



**MidCoast
Christian
College**

Whistleblower Policy

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope

This policy applies to MidCoast Christian College (MCCC), to ensure individuals who disclose wrongdoing in relation to the college can do so safely, securely and with confidence that they will be protected and supported. This policy is published on the MidCoast Christian College's website and made available to Board members and employees.

1.2 Related Policies

- Complaints or allegations of staff misconduct that do not meet the criteria of a whistleblowing disclosure will be addressed in accordance with the MCCC's *Complaints Handling Policy and Procedures*.
- Disclosures about reportable conduct will be addressed in accordance with the school's *Child Safe Policy*.
- Disclosures regarding a grievance between staff members about work matters, including work relationships and decision made by other staff members which impact on their work, may be addressed in accordance with the MCCC's *Staff Grievance Policy*.
- Unlawful discrimination, harassment or bullying complaints may be addressed in accordance with the MCCC's *Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Statement*.

2. What is a Qualifying Disclosure?

A **qualifying disclosure** is when an **eligible whistleblower** makes a disclosure to an **eligible recipient**, and the eligible whistleblower has **reasonable grounds to suspect** that the information concerns a **disclosable matter**.

3. Who can make a Qualifying Disclosure?

3.1 Eligible Whistleblowers

An eligible whistleblower is an individual who is or has been any of the following, in relation to MCCC:

- A Board member.
- an employee.
- a person who supplies goods or services (paid or unpaid).
- an employee of a person who supplies goods or services (paid or unpaid).

- an individual who is an associate of the College (as defined in the Corporations Act); and
- a relative or dependent (or dependents of a spouse) of any individual described above.

3.2 Anonymous Disclosures

A disclosure can be made anonymously and still be protected under the Corporations Act. A discloser can choose to remain anonymous while making a disclosure, over the course of the investigation and after the investigation is finalised.

However, this may make it difficult to investigate the reported matter. The College therefore encourages disclosers to provide their names.

If a discloser wishes to disclose anonymously, the discloser should provide sufficient information to allow the matter to be properly investigated. The College encourages the discloser to provide an anonymous email address through which additional questions can be asked and information provided. It will also allow the College to report the progress of the investigation to the discloser, as appropriate.

4. Disclosable Matters that Qualify for Protection

4.1 Disclosable Matters

A disclosable matter is a disclosure of information where the eligible whistleblower has reasonable grounds to suspect that the information relating to the College or a related company concern:

- misconduct.
- an improper state of affairs or circumstances.
- illegal activity (including conduct of officers and employees) – meaning activity in breach of the Corporations Act or specified financial services legislation, or an offence against any law of the Commonwealth punishable by imprisonment of 12 months or more; or
- conduct (including conduct of officers and employees) that represents a danger to the public or financial system.

This may include any conduct in relation to the operation of the school that involves:

- fraudulent activity.
- unlawful or corrupt use of school funds.
- breach of duty.
- negligence.

If a disclosure is not about a disclosable matter, it will not qualify for whistleblower protection under the Corporations Act.

4.2 Reasonable Grounds to Suspect

Whether a discloser would have 'reasonable grounds to suspect' is based on the reasonableness of the reasons for the discloser's suspicion, having regard to all the circumstances when considered objectively

If a disclosure is made without 'reasonable grounds to suspect' (e.g. where the disclosure is unfounded), the disclosure will not be a qualifying disclosure, and the discloser will not have the protections provided for under this policy and the Corporations Act.

Any deliberate false reporting will be regarded very seriously.

A discloser can still qualify for protection even if their disclosure turns out to be incorrect.

4.3 Personal Work-Related Grievances

Generally, disclosures that concern personal work-related grievances do not qualify for protection.

