

Beyond Mediation and Facilitation: Exploring Early Resolution Options

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Presented by Anne Ladd, Parris Taylor, and Scott Raub

Hosted by CADRE

Melanie Reese (MR)>> All right. So, hello everybody, and thank you for joining CADRE's webinar on Early Resolution: Engaging Families and Stakeholders. I'm Melanie Reese, the Director of CADRE and we are excited to have you here today. Our presentation is another in our continuing series of valuable CADRE webinars. A few technical notes, phone lines have been muted to minimize interruptions. At any point during the presentation you can enter any questions or comments into the question box, not the chat box, on your control panel. CADRE staff will be monitoring comments and questions throughout the webinar. The PowerPoint for this webinar is available in the handout section of the control panel and on the CADRE website.

We are extremely excited to share with you the innovative processes and dispute resolution from Georgia, Louisiana, and Washington State. Anne Ladd, Parris Taylor, and Scott Raub will each present what's going on in their respective states, and in early dispute resolution. I'll introduce each of the presenters throughout the course of the webinar, and we'll save questions for the end and get through as many as time allows.

First up, we have Anne Ladd. Anne is the Family Engagement Specialist for the Georgia Department of Education, Division for Special Education. Ms. Ladd successfully navigated Special Education services for her own son who graduated in 2017. Her family's experience fuels her passion and informs her approach for Family Engagement. Ms. Ladd is a graduate of the University of Georgia and was a 2016-2017 Georgia Lend trainee at Georgia State University. Previous to her current position, Ms. Ladd was a parent mentor for Georgia's largest school district for eight years. Thank you so much for joining us, Anne.

Anne Ladd (AL)>> Great! Thanks for having me! It's a pleasure to be here to talk about my favorite subject, engaging families. In particular, thinking about engaging families and stakeholders as an option for early resolution. I'm trying to advance my slide. Do I have that capacity? Hello?

>> Yes, you should be able to move your mouse forward, or use your keyboard to move forward.

>> Hm, it doesn't seem to be working. I'm sorry.

>> We can do it on this end. Here we go.

AL>> All right, so thank you! So, I just wanted to start with this overarching picture of what's happening in our state. This is Georgia's Systems for Continuous Improvement framework. And we have, as you see, a whole child in the center, and we have identified five systems that we

believe must be in place for sustained school district- excuse me, I'm so sorry. So, we have these five systems that we believe must be in place for sustained school and district improvement. We believe that it's key to set those expectations from the top. And so, family engagement is one of these systems. And family engagement is certainly our expectation in Georgia. We strive to have authentic engagement, which blends that top down and that bottom up leadership. If you'll advance for me, I'm so sorry I can't do that.

So, I have a couple of learning targets today, in this short time that we have together. I hope that you will be able to understand more about how family engagement can be used as an early resolution process. In particular, how in Georgia we use utilize the Parent Mentor Partnership. And also, where you can find more information about our Parent Mentor Partnership, and also Georgia's model for authentic engagement called CAFÉ, Circle of Adults Focusing on Education.

So, there are multiple paths that families can take when they experience-I'm sorry, it went ahead again. This picture just really shows what a parent's experience with Special Education can be like, and there's multiple paths that families might take when they feel confusion or high emotions. And so, we really believe that there's an opportunity here to help guide the path that they choose. We also, if you remember that graphic in the beginning, want to keep that child at the center. When it's apparent that the child is at the center, it helps build trust in partnership. Advance.

So, our state educational agency has the systems for continuous improvement framework that values family engagement and has that whole child at the center. And, we developed this so that we could align the work of all of our divisions in our department. So, last year we began to think, also, more broadly about our dispute resolution in our Division for Special Education. And, we expanded our Dispute Resolution Unit to be called, now, Family Engagement and Dispute Resolution Unit. And yes, that name itself is a conversation starter. We've had some interesting conversations about that name. But really, what we want to show is that we're providing a continuum of resources for Georgia families.

And, we have to spend more energy in those first couple of squares in family engagement and dispute prevention and try to solve some of those things before we get to our more formal dispute resolution process. But today, if you'll move forward, we are going to talk specifically about the Parent Mentor Partnership. I'm sorry, here we go. And, again move forward, how we came to develop the Parent Mentor partnership.

So, on the next slide, it talks about Why Family Engagement? This is that really compelling statement for me. When families are engaged, students achieve more. And, that's regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level. This is really provides that equal opportunity for all families to positively impact outcomes. And so, when we begin to internalize this and believe that we value all families, we continue to build that trust in

that partnership. So, in Georgia, we thought about how we could make this happen. And, we started by developing this initiative. And, this initiative was designed to infuse family engagement in districts. And actually, the Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership was really born out of our state advisory panel. We had a parent who was on the panel who had lived in Ohio and had worked as a Parent Mentor. A little bit different program but has certainly influenced and informed our program here. And, she was a real advocate for getting this going here. So it is an initiative of our state department, and it's partially funded with IEDA funds.

