil fees or LCAP compliance may be filed anonymously as set forth in this Policy. If a complainant is unable to put a complaint in writing due to conditions such as a disability or illiteracy, the Charter School staff shall assist him/her in the filing of the complaint.

All other complaints under this Policy shall be filed not later than one (1) year from the date the alleged violation occurred. For complaints relating to the LCAP, the date of the alleged violation is the date on which the Charter School Board of Directors approved the LCAP or the annual update was adopted by Charter School.

Step 2: Mediation

Within three (3) business days after the compliance officer receives the complaint, he/she may informally discuss with all the parties the possibility of using mediation. If the parties agree to meet to mediation, the compliance officer shall make all arrangements for this process.

Before initiating the mediation of a complaint alleging retaliation or unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying, the compliance officer shall ensure that all parties agree to make the mediator a party to related confidential information.

If the mediation process does not resolve the complaint to the satisfaction of the complainant, the compliance officer shall proceed with the investigation of the complaint.

The use of the mediation shall not extend the Charter School's timelines for investigating and resolving the complaint unless the complainant agrees in writing to such an extension of time.

Step 3: Investigation of Complaint:

The compliance officer is encouraged to hold an investigative meeting within ten (10) business days of receiving the complaint or an unsuccessful attempt to mediate the complaint. This meeting shall provide an opportunity for the complainant and/or the complainant's representative to repeat the complaint orally.

The compliance officer shall provide the complainant and/or his/her representative with the opportunity to present the compliance officer with any evidence, or information leading to evidence, to support the allegations in the complaint. Such evidence or information may be presented at any time during the investigation.

In conducting the investigation, the compliance officer shall collect all available documents and review all available records, notes, or statements related to the complaint, including any additional evidence or information received from the parties during the course of the investigation. He/she shall individually interview all available witnesses with information pertinent to the complaint, and may visit any reasonably accessible location where the relevant actions are alleged to have taken place. At appropriate intervals, the compliance officer shall inform both parties of the status of the investigation.

A complainant's refusal to provide the compliance officer with documents or other evidence related to the allegations in the complaint, or the complainant's failure or refusal to cooperate in the investigation, or engagement in any other obstruction of the investigation may result in the dismissal of the complaint because of a lack of evidence to support the allegation.

Charter School's refusal to provide the compliance officer with access to records and/or other information related to the allegations in the complaint, failure or refusal to cooperate in the investigation, or engagement in any other obstruction of the investigation may result in a finding, based on evidence collected, that a violation has occurred and in the imposition of a remedy in favor of the complainant.

Step 4: Final Written Decision

Charter School shall issue an investigation report (the "Decision") based on the evidence. Charter School's Decision shall be in writing and sent to the complainant within sixty (60) calendar days of Charter School's receipt unless the timeframe is extended with the written agreement of the complainant. Charter School's Decision shall be written in English and in the language of the complainant whenever feasible or as required by law.

The Decision shall include:

- The findings of fact based on the evidence gathered.
- The conclusion providing a clear determination of each allegation as to whether Charter School is in compliance with the relevant law.
- Corrective actions, if Charter School finds merit in the complaint and any are warranted or required by law.
- Notice of the complainants right to appeal Charter School's Decision within thirty (30) calendar days to the CDE, except when Charter School has used its UCP to address complaints that are not subject to the UCP requirements.
- Procedures to be followed for initiating such an appeal.

If an employee is disciplined as a result of the complaint, the Decision shall simply state that effective action was taken and that the employee was informed of Charter School's expectations. The Decision shall not give any further information as to the nature of the disciplinary action except as required by applicable law.

Appeals to the California Department of Education

Any complainant who is dissatisfied with the Charter School's Decision the complainant may file an appeal in writing with CDE within thirty (30) calendar days of receiving the Charter School's decision. The appeal shall be accompanied by a copy of the complaint filed with the Charter School and a copy of the Decision. When appealing to the CDE, the complainant must specify and explain the basis for appeal, including at least one of the following:

1. Charter School failed to follow its complaint procedures.
2. Relative to the allegations of the complaint, Charter School's Decision lacks material findings of fact necessary to reach a conclusion of law.
3. The material findings of fact in Charter School's Decision are not supported by substantial evidence.
4. The legal conclusion in Charter School's Decision is inconsistent with the law.
5. In a case in which Charter School's Decision found noncompliance, the corrective actions fail to provide a proper remedy.

Upon notification by CDE that the complainant has appealed the Charter School's Decision, the Executive Director or designee shall forward the following documents to CDE within ten (10) calendar days of the date of notification:

- A copy of the original complaint
- A copy of the written Decision
- A copy of the investigation file including, but not limited to, all notes, interviews, and documents submitted by the parties and gathered by the investigator
- A report of any action taken to resolve the complaint

- A copy of the Charter School's uniform complaint procedures
- Other relevant information requested by CDE

If the CDE determines the appeal raises issues not contained in the local complaint, the CDE will refer those new issues back to Charter School for resolution as a new complaint. If the CDE notifies Charter School that its Decision failed to address an allegation raised by the complaint and subject to the UCP process, Charter School will investigate and address such allegation(s) in accordance with the UCP requirements and provide the CDE and the appellant with an amended Decision addressing such allegation(s) within twenty (20) calendar days of the CDE's notification. The amended Decision will inform the appellant of the right to separately appeal the amended Decision with respect to the complaint allegation(s) not addressed in the original Decision.

Within thirty (30) calendar days of the date of the CDE's appeal Decision pursuant to 5 C.C.R. section 4633(f)(2) or (3), either party may request reconsideration by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction ("SSPI") or the SSPI's designee. The request for reconsideration shall specify and explain the reason(s) for contesting the findings of fact, conclusions of law, or corrective actions in the CDE's appeal Decision. The SSPI will not consider any information not previously submitted to the CDE by a party during the appeal unless such information was unknown to the party at the time of the appeal and, with due diligence, could not have become known to the party. Pending the SSPI's response to a request for reconsideration, the CDE appeal Decision remains in effect and enforceable, unless stayed by a court.

The CDE may directly intervene in the complaint without waiting for action by Charter School] when one of the conditions listed in 5 C.C.R. section 4650 exists, including but not limited to cases in which through no fault of the complainant, Charter School has not taken action within sixty (60) calendar days of the date the complaint was filed with Charter School.

Civil Law Remedies

A complainant may pursue available civil law remedies outside of Charter School's complaint procedures. Complainants may seek assistance from mediation centers or public/private interest attorneys. Civil law remedies that may be imposed by a court include, but are not limited to, injunctions and restraining orders. For unlawful discrimination complaints arising under state law, however, a complainant must wait until sixty (60) calendar days have elapsed from the filing of an appeal with the CDE before pursuing civil law remedies. The moratorium does not apply to injunctive relief and is applicable only if Charter School has appropriately, and in a timely manner, apprised the complainant of their right to file a complaint.