Rethinking Special Education Dispute Resolution at IDEA's 50th Anniversary

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Executive Summary

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) marks its fiftieth anniversary this year—a milestone in the nation's ongoing commitment to educational equity and civil rights. Yet, the very system intended to uphold its central promise of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is showing clear signs of strain. What began as a procedural safeguard to ensure fairness and accountability has, over time, evolved into an increasingly adversarial, inequitable, and financially unsustainable process—one that too often diverts resources from classrooms to courtrooms.

This report revisits the AASA, The School Superintendents Association's (AASA) 2013 publication *Rethinking the Special Education Due Process System* and situates its recommendations within today's far more complex legal and policy landscape. Since 2013, litigation has intensified, costs have escalated, and inequities in access to dispute resolution have deepened. Landmark rulings—*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017), Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools (2023), and Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo (2024), A..J.T. v Osseo Area Schools (2025)*—have collectively heightened litigation risk, expanded enforcement pathways, and introduced new uncertainty for both schools and families. At the same time, IDEA has not been reauthorized since 2004, leaving districts and parents to navigate a twenty-year-old statutory framework in an educational environment transformed by evolving disability definitions, digital access issues, and heightened procedural expectations.

The result is a system that disproportionately benefits families with financial means, imposes unsustainable burdens on schools, and fails to deliver improved educational outcomes for students. Without reform, IDEA risks devolving into vastly inequitable system that does not lead to improved outcomes for students and consumes taxpayer dollars at a rate that threatens the financial stability of some districts.

This report concludes with policy recommendations to modernize dispute resolution under IDEA by expanding preventive and collaborative mechanisms—such as IEP facilitation, mediation, and early-resolution models—while improving the training, oversight, and consistency of hearing officers. The goal is to resolve problems faster, fairer, and closer to the student, while preserving full access to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and federal courts for discrimination claims. It also calls for reauthorization of IDEA with updated provisions that reflect today's legal and educational realities and ensure equitable access for all families. These reforms are rights-affirming, not rights-reducing: they strengthen accountability, bring problem-solving closer to the IEP table, and raise the floor for equity, efficiency, and transparency—never serving as a pretext to narrow procedural safeguards or weaken the civil-rights protections at the core of IDEA.

Introduction

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, later renamed IDEA, was a watershed moment in American education. For the first time, children with disabilities were guaranteed access to public education and their parents were afforded the legal right to challenge school districts if those rights were denied (Yell, 2019). IDEA institutionalized procedural safeguards, which included mechanisms to ensure access to remedies for students and for families to hold schools accountable with processes such as state complaints, mediation, and impartial due process hearings (Mueller & Carranza, 2011).

The original rationale for accountability measures was compelling. In the early 1970s, children with disabilities were often excluded from schools or placed in inadequate settings. Landmark cases such as *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania (1971)* and *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) challenged exclusionary practices which violated constitutional protections and students' entitlement to an "appropriate" education in public schools (Zirkel, 2011). These rulings shaped Congress's intent in crafting EAHCA: access, parental involvement, and procedural safeguards, all which drive accountability.

Over the ensuing five decades, IDEA has profoundly changed education. Today, more than 95% of children with disabilities are educated in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics (2024). Yet the very system created to ensure equity has become a source of inequity. Due process hearings—designed as a last resort safeguard, rooted in civil rights enforcement, and designed to ensure fairness, equity, and accountability between families and schools— are now lengthy, adversarial, and costly (Wettach & Sanders, 2021). Educators describe them as stressful; administrators see them as a drain on resources, and families without means often cannot access them at all (Berens, 2024; Gomez, Morgan, Schanding, & Cheramie, 2022). Parents themselves consistently report feeling intimidated, excluded, and overwhelmed by the process (Mueller, 2009; Mueller & Carranza, 2011; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Many describe hearings as emotionally exhausting and financially devastating, with outcomes that rarely translate into improved services for their children. Rather than fostering collaboration, families often emerge disillusioned and mistrustful, perceiving the process as one that rewards those with legal expertise and resources rather than one that delivers educational justice (CADRE, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2015).

