



Parents's Guide to the Alternative Dispute Prevention and Resolution Continuum: Preventing and Addressing Conflict in the IEP Process

What is Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)?

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a set of informal, voluntary, and free processes that help families and schools work together to resolve concerns early in the special education process—before they grow into formal disputes.

ADR with SLO County SELPA

At SLO County SELPA, we believe strong partnerships between families and educators are built through proactive, collaborative communication. Our prevention-first approach includes open dialogue, early resolution strategies, and student-centered problem-solving.

ADR focuses on reaching agreements through trust, mutual understanding, and respectful communication. When we prioritize prevention, we protect the connection between home and school and keep the focus where it belongs: on the student.

Preventing Conflict Through Collaboration and Communication

Building Strong IEP Teams

- A well-developed IEP is created through shared responsibility.
- Team members—including parents, teachers, administrators, and service providers—each bring valuable perspectives.
- The IEP should be grounded in the student's strengths and needs, not positions.
- Effective teams use reflective listening and clear communication to reach decisions by consensus.

Tips for Effective Communication Throughout the IEP Process

Before the Meeting

- Review your child's current IEP and recent progress.
- Prepare questions, goals, or concerns you want to discuss.
- Share relevant documents or input with the team ahead of time.

During the Meeting

- Ask for clarification when terms or information are unclear.
- Share your insights about your child's strengths, needs, and progress.
- Use respectful, student-centered language.
- Stay open to solutions and perspectives offered by the team.

After the Meeting

- Review the IEP and any meeting notes.
- Follow up with your case manager if you have questions.
- Stay in regular communication with your child's team to monitor progress.

As a parent/guardian, you are a valuable and required member of the IEP team. This [checklist](#) offers ideas to support you before, during, and after an IEP team meeting.

Conflict Resolution: A Step-by-Step Approach

When concerns arise, early and open communication is key. Conflict is often a natural part of collaboration. Many issues can be resolved informally by following these steps:

1. **Start with Your Child's Case Manager or Special Education Teacher**
 - Share your observations and ask clarifying questions.
2. **Reach Out to the School Administrator**
 - If unresolved, contact the principal for additional support.
3. **Request an IEP Meeting**
 - You can request a meeting at any time to review data, explore solutions, and adjust services.
4. **Contact the District Special Education Administrator**
 - They can help review the concern and suggest next steps, including facilitation.
5. **Use ADR Services from SELPA**
 - Facilitated meetings, neutral mediation, and consultation are available to support resolution.
6. **Consider Formal Options if Needed**
 - If informal steps do not resolve the concern, you may pursue legal options such as filing a state complaint or due process.



When to Consider ADR

ADR can help when you and your child's school have a disagreement about:

- Evaluations or assessments
- IEP goals, services, or placements
- Implementation of the IEP
- Communication challenges with staff

ADR is best when you want to:







- Collaborate with the school team
- Resolve problems informally
- Avoid legal stress and expenses

ADR services are voluntary, confidential, and free. You can access ADR at any point during your special education journey. [ADR Request Process](#)

SELPA's Role in ADR

SLO County SELPA supports families and districts with a range of informal conflict resolution services.

SELPA STAFF WILL LISTEN TO YOUR CONCERNS AND IDENTIFY A PROCESS TO HELP

 SELPA CONFERENCING	 SELPA COACHING	 IEP PROCESS SUPPORT	 FACILITATED IEP	 LOCAL RESOLUTION SESSION	 OAH RESOLUTION, MEDIATION, AND HEARING
When requested, the SELPA staff will conference with parents or district staff to intervene early, offer suggestions, and resolve concerns.	Staff is available to meet with teams or parents to coach and consult on helpful resolution strategies, effective communication techniques, and options for resolving conflicts. A coaching relationship is for those who are ready to learn, grow, and show up differently.	Staff is available to support the IEP process and determine needs on an individual case basis. Support may include case analysis, team-building skills, meeting agenda preparation, process preparation, supporting meaningful participation, and/or attending IEP meetings.	This is a formal IEP meeting facilitated by a neutral facilitator. The process is designed to help the IEP team build relationships, focus on the IEP content and the student, and work toward positive outcomes.	A problem-solving method that brings parties together to reach a mutually satisfying agreement with the guidance of a facilitator. The session allows parties to listen and express their points of view. If agreement is reached, the specifics are put in writing and signed by all parties.	A parent can file a complaint with the Office of Administrative Hearing. If the issue is not resolved in a resolution session, the matter will proceed to mediation. If mediation is unsuccessful, the issue will proceed to a Due Process hearing. The goal is to reach a mutual agreement as early in the process as possible to move forward.

SELPA Staff can:

- Provide consultation on compliance or procedural concerns
- Offer neutral facilitation or resolution sessions
- Help prevent state complaints or due process filings
- Ensure the focus remains on student needs and collaboration

What Happens When SELPA Gets Involved?

When SELPA staff are invited into the process:

- They listen to your concerns and gather context from the team
- They will work with you to determine what level of support may be best for you.
- Conversations are typically confidential
- Participation is always voluntary

Facilitated IEP Meetings

A facilitated IEP meeting is a regular IEP with added support from a neutral facilitator. What to expect:

- **Neutral Support:** The facilitator supports the whole team without taking sides
- **Student Focus:** Keeps the discussion on your child's needs and goals
- **Improved Communication:** Helps clarify and rephrase when needed
- **Collaborative Tone:** Encourages creative, respectful problem-solving
- **Your Rights Stay the Same:** The team makes decisions; the facilitator does not

When More Help is Needed: Formal Dispute Resolution Options

If informal approaches do not resolve your concerns, families have the right to pursue legal options:

- **State Complaint** (filed with the district superintendent)
- **Mediation or Due Process** (filed with the Office of Administrative Hearings)

These processes are legal safeguards but can be slow, costly, and emotionally stressful. Most concerns can be resolved without an attorney and without escalating to legal steps. That's why we encourage early communication and ADR first.

Uniform Complaint Procedure

If you believe the school has violated state or federal laws or regulations, you can file a written complaint through the district's uniform complaint procedures.

Filing for Due Process

A Due Process complaint challenges a district's decision about eligibility, placement, services, or failure to provide FAPE. It is resolved by an Administrative Law Judge through the California Office of Administrative Hearings.

Working Together for Better Outcomes

Navigating the special education process can feel overwhelming, but you're not alone. ADR helps build strong, collaborative partnerships centered on your child's success. With early communication, shared understanding, and student-focused problem-solving, most concerns can be resolved constructively.

If you need support or want to explore ADR options, contact:

SLO County SELPA

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**San Luis Obispo County SELPA Local Education Agency (LEA) Members
Student Services/Special Ed Department**

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(805) 467-2095

Atascadero Unified School District
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Bellevue-Santa Fe Charter
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Cayucos Elementary School District
(805) 995-3694

Coast Unified School District
(805) 909-0641

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(805) 474-3000 ext. 1152

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(805) 227-1040

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