



CADRE's 10th National Symposium on Dispute Resolution
VIRTUAL (Note: All Sessions are in Pacific Time)

Wednesday, October 22, 2025

Session #1 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. PT

- **What Michigan Learned While Building a Successful Informal and Early Special Education Dispute Resolution System (3.8)** (Cheryl Levine, Bernard Dempsey, Beth Kohler, Laura Zangara)

The first to provide free neutral facilitation in addition to federally mandated mediation services, Michigan has been a leader in high quality early dispute resolution since 1997. Michigan has increased its number of mediation agreements by over 50% since 2017 and now facilitates nearly 900 meetings/year. The most recent CADRE data per 10,000 students (2022-23) shows, Michigan had 7.9 mediation agreements – double the national average; an overall agreement rate of 74%, well above the national average of 53%; settled 1.8 DP cases – over twice the national average of .8; and finally, had a 71% DP case agreement rate – more than double the national rate of 33%. We believe this is the result of the robust program Michigan Special Education Mediation Services has built. In this session you will learn the five keys to a high-quality early dispute resolution program: Outreach, Intake, Quality Facilitation/Mediation, and State supported facilitation.

- **Building Capacity for Families Through PEATC's Dispute Resolution Toolkits: Equitable, Early, and Effective Solutions** (Love Kingsbury)

This 90-minute interactive session will focus on empowering families, educators, and dispute resolution practitioners with the skills and tools to navigate the special education dispute resolution process. Utilizing the Mediation, State Complaint, Due Process, and Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) Toolkits developed by the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), this presentation will explore practical, equitable, and early resolution strategies that strengthen relationships and enhance the capacity of all stakeholders. Participants will engage in hands-on activities that illustrate how these toolkits can be implemented to promote effective dispute prevention and resolution, with a focus on understanding and respecting diverse family needs. By showcasing real-life scenarios and providing detailed guidance, this session will highlight innovative practices that support collaborative, solutions-oriented approaches. Special emphasis will be placed on the importance of early intervention in resolving disputes, while fostering trust and communication between families and school systems.

- **Mastering High-Stakes Facilitation in Difficult Dynamics: Achieving Team Goals** (Myrto Flessas)

This program is designed to equip professionals with advanced facilitation skills to navigate high-stakes situations and emotionally charged dynamics. Participants will learn to foster effective communication, encouraging clear and constructive dialogue even when relationships are strained. The course emphasizes techniques to efficiently guide teams in achieving their meeting agendas and business within the allotted time, overcoming conflicts and challenges. Participants will also develop strategies to set a collaborative tone and create a roadmap for future communication, fostering stronger, more effective interactions. Additionally, the program will cover how to adapt facilitation methods for both in-person and virtual settings, ensuring engagement and productivity in any meeting environment. Through a combination of practical exercises and expert guidance, attendees will gain the tools to manage difficult dynamics and lead teams toward success in any scenario.

Session #2 1:15 p.m. – 2:45 p.m. PT

- **Building the Bridge: Creating a Facilitated IEP Culture** (Carrie McCulloch)

Building a strong IEP requires collaboration from all sides, just like a bridge needs two sides to be constructed. What can teams do to strengthen the partnership between schools and families to ensure more effective meetings? How can teams build trust and cultivate a relationship that benefits everyone? This presentation will explore a range of tools and strategies designed to enhance future IEP meetings and foster a collaborative culture that supports student success.

- **Empowering Student Voice in the IEP Meeting** (Cassie Velasquez, Robin O'Shea)

Are we giving our student's the life skill of advocating for themselves once they leave our educational organizations? Students who feel empowered are more motivated and likely to achieve in post-secondary outcomes. We will provide case studies, student, parent, and teacher interviews and anecdotal evidence of the power of the student voice in their own meeting. Examples of case-manager and student meeting preparation and post meeting follow up will be presented. Implications of how this practice can mitigate disputes and lead to resolution will be discussed.

- **SPARcing Conversations: Strategies for Equitable Dispute Resolution** (Joy Jordan, Sarah Marshall)

Two practitioners from Delaware's special education mediation and facilitation program, SPARC, will offer practical tools to "SPARcing" meaningful conversations between educators and families. The presenters will highlight valuable skills to prevent and reduce conflicts. Participants will learn how to foster equity and empathy in special education dispute resolution by acknowledging and developing cultural competency, effective communication skills, and mental health awareness.