It's an initiative that districts can choose to participate in, and they have to apply and receive grant funding. They hire their own Parent Mentors, so that the Parent Mentor is an employee of the local school district. And so, we ask that they select someone, or we really require, that they select someone who is a parent of a child with a disability who has had an IEP or currently has an IEP. So you can imagine, though, back in 2002 when we started this was different. This was a new concept to think about. Let's hire parents to work as parents in a school district. So, we had some reluctant districts. We were able to have six districts sign on to agree to be a pilot. And, conversely, not only did we get some push back from districts, but we had the advocacy community saying, "Hey, how can you expect these parents not to be biased if they're working for a school district?"

So we were feeling it, kind of, from both sides, that pushback. But we continued on. We started our pilot and continued to grow. And now, in 2019, we have nearly 100 parent mentors in 92 school districts. Now, that's about half of our districts. But it represents a large percentage of our students, because we cover all of our metropolitan districts in our Atlanta area and across the state. I wanted to share with you the mission of the Parent Mentor Partnership, which is to build effective family, school, and community partnerships that lead to greater achievement for students, especially those with disabilities.

So, we believe that our students are general education students first. But when you're a student who needs specialized instruction, or when you need additional supports and services, those families and students experience some unique challenges. Our parent mentors are in a position where they have that lived experience of raising that child who has been, or is currently, a student with a disability. So, while there are many people who have lots of knowledge and can be supportive to parents, we find it makes a difference when the mentor has sat on the parents' side of the table, either figuratively or literally. And has worked to navigate the Special Education system for their own child, as well as make those connections and identified resources within their community. I do want to say that we do, also, work very closely with our parent training information center here in Georgia, which is Parent to Parent of Georgia. And, we do work collaboratively.

So we don't think of this as an either/or, but more like a both/and, and really building the capacity and working back and forth. Because we are a partnership, we have collective

knowledge that is really deep and wide. And, these three women that you see here, are parent mentors in the middle part of our state. And, they just have a vast knowledge. The woman in the gold shirt, her son is about to graduate from an inclusive post-secondary program. And, he will be living in the town where his school which is away from his family. And, he has a job. So, this is not necessarily what they thought, maybe 10 years ago, but they are able now to share all those great things. What it took to build that self-determination for him, and what it took for the family to get ready to let him explore, and learn, and grow, and prosper, and do well. So, those are just really great stories and experiences to share.

Another one of these women has a child with a rare medical condition. She's able to share those strategies and how she's navigated. In fact, I contacted her last week regarding some information I needed to share with a family. So, that partnership just really builds our capacity. So, when you think back to that slide in the beginning with all of those directional signs, these mentors can really make a difference when they get connected with families early on. Or, just at critical moments in time.

So, it may be that they are working one-on-one with families, or could be that they are training parents, or providing technical assistance for teachers or administrators. We also work really hard to create that dual capacity. So, we want to get parents ready to be engaged, but we also have to have schools read to engage the families as well and to understand that value. Our parent mentors participate in professional learning within their district, and they're also invited to statewide professional learning as well. So, in those early days we were a little more folksy, and now we're really just part of the continuum of what's going on in those districts. And, we are really being utilized as those influencers that we are in our communities and among families. If you'll go forward.

So, some of the things that parents do, in addition to building family engagement, is connecting families and teachers to resources and providing support to families. I want to say something about this facilitating key stakeholder teams. We have several parent mentors who have convened the CAFEs, which are Circle of Adults Focused on Education. And, these CAFEs have been stakeholder teams that have come together, not just to check off the list, "Hey, we brought these stakeholders. We've got their input. We've done that." But really, to solve these complex problems. In particular, we've convened these teams in the districts in our states who are working on our State Systemic Improvement Plan around increasing graduation rates. So, our mentors have vast skill sets and a lot of influence in their communities as well. They develop workshops. They train teachers and administrators. And, reluctantly, they do a lot of data reporting. But, we've learned a lot over the years, and they're getting really really good at that.

They meet quarterly. We have six regions across our state, so they get together and share information. Do additional professional learning or bring in resources that are key in their

communities. And also, listening is a big part of what they do too. Sometimes, just being that listening ear is that things that stops an escalation of a problem. So, as I said, in the early days we were really a rudimentary program. We just came together out of passion and enthusiasm. If you'll go back a slide, or go back a couple of slides, I'm sorry. In the evolution, as I said earlier, has been really significant. Parent mentors know who to reach out to internally. So if a family has a need, sometimes they can help them get to the right person in the district. And also, if there is someone in the district has a need, or needs information, they know who to reach out within other systems in the state as well. So, that's an important part of what they do.

And also, messaging. So, this is our website. And as I said, we were a pretty basic group. Now we have a website. We have a lot of tools and resources. I took a screenshot of this page because it shows our multitiered system of support, such as our new initiative under our new SPDG grant. So, there is a lot of messaging that has to be going on now, across the state. Really, at all levels, but certainly at the parent level. And so, parent mentors are on that ground floor getting that information and helping share that. You'll also see that there's a parent satisfaction survey link is on here. Parent mentors are very active in spreading the word about the survey and making sure that we are getting input for Indicator Eight. The arrow is pointing to the video learning tools. I just wanted to point that out because, on that link we have four modules that we recording that talk about our implementation manual of our CAFE Stakeholder Engagement Model. So, you may want to take some time to check that out.