A disclosure will concern a personal work-related grievance of the discloser if the information:

- concerns a grievance about any matter in relation to the discloser's employment, or former employment, having or tending to have implications for the discloser personally; and
- does not have significant implications for the school that do not relate the discloser; and
- does not concern conduct that is:
 - an alleged contravention of the Corporations Act and specified financial services laws; or
 - an offence against another law of the Commonwealth, which is punishable by imprisonment of 12 months or more; or
 - a danger to the public or financial system; or

Examples of disclosures regarding personal work-related grievances that may not qualify for protection include:

- an interpersonal conflict between the discloser and another employee.

- a decision relating to the engagement, transfer or promotion of the discloser.
- a decision relating to the terms and conditions of engagement of the discloser.
- a decision to suspend or terminate the engagement of the discloser or otherwise discipline the discloser.

These matters will be addressed in accordance with the MCCC's Staff Grievance Policy.

A personal work-related grievance may still qualify for protection if:

- It includes information about misconduct, or information about misconduct includes or is accompanied by a personal work-related grievance (mixed report).
- The College or individual has breached employment or other laws punishable by imprisonment for a period of 12 months or more, engaged in conduct that represents a danger to the public, or disclosure relates to information that suggest misconduct beyond the discloser's personal circumstances.
- The discloser suffers from or is threatened with detriment for making a disclosure; or
- The discloser seeks legal advice or legal representation about the operation of the whistleblower protections under the Corporations Act.

5. Who can Receive a Qualifying Disclosure

5.1 Eligible recipients

An eligible recipient is an individual who occupies any of the following roles, in relation to the school or a related company:

- A Board member or the Principal of the College.
- an auditor, or member of an audit team of the College or a related company.
- an actuary of the school or a related company; and
- the Business Manager.

5.2 Making a Qualifying Disclosure

While an eligible whistleblower can make a disclosure to any eligible recipient, the College encourages them to make a disclosure in writing to the **Principal**, via email at principal@mccc.nsw.edu.au.

If it is not appropriate for the disclosure to be made to the **Principal**, the eligible whistleblower is encouraged to make the disclosure, in writing, to the **Chair of the Board** via email at board@mccc.nsw.edu.au.

Where a disclosure is made to an eligible recipient who is not the Principal, then subject to the confidentiality protections set out at Section 7 below, it will generally be passed onto the Principal and dealt with in accordance with Section 6 below.

5.3 External Disclosures

Disclosures may also qualify for protection if they are made to ASIC, APRA or a prescribed Commonwealth authority, or if an eligible whistleblower makes a disclosure to a legal practitioner to obtain advice about the operation of the whistleblower provisions.

5.4 Public Interest Disclosures

An eligible whistleblower can disclose to a member of Parliament or a journalist only if the information has been previously disclosed to ASIC, APRA or a prescribed Commonwealth authority, and:

90 days has passed since the time of the first disclosure; and

the eligible whistleblower does not have reasonable grounds to believe action is being, or has been, taken to address the information in the disclosure; and

- the eligible whistleblower has reasonable grounds to believe that making a further disclosure of the information would be in the public interest; and
- the eligible whistleblower informs the original recipient they intend to make a public interest disclosure; and
- the extent of information disclosed is no greater than necessary to inform the recipient of the disclosable matter.

Emergency Disclosures

An eligible whistleblower can disclose to a member of Parliament or a journalist only if the information has been previously disclosed to ASIC, APRA or a prescribed Commonwealth authority, and:

- the eligible whistleblower has reasonable grounds to believe that the information concerns a substantial and imminent danger to the health or safety of one or more persons or to the natural environment; and
- the eligible whistleblower informs the original recipient they intend to make an emergency disclosure; and

- the disclosure of information is no greater than necessary to inform the recipient of the substantial and imminent danger.

Eligible whistleblowers who make a 'public interest disclosure' or an 'emergency disclosure' also qualify for protection.

6. Investigating a Qualifying Disclosure

6.1 Receiving a Disclosure

Upon receiving a disclosure, the recipient (generally the Principal or Chair of the Board) will assess the disclosure to determine whether it qualifies for protection under the *Corporations Act* and is to be managed in accordance with this policy (qualifying disclosure) or the disclosure concerns matters that should be managed in accordance with related policies (see section 1.2).