The purpose of this report is to update the 2013 AASA analysis of the special education due process system, situating its insights within the current legal and policy context. The central question is clear —when conflicts over a child's education cannot be resolved at the IEP table, does the due process system, as currently structured, serve as the safety net that makes IDEA's promise enforceable—ensuring fairness, accountability and equity - or does it perpetuate inequities and inefficiencies?

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Where We've Come in 50 Years

The trajectory of special education rights in the United States reflects both advocacy and judicial action. Before 1975, only about 20% of students with disabilities were educated in public schools, and many states had laws that explicitly excluded children with certain conditions (Yell, 2019). Following PARC and Mills, Congress enacted EAHCA, establishing due process as the primary enforcement mechanism. Parents were empowered to request evaluations, consent to services, and challenge school decisions through impartial hearings. This approach was groundbreaking, placing enforcement directly in the hands of parents (Mueller & Carranza, 2011).

Over time, IDEA was amended to emphasize not only access but also accountability. The 1997 amendments stressed alignment with state standards and the general education curriculum. The 2004 amendments, in response to the No Child Left Behind Act, reinforced the role of data and accountability in measuring progress. Yet the core structure of due process remained largely unchanged.

While hearings were originally intended to be quick, informal proceedings, they have become increasingly judicialized. Research shows hearings now mirror courtroom litigation, with formal rules of evidence, cross-examinations, and reliance on expert witnesses (Zirkel, Karanxha, & D'Angelo, 2007). Wettach and Sanders' (2021) national survey of special education attorneys confirmed hearings are widely perceived as too complex, too expensive, and too lengthy, limiting accessibility and undermining their effectiveness.

Recent research confirms that the length of special education due process hearings has increased substantially, often rendering outcomes less meaningful for students. Wettach and Sanders (2021) surveyed special education attorneys nationwide and found that most described the process as "too lengthy to serve families effectively," citing continuances, scheduling challenges, and administrative backlogs as primary causes of delay. A recurring theme in their study was that students frequently advanced to a new grade—or even transitioned to a different school—before their cases were resolved, undermining the educational relevance of the remedies provided.

Similarly, Gomez, Morgan, Schanding, and Cheramie (2022) reviewed case-level data for students with emotional disturbance and reported an average time to decision of approximately 9.5 months. They found that cases involving attorneys on both sides lasted nearly twice as long as those in which parents represented themselves or reached early settlement, demonstrating that legal complexity is a major factor in delay. Data from the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE, 2023–2025) further reinforce these findings, showing steady increases in median days to resolution for both complaints and hearings. In 2023, more than 80% of due process cases exceeded the statutory 45-day deadline, with some states—including New York, California, and Illinois—reporting average durations approaching 300 to 400 days for fully adjudicated hearings.

As AASA (2013) argued more than a decade ago, the irony is stark: while due process was created to safeguard students' rights, the current system drains resources, is burdensome for all parties, exacerbates inequities, and in the end does not often resolve education issues. What began as a straightforward procedural safeguard has evolved into a high-stakes legal enterprise—one that consumes time, money, and personnel that should instead be directed toward instruction and support. The procedural mechanisms that once empowered families now too often overwhelm both parents and educators, replacing collaboration with confrontation and shifting the focus from improving outcomes for students to defending positions in a quasi-judicial process. In effect, the due process system that once symbolized accountability and fairness has, over time, become a structural barrier to the very equity and access it was designed to protect.

Legal and Policy Shifts Since 2013

Since 2013, a series of Supreme Court decisions has steadily changed the way special education rights are enforced in the United States, broadening the options available to families and shifting how schools must respond. In Endrew F., the Supreme Court clarified the FAPE standard, holding IEPs must be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (Yell & Bateman, 2017). This decision raised the bar for schools, requiring more ambitious, individualized goals and gave parents stronger grounds to challenge inadequate IEPs. Then in Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools (2023), the Court ruled that families do not have to go through IDEA's due process procedures before filing an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) lawsuit for damages. The decision opened the door for families to seek relief outside IDEA, creating parallel enforcement pathways and increasing the legal complexity districts face (Weber, 2023).