If you'll move forward. So, this is how we do our approach to family engagement in Georgia. We start with the National Standards, the PTA standards, for Family-school partnerships. And, this is what we want to be doing all the time. Being certain that we continue to follow these six elements for building Family Engagement. We also, as we are doing our work, we want to be thinking about authentic engagement. How we are doing our work, and how to go deeper with our work. So, it's important to be sharing and informing, but can we go a step further and also be hearing back and getting information from people. And then, when do we take it that next step and begin collaborating? Who else needs to be at the table with us? Who else already cares about this work and is already doing this work? And then, that transformation, when are we really blending that top-down and bottom-up leadership in that collaborating, and working, and informing? So, we want to be thinking about that all the time so that we are not just stopping in one place. So, we can possibly go deeper and solve some of that complex issues.

I'm not going to talk too much about this, but I did want to show you how we collect data. We were at a Transitional Technical Assistance National Conference a few years ago, five years ago in fact. Me and another parent mentor were part of the team. And, we sat, and we listened to that radical groundhog day conversation where we talk about families. Did they show up at the meetings? We tried it on Tuesday, lets try it on Wednesday instead. They're not coming, and this is how we are talking about family engagement. And we looked at each other and said, "We

need to be reporting our data differently because we have great qualitative data, and we have great quantitative data.” So, we went back and developed these Evidence to Practice guides. We have, I think, six or eight. This one is named Five Partnerships. We started with the frameworks around family engagement. We took the evidence from those frameworks. We selected an objective. We wrote smart goals, so our parent mentors didn’t have to formulate a smart goal. They could choose a smart goal from a topic that was important to their district. And then, those colored boxes in the center are vital behaviors. And that’s what we want to train our teacher parents about, so that they can develop these behaviors that we know can impact outcomes for students.

So, if you’ll move forward. This is our Planning to Implementation guide. Four times a year, the parent mentors report on their project. Whatever new topic they picked, perhaps it was building new partnerships. They will have, by the end of the year, answer all of these 18 questions. They don’t answer them in this format, but we created this so that they could see where they were moving toward by the end of the year. they will all have answered these questions in regard to the work that they are doing in their districts...and forward.

From the work, over the last four years, we have extracted what has looked like has been working to those best practices. And, we created these best practice guides around each of our evidence to practice sheets so that, if I’m starting something new, I can look and see what worked well for somebody in another part of the state. So this way, we’re doing work even though we’re in different regions, in different sized communities. We can share what’s working well, and the barriers and successes that we’ve had to really measure them the family engagement piece. So, what are families doing, what are those behaviors, and what are the outcomes that they are seeing from their child. And, when you take all this back to dispute resolutions, what is it that people are upset about typically? And it’s really because they want to see their child doing well. They want to see those positive outcomes. They want to understand what the future is going to hold for their child. So, if we can engage them in that process, and help them see the potential for their child, that really does take that energy that they’re spending on being frustrated and moving it towards being more productive. And, if you’ll go forward.

By building effective family, and school, and community partnerships, we want to help families move from that confusion and high emotions to finding that path that leads to greater achievement for that child with a disability. So, I have included just a couple of resources. One is our website, so you can go on, and take a look, and see what else you might want to learn about our project. And also, the link the CAFE Implementation Manual. All of that work is based on the work of Leading by Convening. So, we took that and we “Georgia-ized” it, and we took it down to the district level instead of the statewide lens and were able to share that information in the implementation guide. So, hopefully, you can take a look at that as well. And, I hope I’ve

met my goals for you today. My expectations that you know a little bit more about the Parent Mentor Partnership. And how family engagement, whether it's Parent Mentor Partnership or just engaging families, can lead to better outcomes for students. Thank you!

MR>> Thank you so much, Anne. Next, we're proud to bring you Parris Taylor. Parris is an attorney working for the Executive Council for the Louisiana Department of Education and is the Co-Ordinator for the Department's Dispute Resolution Program for Student's with Exceptionalities. Mr. Taylor was a former IDEA Administrative Law Judge and Deputy Counsel with the State of Louisiana's Division of Administrative Law before joining the Department. Attorney Taylor served as the founding co-chair and is currently a member of the Louisiana State Barr Association's Children Law committee and is also a member of the Louisiana State Barr Association's for Person's with Disabilities Committee. Mr. Taylor graduated from Morgan State University in Baltimore, and later graduated from the Southern University Law Center in Baton Rouge where he has recently served as an adjunct professor teaching Administrative Law. Thank you so much for joining us, Parris!

Parris Taylor (PT)>> Thank you for having me! Thank you, also, for putting this together. CADRE is a wealth of information, and a valuable resource that I take advantage of and recommend to others. Again, we appreciate you inviting us to participate and share information about Louisiana's Dispute Resolution processes. And one unique element of our options that we have, which is the Informal Complaint and Early Resolution Process. Now, as my customary disclaimer. Though I am an attorney with the Department of Education, this is not intended to establish an attorney-client relationship. It is just a sharing of information, and it is not intended as legal advice. Now that I've got my disclaimer out of the way, as I go through this presentation, I want to just review the major points.