6.2 Investigating a Qualifying Disclosure

MidCoast Christian College will acknowledge receipt of a disclosure within a reasonable period, assuming the eligible whistleblower can be contacted (including through anonymous channels). The College will assess disclosures to determine whether:

- they fall within the Whistleblower Protection Scheme; and
- an investigation is required – and if so, how that investigation should be carried out.

If an investigation is required, the MidCoast Christian School will determine:

- the nature and scope of the investigation.
- who should lead the investigation – including whether an external investigation is appropriate.
- the nature of any technical, financial or legal advice that may be required to support the investigation; and
- the anticipated timeframe for the investigation. Each investigation will be different, which will impact the applicable timeframe. However, the College's intent is to complete an investigation as soon as practicable

Where practicable, MidCoast Christian College will keep the eligible whistleblower informed of the steps taken or to be taken (or if no action is to be taken, the reason for this), and provide

appropriate updates, including about the completion of any investigation. However, the extent of the information provided, or whether it will be provided at all, will be subject to applicable confidentiality considerations, legal obligations and any other factors that MidCoast Christian College considers relevant in the situation.

MidCoast Christian College may not be able to undertake an investigation, or provide information about the process etc, if it is not able to contact the eligible whistleblower, for example, if a disclosure is made anonymously and has not provided a means of contact.

Where practicable, whistleblowers will receive updates about when the investigation has begun, while the investigation is in progress and after the investigation has been finalised. The frequency and time frame of any updates may vary depending on the nature of the disclosure. MidCoast Christian College will also have regard to confidentiality considerations when providing updates.

6.3 Fair Treatment of Employees Mentioned in Disclosures

MidCoast Christian College will take steps to ensure the fair treatment of employees who are mentioned in a disclosure that qualifies for protection:

- disclosures will be handled confidentially, when it is practical and appropriate in the circumstances.
- when an investigation needs to be undertaken, the process will be objective and fair.
- employees about whom disclosures are made will generally be given an opportunity to respond to the relevant allegations made in the qualifying disclosure.

MidCoast Christian College will offer support to employees affected by the disclosure, should it be required. (See section 9).

MidCoast Christian College will document the steps of the investigation and the findings from the investigation and report those findings to those responsible in the College. The method for documenting and reporting the findings will depend on the nature of the disclosure. There may be circumstances where it may not be appropriate to provide details of the outcome to the discloser.

7. Confidentiality and Records

Under the Corporations Act, the identity of the discloser of a qualifying disclosure and information which is likely to lead to the identification of the discloser must be kept confidential.

Exceptions to this are disclosures to ASIC, the Australian Federal Police, a legal practitioner for the purpose of obtaining advice about the application of the whistleblower protections or made with the consent of the discloser.

If a disclosure involves an issue which the school is required to report, MidCoast Christian College may not be able to maintain the confidentiality of the identity of the disclosure. This disclosure could include NSW Police, the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian, NSW Education Standards Authority or the NSW Department of Education.

It is also permissible to disclose information which could lead to the identification of the discloser if the disclosure is reasonably necessary for the purpose of investigating the matter, if all reasonable steps are taken to reduce the risk that the discloser will be identified because of the information being disclosed.

Breach of these confidentiality protections regarding the discloser's identity and information likely to lead to the identification of the discloser is a criminal offence and may be the subject of criminal, civil and disciplinary proceedings.

Confidentiality will be observed in relation to handling and storing records.

8. Whistleblower Protections

Confidentiality

Eligible whistleblowers making a qualifying disclosure are protected by the requirement that their identity, and information that may lead to their identification, should be kept confidential, subject to relevant exceptions as set out in section 7 above.

MidCoast Christian College will protect an eligible whistleblower's identity by appropriately redacting documents and referring to the whistleblower in gender-neutral terms. It will also secure all documents and communicate them in a way that will maintain confidentiality.