That pathway was widened again in A.J.T. v. Osseo Area Schools (2025), when the Court rejected a long-standing rule that made it difficult for families to win discrimination claims against schools. Instead of requiring parents to prove a school acted with "bad faith or gross misjudgment," the Court said schools should be held to the same ADA and Section 504 standards that apply in workplaces, housing, or public services. This lowered the barrier for families to bring claims when schools fail to provide accommodations.

Finally, Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo (2024) reshaped the legal environment more broadly by ending what is known as the Chevron deference. For decades, courts gave weight to federal agencies' interpretations of education and civil rights laws, including guidance from the U.S. Department of Education. Without Chevron, courts will interpret statutory language independently (Bateman, 2024), which may lead to less consistency and more uncertainty until Congress updates the statute.

Taken together, these rulings have eroded the exclusivity of IDEA's due process system, broadening the avenues for enforcement. Families now have multiple legal avenues to enforce their children's rights, and schools are under greater pressure to meet higher standards while also facing more complex litigation risks. Wettach and Sanders (2021) note families now view OCR complaints and ADA lawsuits as viable alternatives to IDEA, creating overlapping enforcement systems.

Despite these significant legal shifts, IDEA itself has not been reauthorized since 2004. The statute predates digital learning, the heightened FAPE standards established by the courts, and the expanded enforcement of rights under the ADA and Section 504. As a result, schools and families are left to navigate outdated provisions in a far more complex legal environment — one that carries additional layers of accountability and higher stakes financially, legally, and relationally. For policymakers, the takeaway is clear: without an updated IDEA, the balance between fairness for families and sustainability for schools will continue to tip in unpredictable and often inequitable ways.

Escalation of Litigation and Costs

National data from the U.S. Department of Education show a sharp escalation in dispute resolution activity over the last decade. Between 2013 and 2023, dispute resolution events rose nearly 90% (CADRE, 2025). Written state complaints have surged, climbing from an average of about 5,500 annually to nearly 10,000 in 2023, a 79% increase over the 10-year average. Mediation also reached record highs in 2023, with nearly 13,000 requests filed. While mediation continues to show strong agreement rates- over 70% when not tied to a due process hearing- its overall share of dispute resolution use has dropped, suggesting that families and schools are increasingly turning to more adversarial channels (CADRE, 2025). Due process complaints (DPCs) likewise continue to grow, rising to more than 12,000 cases filed in 2023 (excluding New York, which accounts for nearly 70% of national filings). Although the majority of these cases were withdrawn, dismissed, or settled before a full hearing, the percentage of cases going to full adjudication reached its highest point since 2019. Together, these trends highlight the mounting reliance on formal legal processes to resolve disputes, rather than collaborative or preventive approaches. For schools, this means rising financial and administrative burdens. For families, it signals both increased use of procedural safeguards and an environment where adversarial conflict, rather than collaboration, is becoming the norm.

The costs associated with this rise in dispute resolution activity are significant. AASA's 2013 survey reported average hearing costs of $10,512 in legal fees and nearly $24,000 in settlements (Pudelski, 2013). More recent estimates suggest defense costs of $20,000–$40,000 per case, with settlements frequently exceeding $100,000 in tuition reimbursement disputes (Gomez et al., 2022). These expenses drain resources that could otherwise support classrooms, staff training, or inclusive programming. Small and underfunded districts face disproportionate burdens. A single hearing can destabilize their budgets, forcing them to cut services elsewhere.

As Berens (2024) noted in her study of teacher workload, the administrative and emotional strain of hearings compounds existing challenges in retaining special educators. For districts already struggling with staffing shortages, litigation can accelerate attrition and reduce capacity to serve students (Zagata, et al. 2023).

Most concerning, hearings show little evidence of improving student outcomes. Studies consistently conclude litigation produces winners and losers but does not translate into better academic achievement (Gomez et al., 2022; Zagata, et al, 2023). As Wettach and Sanders (2021) emphasize, the process has become judicialized, adversarial, and ineffective as an educational enforcement mechanism.