I'm going to first start off by talking about the departments general dispute resolution goals and available options. Then I'll delve deeper into the informal complaint laws and the implementation regulations. And finally, I will describe an overview of the dispute resolution process for everyone.

The Department generally, as most state education agencies, has a mandate to monitor and supervise LEAs to make sure that they offer all students with disabilities a free and appropriate education, in the least restrictive environment. Of course, that is not always a simple as it sounds. Because, whenever you are talking about parents and their kids, disagreements on what's best for them, even amongst parents, arise. So of course, you can expect that parents and school districts won't always agree on the best way to address educational needs of students with disabilities. So, Louisiana LDE, we encourage parents and school districts to try to resolve Special Education disputes in the least adversarial manner possible. I've included a definition. When I say parents, I mean not only parents, but adult students, individuals, organizations, and the like.

The purpose and the end goal of LDE dispute resolution options are to try to maintain two things. Number one, of course, is to try to resolve disagreements. And secondly, it's important to try to preserve those relationships and keep the communications line open between parents and school districts. Because, that is necessary to ensure student success. I've also listed some of the common areas of dispute. Now, I often tell folks that I'm a recovering Administrative Law Judge, because I've been with the Department for close to three years now.

In my experience as an ALJ, I saw that we would often come in to a school district, conduct a hearing. When I say, our come in, we'll bring in a court reporter, attorneys ride into town, and we'll try to hear this dispute. Then we'll leave. As an ALJ, I would issue a ruling by email, and I'm done. However, parents and schools are still left behind. And they still have to try to work together sometimes, depending on the age of the student, for a decade or more. So, trying to preserve, or establish, a long-term relationship of collaborative communication and dispute resolution is important for the long-term student success.

Now, this slide, we have all of the customary and most commonly known dispute resolution options that are probably offered in most states. IEP facilitation, mediation, formal complaints, and of course, due process. I've, kind of, listed them in what I consider to be the least to most adversarial options available for dispute resolution. Next, I'm going to talk about and review some of the law and regulations that were created to implement the Informal Complaint and Early Resolution Process.

No, of course, the Informal Complaint and Early Resolution Process is not required by IDEA, but it is a creature of Louisiana law and our regulations. Now first, the Louisiana R.S. Title 17, Section 1941, is the state law that applied to children with disabilities, as well as, giving our Board of Elementary and Secondary Education the authority to create and promulgate regulations that school districts are to follow. And in Louisiana, we list those regulations in our administrative code, and we call them bulletins.

The bulletin that contains our regulations for Informal Complaint and ERP, is Bulletin 1706. Specifically, in section 151.C. We also include information about the Informal Complaint process in our procedural rights handbook. Some of you might ask, "Okay, we've got this accomplished through regulation. Is the regulation complex? Is it detailed? Is it intricate, multi-leveled, multi-faceted?" No, in fact, the opposite is true. On your screen now, you should see a copy of the language in Bulletin 1706, Section 151. If you look at it, it's pretty simple and straightforward, actually. And, it has three major parts.

Number one, in section one, it describes the process and the purpose. As we said, it's aligned with LDE's policy to promote parents and school districts to resolve these disputes in the least adversarial manner, and we want it to be informal but systematic. I know that seems like a misnomer. Section two, describes how you initiate the Informal Complaint Process. And the

third section, is the timeline and disposition. A couple of things to note, in section three, is that the early resolution period is 15 calendar days. Now, that's important because it provides the timeline that school districts are expected to try to resolve this. Again, the operative word is try. If it can't be resolved within 15 calendar days, that timeline can be extended by written agreement amongst the parties.

Next, I will provide an overview of the dispute resolution process. Now, the primary benefits of the Informal Complaint process are by four, right? Number one, it is informal. There aren't a lot of forms necessary, or hoops to jump through, in order to initiate the process. It's fairly straight forward and simple. Third, it provides an opportunity for a speedy resolution of those disputes. And fourth, it coincides with LDE's policy of trying to encourage parents and school districts to resolve disputes amongst themselves because those types of resolutions seem to have a long-lasting effect. That opportunity for direct engagement can be a non-adversarial manner of resolving dispute, and it kind of almost gives the parents and schools the opportunity to start working collaboratively. If they can start walking down the path to collaborative dispute resolution, maybe they can continue the process for any future disputes.

Now, as far as the mandatory elements of the regulation, you can primarily divide them into four categories. Number one, our regulations require all LEAs to designate a local ERP representative. Now, in Louisiana, we have parishes not counties. So, either in your parish, a Special Education Director, or Supervisor, or their designee—depending on the size of the parish, in most parishes the ERP representative is the SpEd Director or the Supervisor. However, in some of your more populated parishes, with larger school districts, there could be a specific designee who reports directly to the Special Education Director or the Superintendent, is identified as the ERP representative. The other second mandatory element of the recommendation for the LEAs, is that they have to ensure the LDE knows that representative's name and contact information. Also, take steps to make sure that that information is available to the public and the parents in their school district.