Immunity

Eligible whistleblowers making a qualifying disclosure cannot be subject to any civil, criminal or administrative liability (including disciplinary action) for making the disclosure. No contractual

or other remedy or right may be enforced or exercised against the person based on the disclosure.

Whistleblowers who make some types of qualifying disclosures (generally external to the College) are also provided immunities to ensure that information they disclose is not admissible in evidence against them in criminal proceedings or in proceedings for the imposition of a penalty, other than proceedings in respect of the falsity of the information.

These immunities do not prevent an eligible whistleblower being subject to criminal, civil or other liability for conduct that is revealed by the whistleblower, only that the information the person has disclosed is not admissible in certain proceedings against them.

Detriment

Eligible whistleblowers are also protected from victimisation - suffering any detriment by reason of the qualifying disclosure. It is unlawful for a person to engage in conduct against another person that causes, or will cause detriment, where the person believes or suspects that the other person or a third person made, may have made, proposes to make or could make a qualifying disclosure.

Threats of detriment are also unlawful.

Detriment has a very broad meaning and includes dismissal of an employee, injuring an employee in their employment, alteration of an employee's position or duties to their disadvantage; discrimination between an employee and other employees; victimisation of a dependent of the discloser, harassment or intimidation of a person or harm or injury to a person, including psychological harassment or injury; damage to a person's property, reputation or business or financial position.

If an eligible whistleblower believes they are being subjected to a detriment or a threat of detriment, this should immediately be reported in writing to the **Principal**, via email at principal@mccc.nsw.edu.au.

If it is not appropriate for the report to be made to the **Principal**, the eligible whistleblower should report the matter, in writing, to **Chair of the Board**, via email at board@mccc.nsw.edu.au.

MidCoast Christian College may also consider a range of other matters to protect an eligible whistleblower from the risk of suffering detriment and to ensure fair treatment of individuals mentioned in a disclosure. Steps the School will take to help achieve this may include:

- assessing whether anyone may have a motive to cause detriment—information could be gathered from an eligible whistleblower about:
 - the risk of their identity becoming known.
 - who they fear might cause detriment to them.
 - whether there are any existing conflicts or problems in the workplace; and
 - whether there have already been threats to cause detriment.
- analysing and evaluating the likelihood of each risk and evaluating the severity of the consequences.

- developing and implementing strategies to prevent or contain the risks—for anonymous disclosures and assessing whether the discloser’s identity can be readily identified or may become apparent during an investigation.
- monitoring and reassessing the risk of detriment where required—the risk of detriment may increase or change as an investigation progresses, and even after an investigation is finalised.
- taking steps to ensure that:
 - disclosures will be handled confidentially, when it is practical and appropriate in the circumstances.
 - each disclosure will be assessed and may be the subject of an investigation.
 - the objective of an investigation is to determine whether there is enough evidence to substantiate or refute the matters disclosed

MidCoast Christian College will offer support to eligible whistleblowers who are employees, should they require that. If a whistleblower who is not an employee wishes to obtain support, such as counselling or other professional support, they should contact the **Principal** by email principal@mccc.nsw.edu.au

Remedies available to an eligible whistleblower for being subjected to detriment could include:

- compensation
- injunctions and apologies
- reinstatement of a person whose employment is terminated
- exemplary damages

Schools and individuals may face significant civil and criminal penalties for failing to comply with confidentiality and detrimental conduct provisions.

If an eligible whistleblower believes they are being subjected to a detriment or a threat of detriment, this should immediately be reported in writing to the **Principal** via email principal@mccc.nsw.edu.au.

If it is not appropriate for the report to be made to the Principal the eligible whistleblower should report the matter, in writing, to the **Chair of the Board**, via email at board@mccc.nsw.edu.au

9. Additional Support for Eligible Whistleblowers and other Employees

The school's employee assistance program (EAP) services will be available to all eligible whistleblowers and other employees affected by the disclosure, should they require that support.

10. Contact

If you have any queries about this policy, you should contact **Adam Birkefeld, Business Manager** for advice.