Equity Gaps Deepening

While litigation is expensive and stressful for all involved, its inequities are also a troubling trend that has evolved. Families with financial means are far more likely to pursue due process, hire attorneys, and prevail. By contrast, low-income families, families in rural areas, and those with limited English proficiency encounter formidable barriers. Research has consistently shown parents who access due process tend to be wealthier, English-speaking, and more educated (Almazan, Feinstein, & Marshall, 2017). For these families, the system can be navigated successfully, though not without difficulty. But for parents who lack financial resources, the odds of prevailing are slim. The inability to afford attorneys or expert witnesses often makes hearings inaccessible in practice. Wettach and Sanders' (2021) national survey of special education attorneys underscored this inequity: while district attorneys identified the high cost of plaintiffs' attorney fees as a systemic problem, parent attorneys emphasized the unaffordability of expert witnesses, which prevents many families from even filing cases.

Geographic disparities further exacerbate inequities. A child in New York City, where thousands of hearings are filed annually, may have greater access to attorneys and advocates. By contrast, a child in Mississippi or Idaho, where hearings are rare, may have virtually no access to due process at all (Zirkel & Skidmore, 2014). This creates a patchwork of enforcement where rights are unevenly available depending on geography.

The cumulative effect is the emergence of a system in which families with means use litigation to secure robust services, while disadvantaged families either lack access altogether or face long delays and inadequate remedies. In this sense, the very system designed to ensure equity perpetuates inequity.

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Systemic Impacts on Schools

The strain of due process extends beyond the courtroom, touching every aspect of school functioning. Educator stress is one of the most frequently cited consequences. The demands of preparing documentation, testifying under oath, and defending professional decisions create intense anxiety. Berens (2024) documented special educators already face high burnout due to paperwork and workload; litigation only magnifies these pressures.

Administrators also face significant burdens. Administrators divert hours of time to case preparation rather than focusing on instructional leadership. Hours spent preparing for hearings are hours not spent on classroom observations, teacher support, professional development, addressing chronic absenteeism, or fostering a safe and positive building culture. Leaders who should be driving instructional improvement and cultivating conditions for learning are instead consumed with managing litigation risk. This diversion of attention erodes schools' capacity to address systemic challenges and undermines efforts to build inclusive, supportive environments where students and staff can thrive.

The educator shortage compounds these challenges, creating a vicious cycle in which due process both results from and intensifies staffing instability. The U.S. Department of Education (2023) reports nearly every state faces shortages of certified special educators, related service providers, and paraprofessionals. Chronic vacancies force districts to rely on long-term substitutes, itinerant contractors, or unlicensed personnel—conditions that increase procedural errors and make districts more vulnerable to litigation. When disputes do occur, staff are pulled away from instruction to prepare for testimony, compile documentation, and meet with attorneys, further eroding instructional capacity. For teachers already carrying caseloads far above recommended levels, the additional burden of litigation often becomes a breaking point. Berens (2024) found that teachers who participate in hearings are almost twice as likely to consider leaving special education within the following year.

This attrition fuels the shortage, leading to inexperienced or underprepared replacements, which in turn heightens the likelihood of compliance errors and additional disputes. In effect, due process litigation has become both a symptom and a driver of the special education staffing crisis—diverting scarce human capital away from students and perpetuating a cycle that no amount of procedural reform can resolve without addressing workforce sustainability. Simply put, without qualified staff, schools cannot serve students, and no dispute resolution process—no matter how well designed—can compensate for a system that lacks the human resources to deliver the services guaranteed under IDEA. The staffing spiral is a systems failure, not a parent failure: when the only effective pathway is adversarial, both sides are forced into litigation that drains the very capacity needed to deliver FAPE.

Perhaps most damaging is the erosion of trust between parents and schools. The adversarial nature of hearings undermines collaboration, a cornerstone of effective IEP development. Even when districts prevail, relationships with families are often irreparably harmed. Wettach and Sanders (2021) found attorneys on both sides—district and parent—viewed hearings as corrosive to long-term relationships. This erosion of trust complicates future collaboration, making it harder to resolve disputes informally.