Third, they need to develop a process that attempts to resolve the Informal Complaint within 15 calendar days after the school district receives it. Unless, of course, the parties agree to an extension. When I'm conducting presentations of parent assistance centers, or other community stakeholders, and in talking to them about the Informal Complaint Process and that timeline, one of the things that I point out to them is try to be reasonable when considering whether to grant an extension. Although this does provide an opportunity to resolve the dispute, quickly, sometimes things might take more time. The example that I often use is, perhaps there's some technology that would resolve the dispute. But it's not something that you can go pull off the shelf at Walmart, or Best Buy, or order off Amazon. You might have to take more than 15-days for it to be ordered, paid for, and delivered. But if the school district says, "We're ordering it. It takes 21 days to get here." Then the parent and school district can

enter into a written agreement to extend the resolution period. And finally, the fourth element is, if the parties are unable to resolve the dispute, the last mandatory element of the regulations for LEAs is that they have to document their efforts in some sort of communication with to parent but included in that it should inform the parent about the other Special Education dispute resolution options. Again, that's in the case that resolution is not possible.

Now, there are two basic entry portals for starting the Informal Complaint Process. Now, the parent can contact the LEA directly to get the ERP representative's information, or hopefully, the school district has it posted on their website. Or, they can also contact LDE to tell us what school district they are a part of, and then we can take their information and forward it to that LEAs ERP representative. Now, another element to this ERP process that's important to remember is that this process is voluntary. The parent can engage ERP process, and halfway through it, decide to withdraw from it and pursue any other legal options available under the law. So, again, it's not a mandatory requirement, but, again, it's an opportunity for parents and school districts to work voluntarily and collaboratively in order to resolve the dispute.

So next, during this ERP process, what's LDEs active role? None, actually. That is by design. It's included in the regulation in sub-section D, of section 151. It specifically states, that LDE should have a hands-off approach, at least for the initial 15-day period. We stay out the way, and basically give them the opportunity to resolve the problem amongst themselves. However, that regulation specifically states that our role is receive any concerns or inquiries from the parents, document it of course, relay that inquiry to the LEAs, and then, of course, providing the parents with the ERP representative contact information so that they can follow up and contact that person directly.

Now, when parents contact the ERP representative, there are a couple of different things that they have to be told about the 15-day window. And, again, the ERP representative and parent can attempt to resolve the dispute. Now, one of the benefits of using the Informal Complaint process, that I tell the parents, is that it gives them an opportunity to speak to someone who's not inside their school building that their child attends. Because, that gives them the opportunity for a third person decision maker to, kind of, intervene and attempt to resolve the dispute if they weren't getting any traction towards resolution inside the school building. Now, when a parent contacts LDE either through an inquire or to file an official Informal Complaint, we have an ERP Intake Co-Ordinator who will relay that information to LEAs ERP representative. They usually complete that task within two calendar days by sending them an email, and that ERP has a brief neutral description about the Informal Complaint. If the parents sent some documents on attachment, we would forward it to the ERP representative. It has the timelines for resolution, and also includes the parents contact information in the notification to the ERP representative.

Again, it's just a summary. We take measured efforts to try not to add any additional information to it that reflects any position on what the parent's allegations are or the nature of that dispute. These are the major components of the Informal Complaint and ERP Regulations. The first and the last are what I consider to be the major components. Again, you have to have some sort of written procedures that allow a school district and the parent to attempt to engage Informal Complaint Process and ERP, and try to resolve it within 15-days, and school districts are expected to document the results. All that documentation related to the ERP process should be kept onsite and subject to inspection by our compliance monitors. Who can come in, and while they are reviewing the Special Education records and procedures for school districts, one of the things they will also check is not only their regulations, but make sure that they are keeping the documentation to show that they are filing these timelines and making this process available to parents?

And finally, the LEAs must continually update any changes in ERP representatives. You have to keep LDE informed of those. And, we have a designated email address for our ERP Rep Intake Co-Ordinator to send those updates to. So, if there's a change, someone gets promoted, or moves on to the next person, they need to make sure that we always stay updated with the most current information. And, that sums it up. Our ERP process, again, it's fairly straightforward, simple, direct. It is informal, but it also again, gives the parent and school district the opportunity to try to work through the problem collaboratively. And, thank you very much for listening.

MR>> Thank you so much for the kind words, Parris, and the wealth of information. Our final presenter today is Scott Raub. Scott is the Special Education Parent and Community Liaison for the State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. He serves as a resource for information about the Special Education process and dispute resolution options to students, families, educators, and community members throughout the state. His past professional experience includes working in a variety of educational and nonprofit settings as both a counselor and an attorney. His interests is in the intersection between education and civil rights, and that is what eventually led him to the focus on his work on the rights of adults and students with disabilities. Scott earned his law degree from the Washington College of Law at American University and is a member of the California State Bar. He has a bachelor's degree in Political Science, and one in Communication Studies, and a master's degree in Counseling Psychology from the University of San Diego. Welcome, Scott!