Session #3 3:15 p.m. – 4:45 p.m. PT

- **Breaking Barriers: Strengthening Family Engagement and Advocacy in Special Education** (Britania Vazquez-Elorza, Heather Olivier, Diana Cruz)

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families of students with disabilities often face barriers that limit their meaningful participation in special education processes. This session will explore key findings from recent research on the challenges many CLD families encounter as they navigate educational systems and strategies to address their unique needs. Using the experiences from FACT Oregon and their parent leadership program, Activating Your Advocacy (AYA), this session will highlight lessons learned and program strategies that effectively support CLD families. Presenters will share impactful quotes and first-hand experiences that underscore the program's effectiveness. The session will conclude with an interactive Q&A, fostering discussion on actionable strategies for improving CLD family engagement in special education processes.

- **Despite the Best Intentions...Unraveling the Mess: Using Strategic Questions to Address Challenges** (Jana Rosborough, Kevin Davis)

Despite the best efforts of educators, achieving success in special education can often feel elusive. Systemic challenges—rooted in gaps in communication and compliance—can undermine even the most well-intentioned improvement. This interactive session will explore how state, district, and local personnel can use strategic questioning to identify and address the root causes of these barriers, with a particular focus on enhancing communication and fostering adaptive skills across all levels of the system. By approaching dispute resolution through a strategic lens, participants will uncover the complex, the complicated, and the simple barriers that hinder progress and discover actionable solutions to create more effective, sustainable systems. Shifting from a "hero" model to a collaborative, team-based approach, attendees will gain tools to not only ask the "right" question and develop concrete actions to improve collaboration, compliance, and communication.

- **Even the Playing Field for All Families: Implementation of IEP Facilitation with Fidelity** (Cassie Velasquez, Robin O'Shea, Carla Cumblad)

Been trained on Facilitated IEPs? If so, now what? As with any systems improvement effort, a plan should be in place to guide implementation. We will integrate the tenets and methodologies of implementation science in a manner that allows District and Building Leadership, as well as IEP teams, to use and sustain tools and techniques strategically over time. We will provide specific guidelines so that you can leave with your vision of implementing facilitated IEPs across your organization. This in turn will create a culture change in how IEP meetings are managed so that all families have access to using the early resolution practice of IEP Facilitation.

Session #1 10:15 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. PT

- **Being the Third Side: Supporting Through Conflict** (Amber Gallagher, Tricia Lomino, Lindsay Flatos)

In this presentation, participants will delve into the concept of the "third side" in conflict resolution, exploring the critical role of a neutral and supportive presence in managing disagreements. Attendees will learn how to guide teams through adaptive work by actively listening, uncovering underlying issues, and seeking out diverse perspectives. The session will emphasize the power of collaboration over confrontation, equipping participants with the skills to foster a cooperative approach when conflict arises. By the end, attendees will have the tools needed to manage conflict constructively, strengthening team unity and effectiveness. Additionally, the session will highlight how one California-based multi-district SELPA successfully transformed its ADR continuum to prioritize the "third sider" role, enhancing conflict resolution within special education.

- **Practical Strategies for School Leaders to Prevent and Navigate Future Conflicts** (Dr. Angela Balsley, Dr. Janet R Decker)

With disputes between families and schools on the rise, professionals tasked with implementing IDEA and Section 504/ADA must navigate the complex challenge of balancing legal requirements with practical solutions. In this session, Janet Decker, an attorney and education law professor, will discuss five common issues that lead to lawsuits including 1) adversarial IEP meetings; 2) failure to recognize that all school staff need to be legally literate; 3) discipline mistakes; 4) failure to identify students with hidden disabilities; and 5) staff shortages. These real-world scenarios will pave the way for Angie Balsley, a seasoned special education director, to share practical recommendations so that school leaders can better prevent and navigate conflict. Regardless of your professional role, in this session you'll increase your legal literacy and practical toolkit to effectively support your work in ensuring student success and maintaining productive family-school relationships while mitigating future liabilities.

- **Re-thinking family engagement in Special Education** (Marisa Howard-Karp, Theresa Nicholls)

We know the best way to manage conflict is to prevent it! Family engagement is a primary prevention tool meant to foster relationships and trust between families and schools, but it can be challenging. Limited time and competing priorities make it hard for families to take advantage of traditional family engagement opportunities and difficult for schools to meet families where they are. Without meaningful family engagement, families turn to other resources for information, which can lead to frustration and distrust. We will address the role of intentional, genuine family engagement as a powerful tool in the ADR process. Our presenters, representing both educator and parent perspectives, will walk through each part of the process and address the ways in which our systems can better engage families. Participants will consider the processes and protocols in their own district and identify changes that can build collaboration, strengthen communication, and avoid costly disputes.