Finally, litigation drains financial resources from classrooms. Settlements and attorney fees consume dollars that could otherwise fund inclusive programming, co-teaching initiatives, or behavioral supports. For every dollar spent on litigation, there is one less dollar available for preventive measures that might reduce disputes in the first place.

Taken together, these trends point toward a troubling trajectory. Litigation is becoming the default pathway for resolving disputes, even though it was never intended to function that way. What was envisioned as a last-resort safeguard has evolved into a primary enforcement mechanism, consuming millions of taxpayer dollars annually.

The implications are profound. Without reform, the system will continue to tilt toward affluence, leaving disadvantaged families behind. Schools will continue to divert scarce resources into litigation rather than instruction. Educators will continue to leave special education at alarming rates, exacerbating shortages in an already high-turnover field.

The United States is, in effect, on a path toward runaway litigation costs. As Wettach and Sanders (2021) concluded, the due process system is "overly complex, prohibitively expensive, and excessively lengthy," making it ineffective as an enforcement mechanism. Unless systemic reform is undertaken, IDEA risks becoming a hollow promise—an aspirational statute undermined by inequitable and unsustainable enforcement.

Policy Recommendations

To address these systemic challenges, this report proposes a set of reforms designed to rebalance fairness, efficiency, and educational focus within IDEA's dispute system. Reforming IDEA's dispute resolution system is not only urgent—it is foundational to preserving the law's legitimacy as the primary federal education statute designed to ensure the appropriate education of students with disabilities. A half-century after its passage, IDEA's enforcement mechanisms no longer align with its purpose or today's educational landscape. Building from the AASA (2013) recommendations, and incorporating subsequent legal, fiscal, and policy developments, the following legislative recommendations outline a multi-tiered reform agenda for IDEA that restores fairness, efficiency, and educational focus to special education dispute resolution.

1 Expand Preventive Mechanisms and Early Resolution

The first and most cost-effective step in dispute reform is to prevent conflicts from escalating to formal hearings.

- **Universal IEP Facilitation:** IDEA should require States to have, and fund, trained facilitators who are available for any district to utilize. Facilitation should be offered automatically when disagreements arise during IEP development, rather than waiting for a parent to file a complaint.
- **Pre-Mediation Case Review:** IDEA should allow for SEA-funded "pre-mediation reviews" which could allow a neutral professional to help both sides clarify facts and identify shared interests before mediation begins.
- **Data Transparency:** IDEA should require SEAs to publish annual data on the number, type, and outcome of facilitated IEPs and mediations, to identify patterns of success and areas needing technical assistance.
- **Notice of Rights:** IDEA should require all early-resolution invitations to include a one-page multilingual notice stating: 'Participation is voluntary and does not limit your right to file with OCR, request IDEA due process, or pursue 504/ADA remedies.'

Early, structured collaboration restores trust and preserves relationships, which are critical to long-term student success.

2 Establish Expert Panel-Based Resolution Systems

The central IDEA reform must be a nationally modeled panel-based dispute resolution structure—replacing the fragmented hearing officer model with a consistent, expert-driven approach.

STRUCTURE:

- **State-Level Expert Panels:** Each state would establish standing panels of three qualified members: one education expert, one parent or disability-rights representative, and one neutral legal professional trained in IDEA and Section 504.
- **Panel Rotation:** Panels would be assigned randomly to prevent bias and maintain integrity.
- **Regional Pool:** In smaller states or those with limited caseloads, regional or multi-state panels could be established through interstate compacts.

FUNCTIONS:

- **Tiered Review:**
  - **Fact-Finding:** Panels would review documentation and written arguments within 30 days of filing.
  - **Collaborative Resolution Session:** Panels would conduct a structured, facilitated meeting with both parties to identify potential resolution points.
  - **Binding Decision or Advisory Opinion:** If unresolved, the panel would issue a written decision within 15 days. States could allow advisory decisions in lower-level disputes and binding rulings in high-stakes cases.
  - **Family Opt-Out & Appeal:** At any time, families may opt out of the panel process and pursue IDEA due process, OCR complaints, or 504/ADA litigation. Final panel decisions are appealable to state/federal court to the same extent as hearing-officer decisions.