Scott Raub (SR)>> Thank you for having me. I appreciate the invitation to be a part of this, and I'm really grateful for everyone who is participating and listening to what we do. I'm going to try to explain, as best I can, of how we approach my role within this office and the benefits, and hopefully, opportunities we see from it. A little bit, briefly, about the background of how, I guess, came to be. My position was created back in 2005, that's before I started in the role. It

was originally conceived of as an ombudsman, at the time. But, that title over time was generally confusing to people. They didn't necessarily know what it meant, just by hearing it, and didn't really accurately convey what I tried to do or what my role became within our office.

There's an air of formality, I guess, to the title of ombudsman for those who do know about it or are familiar with that title. It's kind of a misnomer, in a sense, in that I have no formal authority to resolve a dispute in the dispute process. We have a separate office in our state which uses the same title, so it led to a little bit of confusion. And, that's what caused us to redefine my role, or the title at least, to the Parent Community Liaison. It was a little bit more understandable, I think, to the general public as to what I do, or what I can do. And, it's a little more expansive in terms of my ability to represent the agency, to represent the priorities of Special Ed. I can be liaison in many different ways to many different people. And so, we use the term "parent," as I already mentioned, pretty deliberately because there's a specific definition within IDEA for what a parent means. And that, obviously, extends more broadly to all family members and adult students. There's only one of me in the state, currently. And, I report directly to the Assistant Superintendent within our State Superintendent's office.

So, to kind of briefly sum up what my role does, I tried to divide it up for the purposes of this talk into three areas. They are kind of overlapping functions. First, and foremost, I engage and serve as the primary contact for families or any community advocates who have questions. I, obviously, don't answer all questions that come into the state office. It's not always a question about disputes. Sometimes it's more generally, as we'll talk about, just how to navigate the process. My role kind of sits in the middle of a lot of conversations between people, both internally and externally in our agency and throughout our state. There's a communication kind of function. And overall my perspective, or what I hear, I try to use that for systems improvement and advocacy, as I'll mention.

So, first and foremost, one of my primary roles is the engagement with families. If there is a question that comes into our office about how to use the dispute process, or how even does Special Ed even works? Where do I start? I'm a family who's new to special ed. Even just navigating the whole bureaucracy of the school district. Those kinds of questions will come in to me. So I try to serve as that, sort of, primary contact with families who might need a little more direction. I offer the sort of guidance necessary to get through the process. Understand the process on the big picture level. And, also, direct families to the kind of resources used within their district, or within the community at large. That maybe could have a little more direct contact with them on a day-to-day basis.

If there are families, though, who have interest in formal dispute options or have a need to understand what their procedural safeguards are, I try to be as well-versed in those as possible. I'll offer guidance on how each of those processes work so that families are fully informed about what exactly it means to file a complaint, or go to due process hearings, or other options

like mediation or facilitation in our state that are available. And, I can also review the procedural safeguards to know that within the process there are certain elements that they can rely upon to resolve a disagreement or dispute. With that, that kind of speaks broadly to this idea of engagement being something in my personal work, to try to build up the capacity of families to be participants in the process. And, to have the knowledge necessary to feel that they are on equal footing with school administrators. To understand how to have a productive conversation. Who to talk to, what you might want to say? If they understand the process as a whole? Then perhaps, we can work through any possible disagreement or dispute without necessarily needing a formal process.

Some examples, and this comes up frequently. Many of you might be familiar with. Say a student needs to be re-evaluated. What are the steps in those processes? What are the eligibility process? What are those kinds of steps? Or, if disciplinary measures come up, how do those processes work? If parents feel like they are on equal footing, or they know who to talk to, then there may be a better opportunity for resolution.

Kind of as needed, what I'll do in the engagement process is that I can put families in touch with administrators as needed. The primary role is to try to really empower families to have that connection in their relationship. But obviously, there may be moments when English may not be the primary language for a family. Sometimes it's ensuring there's a contact with someone in the district who can work with that family more effectively. Or, try to contact an administrator to kind of restate what my understanding of an issue might be, so that we can better identify support for the family and try to navigate the process. And, really doing an assessment based on what is the family's needs to try to get them connected to the right people. So, there is sort of the measure of directing traffic with regard to the community as well. And, within all that, My other roles are to provide training and information to parent groups throughout our state, or community groups, so that they understand what's available. How the process works, and if there is anything going in our state with regard to new regulations, laws, trends, or policies. I will frequently get out there in the community to speak more broadly to groups of families or parents, as invited, so there is a better overall understanding of how the system works.

A good summary, or just one of the resources, that we have on our website is just a section on Guidance for Families Broadly. So this is kind of a tool that I, actually, use to try to write, keep updated, or I just refer families to information that they can find on our website to kind of complement the conversations that we have in person. One of the things that it is important to point out, is that I do not attend IEP meetings, as much as I get invited to them.

