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NOISE COMPLAINTS

What to do if you receive noise complaints after a system is installed

Any change can be a sudden shock to your neighbours. A PA system install where there was none previously, can sometimes flush out complainants who believe their right to silence is legislated in stone. Somewhere.

The important thing to remember is that the complainant will be viewing from a position where "***they were there first***". They will believe that before *your* system was installed, *their* life was just fine. So ultimately, what they want is for you to just switch it off. And return them to their former blissful state.

However your school DOES have legal right to carry out activities at your site associated with the task of educating and care of students at the school. Some of these activities invariably involve creation of noise at certain times of the day, in particular the need to signal the start and finish of different activities or to issue warning signals. So legally the school is starting from a fairly strong position.

As far as NSW law is concerned, noise complaints involving NSW Public Schools are handled by the NSW Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). The EPA does not publish guidelines regarding noise around schools. They do however publish a "Noise guide for local Government". Running at 192 pages, it might be something to suggest your "complainant" take some time looking at, if you want to buy yourself some time!

The NGLG outlines a legal framework for noise control. Ultimately after investigation (in the case of schools) the EPA can then negotiate changed times for activities, issue a *Noise Abatement Direction*, a *Noise Control Notice* or a *Prevention Notice*. None of these things you have to worry about, until they are formally issued by the EPA. Should the complainant remain unsatisfied after these directives have been given and complied with, they can still seek a *Noise Abatement Order* through a local court if they wish, likely with the assistance of a large cash advance to their lawyer first.

The EPA document is available for download at;

<http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/publications/noise/130127nglg>

Ultimately then, the best strategy for handling noise complaints is to try and reach a compromise FIRST that both your complainant and the school can accept.

Experience has shown that schools which take prompt action and do their best to address the situation quickly and accurately, have the best success in nullifying any future complaints and staying friends with their neighbours.

Within a few weeks, the complainant should recognise that a change has been made. They then become satisfied that their grievances have been heard. Before long, the problem "isn't new anymore" and they just get used to it. They couldn't be bothered complaining again or taking any further action.

When we design our new systems, we take as much care as possible to direct sound away from neighbouring properties. In the end this depends a lot on where your kids make the most noise, because the PA system needs power to get over that noise. It mostly depends on where your buildings are, as these act both as a barrier to sound and also used to support the speakers. That said, problems can also arise when buildings that were previously acting as a barrier (such as portables) are later removed.

Once a new system is commissioned, we include in our warranty *one* additional visit which allows for further adjustment of speaker power levels and pointing directions. This should generally be carried out 1~2 months after install. By this time, any complaints from neighbours should have been received and logged. If it is decided that additional speakers are required or existing ones need to be moved in order to address a noise complaint, this extra work is then handled as a separate work order.

NOISE COMPLAINTS

What to do if you receive noise complaints after a system is installed

Procedure to follow if you receive a noise complaint about a new system;

1.) **Gather data about the complaint.** *You need to know;*

A.) When did the complainant first notice the problem?

(It may not even be *your* system causing their problem in the first place!)

B.) Exactly where is the complainant's property in relation to the school?

(This is VERY IMPORTANT!! We can't adjust systems unless we know this first.)

C.) What aspect of the noise is the problem?

(Music? Bell sound? Frequent announcements? System making noise at night or on weekends when it shouldn't?)

D.) WHO is the complainant?

(It's no good anyone saying "Oh, I'm complaining on behalf of someone else".

You need their NAME and some sort of RETURN CONTACT so you can them know later what action you have taken. *We have had situations arise in the past where some "complaints" ended up being pranks staged by school students!*)

2.) **Tell US.**

Ideally send an email to us outlining the above information. We'll review your design, suggest immediate action that can be taken, then schedule a visit to the school and make adjustments if required.

3.) **Get back to the Complainant.**

Once action has been taken, contact the complainant and tell them what has been done. Then suggest they "take a month or so" to see if the action has improved their situation. They can then call the school Back if they are still having problems. *90% of the time, they will not bother calling back.*

COMMON NOISE COMPLAINT ACTIONS

Noise complaints from PA systems are a **function of both VOLUME LEVEL and the LENGTH OF TIME** the system is used for. A loud system used infrequently is less likely to generate complaints than a soft one that is in constant use. The solution to a noise complaint most likely to succeed will be one that limits the time during which a system is used, rather than just the volume level. It may also be appropriate to isolate or rearrange speaker zone switching so that speakers not normally needed in a particular area are not used needlessly.

- LINE UP MUSIC

Experience has shown Line Up Music should not exceed 2 minutes' duration. A common recommendation is to reduce line up music to 1 minute. Another recommendation is to delete line up music before 10AM in the morning, as this has the capacity to disturb neighbours who are shift workers or otherwise rise later than usual. The style of the music should also be considered. Light classics or '80s rock is less likely to generate issues than Skip hop or Metal. The volume level of the music should also be recorded lower than the bell signal.

- ANNOUNCEMENTS

Announcements should be brief and infrequent. Try and limit announcements to later on in the day and a maximum of one per hour. Don't keep grabbing the microphone and making "just one more announcement". Or lazily using the system to consistently find staff or students when other methods might be more appropriate. Consider switching outside zones OFF when you know an announcement only needs to be heard inside.

- SYSTEM LEVELS

Keep it just high enough to do the job but not so high that it blows everyone's head off. After we have carried out adjustments, if there are areas where the system cannot be heard, this may need to be addressed by installation of additional speakers in those specific areas.