ADVANTAGES:

- Promotes educational—not adversarial—expertise.
- Reduces procedural variability across states.
- Balances parent and school perspectives through shared panel representation.
- Decreases cost and time by eliminating redundant hearings and appeals.

The establishment of such standing panels would ensure consistent, high-quality adjudication, preserve due process integrity, and refocus the system on educational solutions rather than litigation strategies.

3 Develop Consultant-Driven Resolution Models

Beyond formal panels, IDEA should encourage States to pilot consultant-based resolution systems to manage recurring disputes efficiently.

- **State-Approved Consultants:** Qualified experts—often retired administrators, former hearing officers, or special education professors—could serve as independent evaluators empowered to recommend remedial IEPs or service plans.
- **Trial Implementation:** Both parties would implement the consultant's recommended plan for a defined period (e.g., 45 school days), after which progress data would determine continuation or modification.

This model prioritizes resolution over adjudication and ties dispute outcomes directly to student progress rather than procedural victories.

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4 Improve Hearing Officer Quality, Training, and Oversight

If hearings remain part of IDEA's framework, their quality and consistency must be dramatically improved.

- **Uniform National Standards:** IDEA should mandate the development of minimum qualifications for hearing officers, including demonstrated expertise in special education instruction, law, and disability rights as well as mandatory re-certification and professional development for hearing officers. Hearing officers should complete federally approved certification programs and annual continuing education in current case law, disability equity, and trauma-informed approaches.
- **Performance Review Panels:** IDEA should require SEAs to establish oversight committees to review decision quality, timeliness, and equity patterns, ensuring accountability without compromising independence.
- **Public Reporting:** IDEA should require SEAs to report annually on anonymized decision outcomes, timelines, and appeal rates to increase transparency.

Quality, consistency, and neutrality are prerequisites for public confidence in the system.

5 Advance Equity and Accessibility in Enforcement

Equity must move from rhetoric to structural design.

- **Assistance to Families:** Maintain funding for protection and advocacy centers who can guide parents towards effective dispute resolution models for their child.
- **Language Access and Cultural Competence:** All dispute processes should guarantee access to translation, interpretation, and culturally responsive facilitators.
- **Geographic Access Solutions:** States with low caseloads should collaborate regionally to pool dispute resolution resources and ensure families in rural or underserved areas can participate meaningfully.
- **Data Disaggregation:** IDEA must require the disaggregation of dispute data by race, income, language, and disability category to monitor systemic disparities and target technical assistance accordingly.

Without structural equity, procedural rights remain theoretical.

6 Reauthorize IDEA with Modernized Dispute Resolution Provisions

- **Incorporate Judicial Precedent:** IDEA's reauthorization must codify modernization in statute—not merely through regulation—while ensuring that congressional intent, not shifting judicial interpretation, defines the law's core protections. Congress should explicitly clarify the relationship among IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA, reinforcing that families retain independent access to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and federal courts regardless of participation in state dispute-resolution alternatives. Rather than simply adopting recent judicial interpretations such as Endrew F., Perez v. Sturgis, or A.J.T. v. Osseo, reauthorization should refine the standards they addressed—restoring coherence, fairness, and alignment with IDEA's original purpose of ensuring meaningful educational benefit and equitable access.
- **Reduce Procedural Duplication and Fragmentation:** Reauthorization should reduce redundant processes by improving coordination—not alignment—among IDEA, Section 504, ADA, and OCR enforcement mechanisms. Families and districts too often navigate parallel complaints, mediations, and investigations over the same set of facts, leading to conflicting outcomes, prolonged uncertainty and duplicative disputes and litigation that redirect limited district resources towards litigation rather than remedies. A reauthorized IDEA should amend Section 504 and ADA to make dispute resolution more coherent, not slower—resolving issues once, correctly, and as close to the student as possible.
- **Embed Panel and Facilitation Models:** The new statute should authorize states to replace or supplement traditional due process hearings with expert panel or consultant-driven models, with federal pilot funding to support transition.
- **Expand the Work of the National Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution In Special Education (CADRE):** Federal funding for CADRE should be expanded to coordinate training, collect data, and provide model procedures and templates for states.