I'm not the investigator when there is a complaint. Sometimes I have to be clear in my role, that that's not the case. I do not offer legal advice, but I will try to explain what the regulations mean in terms of a process, or what our state or office's policy is with regard to a regulation on how we interpret it and enforce it. So that families can understand what that might look like in

practice and have conversations with their district administrators and school staff with regard to their specific student. As I talked about, I will assist in communication, as necessary, between parents and school districts to try to facilitate a resolution. Because, we do want to try to prevent disputes at the lowest level possible. And that's always tricky, sometimes because in my role, I try to stay as neutral as possible and really advocate for using the system for resolution. But, not advocate for one specific party or try to be an apologist for what school districts are doing.

So there's an element of diplomacy that's needed with regard to try to balance the two needs of families and school districts with regard to the process, and really try to focus on using the elements available in the process to come to a resolution. Some of the opportunities that really come from this, I guess the outcomes that we try to see, is not an easy thing to exactly measure. But, I do try to track who I'm in contact with and what kind of issues come up. In that regard, I can still have my ear to ground understanding of what kinds of trends or themes are popping up. At least, that are coming to us at the state level. My specific role is not to prevent complaints, specifically, from happening. But, to actually inform families about what does it mean to file a complaint if they have one. What does that process look like prior to actually making the complaint? Sort of a rough number in the sense of annually, if you were to look at the complaints that get filed, these are complaints within our state. Only a third to half, at the most, of those complaints have had contact with me prior to making that complaint. So there isn't anything, specifically, tied to what I do in terms of complaint prevention. But, I'm also talking about mediation. We're seeing a lot of rise of that in our state, and also parents are going through due process hearings.

They can come to me with information, generally about this is what you expect procedurally from a due process hearing. They can understand what happens once a due process hearing starts, is that the ALJs will take over. So, in my ability to track what I am doing, I try to have a measure of where I have contact with a family, and keeping track of what kind of issues are coming up, or what they are bringing up? It averages out to about 800 unique phone calls or contacts with families. For instance, if one family contacted me, we may talk multiple times, but that's one unique family that's had contact, or one unique community advocate that has had contact with me. Often times it involves more than one phone call. At least the numbers kind of roughly show at least one-fourth or one-fifth of them, I'm more than one phone call or one email with them. And yes, about a fifth of callers have contacted me from one academic year to the next.

So, we can see there is some consistency happening where there is some success with using me as a resource in the office. This slide is an example of what I can, kind of, do. I've been in this role for a little over six years now, that I can actually see broadly from my tracking system that I can have a conversation about what are most of the phone calls about. Where are the areas

where we're having questions come up? As I mentioned, what are the trends? What is happening in terms of the conversations going on from the family perspective. I can use that to overlap with some of the other functions I mentioned, in terms of bringing the parent perspective to conversations we have in our state for policy making. Or, perhaps, improving some of the systems we have to use to resolve disputes.

So the tie in here, is that one of my jobs to really be someone who is in the center of communications between folks within our agency, and other bureaucratic systems and administrative offices in our states or school districts. And so, in that regard I can represent the parent concern when I'm having conversations with other offices, say within the State Superintendents office. Some recent examples. We have an Equity in Civil Rights Office. We have, obviously, a very close relationship with them. Student support services, or if there is an issue regarding student safety or attendance needs, things like that where I am able to be someone who would represent, at least from the families that I hear from, here is the special ed perspective. Or, here is how different policy decisions might be affecting students who are eligible or families who have a student eligible for special ed. In some regards, students who are in Special Education don't only have an issue with special ed.

So, that's where sometimes I am the link to making sure that a family is in touch with another office in our agency. If, for example, there's some sort of highly talented or gifted program they need to have a contact with, I can be the link to put them in touch with someone in our agency who can provide the right expertise to actually answer a question. My role extends out to others in our state. Our state is broken up into regional support districts. They are called ESDs, or Educational Service Districts. I can be a regional contact for one of those and for the many Special Ed Administrators throughout our state. I talk to anybody who has a question. Like I said, if there is a family who has concerns about communicating with someone, I can usually make the phone call or identify how a family can navigate within a district, and who is the right person to talk to.

Because of what I do, I can also try to get out there and communicate more broadly to professionals within our state, and any regional conferences, as well, with regard to serving students in Special Education. You know recently, we did one within our state where we were talking about alternative learning programs within our state such as online learning, or non-traditional arrangements for learning, and we can bring the perspective of how would a student in special ed be served in a different kind of context. And so, given my experience and contacts with families, we can represent how administrators in those programs might navigate or engage families who are involved in those. Being at the center of communication with the actual public, allows me to have ongoing contact with our mediators, or facilitators, or judges, and we work pretty closely with our Parent Training Education Center. They are highly valuable,

and I think there's an opportunity to align what these different groups are doing with regard to one overall system.

I have conversations about where we can improve, or conversations about what we can do or expect with regards to trends that we're hearing and have consistent messaging so that they know what the state's perspective is. And then, have it go out to the community members and the parents that they are having contact with. This slide is just a brief example of what happens. I mean, there's screenshots of some of the publications where I might have sat in on and had conversations with those different agencies, or different offices within our agency who are developing guidance more broadly on a different topic. Where there's a Special Education perspective brought to the table and representing that this is our agency wide priority with regards for students who are receiving special ed services. My role is to represent the parent perspective or bring this information out to parents and community members so that they can have as much of a vested interest in what we are doing as a state agency, as well as administrators and folks who work in the districts.