This modernization would reestablish IDEA as a living, adaptive statute—responsive to the legal, fiscal, and educational realities of today's schools.

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7 Federal-State Accountability Alignment

Finally, reform must include mechanisms to ensure implementation fidelity and continuous improvement.

- **Continuous Improvement Cycle:** States should use dispute data to inform professional development, family engagement strategies, and special education quality improvement initiatives.
- **Rights-Preservation Certification:** Federal support for dispute system reform must be contingent on states' formal certification that families' rights under IDEA, Section 504, ADA, and OCR remain intact and unrestricted. States must provide transparent, multilingual notice of these protections to ensure informed participation by all families.

Accountability must extend beyond compliance to outcomes—ensuring that dispute systems actually support educational benefit.

Civil-Rights Backstop Remains Essential. IDEA is the federal education law; Section 504/ADA and OCR are the nation's civil-rights backstop against disability discrimination. Our proposals assume and depend on OCR's continued authority and adequate resourcing. Early-resolution models are designed to reduce the need for federal intervention by fixing problems sooner—they are not substitutes for civil-rights enforcement, and nothing herein should be construed to curtail OCR's role.

Conclusion

IDEA's fiftieth anniversary is both a milestone and a warning. The law has transformed American education, ensuring millions of children with disabilities have access to public schooling. IDEA's dispute resolution system began as a safeguard for fairness. Over time, it has become adversarial and inequitable.

The evidence is clear. Litigation is concentrated in a few states, disproportionately benefits affluent families, consumes enormous resources, and delivers little evidence of improved outcomes for students. Educators are stressed and burned out, administrators are distracted from instructional leadership, and schools are drained of resources that should be invested in prevention and inclusion.

With reform, the next fifty years can be different. By expanding preventive mechanisms, improving fairness and consistency, and reauthorizing IDEA with updated dispute resolution provisions, policymakers can restore the balance between safeguarding rights and ensuring sustainability.

Reform must be rights-affirming: modernization should expand early, collaborative solutions while explicitly preserving every federal civil-rights avenue, including OCR, Section 504/ADA, and IDEA due process. It also must acknowledge the funding and capacity constraints of districts: dispute systems cannot substitute for a qualified workforce nor the intense budgetary and personnel pressures districts are facing.

AASA sounded the alarm in 2013. A decade later, the same warning rings louder: to keep IDEA's promise alive, dispute resolution must evolve—from adversarial battles to collaborative, equitable, and preventive systems that put students first.

About the Authors

David Bateman, PhD, is a nationally recognized expert in special education dispute resolution and legal compliance. He has ten-years of experience as a due process hearing officer and complaint investigator and has since served as a second-tier hearing officer in multiple states. In addition, over the past ten years, he has worked as a mediator in seven states and one U.S. territory. Dr. Bateman is the lead author of one of the primary books on special education dispute resolution (Bateman et al., 2023) and is the co-author of one of the most widely visited blogs on special education legal issues. He is a former special education classroom teacher and building-level administrator, and the parent of two adult children—one who had an IEP in school and the other who had a Section 504 plan.

Angela L. Balsley, Ed.D., is a nationally recognized leader in special education administration, dispute resolution, and systems-level improvement. She is the founder of Unified Leadership, where she provides leadership coaching, conducts research on special education dispute resolution, serves as a subject matter expert, and advises organizations on risk management, compliance, and program analysis. Dr. Balsley also serves as a Senior Consultant for the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), where she facilitates national initiatives to strengthen conflict engagement and early resolution practices. Dr. Balsley is a Past President of the Indiana Council of Administrators of Special Education (ICASE) and served as the Chairperson for the national CASE Policy Committee. She is a licensed teacher, principal, special education director, and superintendent.

Sasha Pudelski is the Director of Advocacy for AASA where she has led the association's policy and advocacy work on special education and related issues since 2010. She has also overseen the organization's efforts in coordinating amicus curiae submissions before the United States Supreme Court in connection with significant litigation concerning special education law.

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