That's my last tie-in to where this is about opportunities to advocate for system change or improvements as necessary. I get to work very closely with all of the talented people in our office who do the monitoring and system improvement actions and be a part of those conversations with regard to what are the policy positions of our office, when it comes to expectations about how IEPs are going to be developed. And, the kind of client elements that we are looking for. For instance, we had an example of a district who had been at the highest level of intervention. And in the past, have been able to work hand-in-hand with our monitoring and system improvement team to where I can play a role in working with the district specifically to overhaul their system and understand how parents might interact to what their processes might be. So, there's that ongoing conversation with regard to policy that can happen whether it be with other examples in our state, whether it be with statewide assessments going on in the provision of services, or progress reporting and interpreting recent draft decisions. We had that opportunity to write things and have guidance or tips come out from our office that talks about systems and how we're going to practice within our state.

I've made some frequent appearances to our State Education Advisory Council, or SEAC, and had that two-way conversation to bring in the parent perspective, or this is the trend that I'm hearing on the ground to everyone's knowledge. And, more recently, I've been serving as the primary contact for our non-public agencies. Basically, our private schools who are serving students eligible for special ed in our state. Because, again, there's that having that relationship of at least one person who can be a contact in our office who can have that overall systems perspective with regard to how families interact with private schools. And, how do districts use non-public agencies to provide FAPE to students.

And luckily, I think with my interest and my background, I'm able to be involved with rewriting some of the state regulations. Bringing in the parent perspective or community perspective with regards to how the system works. Probably the most recent example in our state had to do with, a couple of years back, we had to rewrite the laws around the use of restraints, seclusion, and isolation in our state. And so, being able to have a role or stake in what those regulations say and writing them in a way that keeps a parent perspective in mind or community's perspective in mind based on what I'm hearing. And this extends, not only in our state's regulations in Special Education, but more broadly if we are writing rules within our agency. It happened recently when we revised our discipline rule more broadly to apply to all students. Or even, attendance regulations, or regulations regarding transferring from districts. These are examples of how a special ed perspective can be brought to the table for how those regulations might have an impact on the families that our office serves. From time to time, there have also been requests for me to speak to legislators about what I do, so they have that kind of perspective. And, vice versa, state legislators will refer constituents to me who may have questions to our general process of having an intake. If there is a question of having to work through the process, we can serve state legislators and their constituents that way.

This is just a brief picture about the examples that I talked about. You know, rewriting the rules and regulations. It allows, also myself, to have the ability to create the guidance documents that can be used both in a friendly way for a family who says that, "Well, that's for school district administrators, staff, and community members." it can be used effectively for everybody. My role is described, specifically, on our website. So, if there is ever, kind of, a deep dive into what we do in our state and how I function, there's always a way to contact me this way on our website. So, thank you for having me, Melissa.

MR>> Thank you so much, Scott, and Parris, and Anne! We really appreciate your time. We may have time for one question. If you'll pull up the questions for me? This is for Parris. How long as ERP been in place in Louisiana, and has there been any change in the Formal Dispute Resolution activity in the state since its initiation?

PT>> ERP has been a part of our regulation since 2008, and as far as any changes in the process, no. It's an add on. We consider it an add on.

MR>> This question is for Anne. Anne, you mentioned some pushback from both school and advocacy groups in the early days. Did such potential conflicts actually occur, and if so, how did you overcome them?

AL>> Well, it's been 17 years, and so there was a little activity. This was before Facebook. I think we just continued to work through it and stayed the course and really just developed our professionalism to kind of move past that. I think because it was new and unknown... I think we are trusted now as a good source.

MR>> Great, thank you! A final question. Are you aware of any informal process to check out what might be legitimate concerns of parents instead of just referring it back to districts? That's for Scott.

SR>> I think the informal process might just be talking to me. In the sense that I can take those kinds of concerns, and like I said, I can kind of track a lot of what the conversations are that come in to me. And so, that's how I can bring that perspective to folks within our office and bring it to districts. More broadly, if I have a hand in shaping what are the conversations or guidance materials that come out from our office to address common issues that are coming up with regard to informal complaints. But, there isn't anything formally structured. I think that's one of the opportunities for growth that we are still looking at in as a state. How can we continue to create more of those informal opportunities?

MR>> Great, thank you! Well in rapping this all up, thank you so much for joining us today. It is really important to us that we get your feedback from this webinar. So, if you would, please click on the link in the chat box to fill out a brief SurveyMonkey to evaluate today's webinar. We would greatly appreciate it. And, just as a bonus, if you are interested in learning about other Early Dispute Resolution Practices, CADRE has curated a wide variety of from across the nation. Go to the website and click on the CADRE continuum. You'll see practice areas listed, and you can click on those to open up a world of innovative activities happening around the United States. Our next webinar is Let's Work Together! Building Local Capacity with CADRE's Online Learning Resources, and that will be held May 14th, and we hope to see you there. Thanks again for joining us, and we look forward to next time.