Working Together: Strategies and Supports for Schools and Families to Solve Concerns

Dr. Alyse Watson
- Bureau of Special Education, Division Chief

Ashley Smith
- Office for Dispute Resolution, Program Manager

Dr. Jackie Bartek
- Colonial Intermediate Unit 20, Assistant to the Executive Director for Student Services

Cindy Duch
- PTI Project Director, The PEAL Center

Start at the Beginning

- The Bureau engaged the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) to provide targeted technical assistance to strengthen early dispute resolution at the local level.
- This effort began with the goal of helping the Bureau and federally funded Parent Centers work together to build the capacity of local education agencies (LEAs).
- The focus is on creating strong partnerships, elevating family voice, and supporting LEAs in resolving concerns proactively and equitably before they escalate.
- The underlying motivation is to improve relationships, reduce the costs and impacts of conflict, and promote better outcomes for students through collaborative, locally responsive solutions.

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Why Early Conflict Resolution Matters

- Early action leads to better outcomes because it:
  - Builds trust between families and school teams
  - Promotes collaborative problem-solving
  - Reduces misunderstandings
  - Prevents escalation into formal disputes
  - Keeps the focus on student needs
  - Protects relationships that support long-term success

Resources: *PEAL Procedural Safeguards Video* • *ODR Overview* • *PaTTAN Family Engagement Framework* • *CADRE Partnerships* • *BSE Procedural Safeguards*

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Teacher's Role in Early Resolution

How can these supports help you?

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Strengthening Communication & Resolving Conflict Early

Teachers are uniquely positioned to:

- Notice early signs of concern
- Build relationships before conflict arises
- Communicate proactively
- Clarify misunderstandings
- Document conversations and next steps
- Connect families with early supports
- Prevent escalation into formal disputes

Early Resolution Toolkit

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What teachers can do immediately:

- Communicate concerns early and often
- Use clear, family-friendly language
- Share both strengths and concerns
- Follow up conversations with written summaries
- Invite questions and encourage family input
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Provide consistent updates

Resources: *PEAL Communication Tools* • *ODR Conflict Resolution Skills* • *PaTTAN Collaboration Webinars* • *CADRE Communication Guides*

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Educational Advocacy Starts with Families

- Families lead the way to prepare their child for the future.
- Family is the constant in any child's life, while the systems and individuals who serve often change.
- Families are partners in the relationship with educators.

Parent Feelings at School Meetings

How do we fix this?

Proactive Communication Strategies and Active Listening

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Effective Communication Includes:

- Communicating concerns early and often
- Using clear, family-friendly language
- Sharing strengths and concerns
- Following up with written summaries
- Inviting questions and family input

Resources: *PEAL Communication Tools* • *ODR ConsultLine* • *BSE Contact Information*

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Communication During the IEP Meeting:

- Pre-Meeting: share the IEP draft with the parent ahead of time;
  - Have parents share concerns or areas they really want to focus on during the meeting.
- Use an agenda to keep the IEP meeting focused and timely.
  - Share with all IEP Team members ahead of time.
- Assign roles
- Use of the parking lot

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Communication During the IEP Meeting: Part 2

- Establish Norms: Suggest that individuals reserve judgment until all information is discussed.

- Remember communication is written, verbal, and nonverbal.
  - Check yourself and your staff.

- Use words such as “collaboration” & “partnership”

- Administrator Role: You want to intervene before people shut down or become offended or offensive.

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Enhancing IEP Meeting Collaboration through Statements

Set the Tone for Success

- “Welcome! We are looking forward to a productive meeting.”
- “Our agenda is student focused…Let’s begin and start to brainstorm!”
- “I am very excited for a productive meeting.”

Maintaining Momentum

- “Check point time! Are we aligned and following our agenda?”
- “Before we continue. Let’s make sure everyone is clear where we are…”
- “Let’s pause…and confirm we’re all in consensus with our action items.”

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Accountability and the Power of Listening

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Accountability

- Address Past Failure(s): Openly acknowledge previous mistakes and move forward.
- Face Issues Directly: Do not deny or ignore problems, even if minor or time-consuming.
- Clarify & Apologize: Resolve misunderstandings as they occur.
- Ensure Accuracy: Be entirely willing to revise any inaccurate information.
- Deliver: Fulfill commitments

The Power of Listening

- Listen: Truly hear the family concerns and allow them the uninterrupted space to speak.
- Control Reactions: Never interrupt and strictly avoid dismissive gestures.
- Stay Present: Do not use cell phones or check message/emails during the meeting
- Prepare for Emotion: Have a bag of tricks ready for reluctant participants or flying tempers.
- Monitor Body Language: Maintain an acute awareness of non-verbal cues.

Active Listening Strategies:

- Key listening skills:
  - Listen to understand, not just respond
  - Paraphrase key concerns
  - Ask open-ended questions
  - Acknowledge emotions without defensiveness
  - Focus on interests, not positions

Resources: *PEAL Family Perspective Training* • *ODR Conflict Engagement* • *PaTTAN Coaching & Facilitation* • *CADRE Listening Tools*

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Conflict Ahead?

Conflict Prevention and the Unavoidable Speed Bumps

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Daily habits that reduce conflict:

- Build positive relationships early
- Set clear expectations and timelines
- Address disagreements promptly
- Use collaborative IEP decision-making
- Document action items and next steps

Resources: *PEAL Navigating Disagreements* • *ODR ConsultLine & Mediation* • *PaTTAN IEP Decision-Making* • *BSE Procedural Safeguards* • *CADRE Conflict Prevention*

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Solutions: Discussion Management

- Sometimes during meetings, there will be challenges, roadblocks, and disagreements.
  - Address the challenges, roadblocks,& disagreements immediately.
  - Encouraging open communication assists with identifying and working through the challenges/roadblocks/disagreements swiftly.

- Here are some sample statements to use when overcoming challenges or roadblocks during the meeting:
  - What's preventing us from moving forward?
  - Does anyone feel confused or uncertain?
  - Let's pause and identify the barriers we're facing right now.
  - Is there a different perspective we need to consider?
  - Are there any concerns that haven't been voiced?

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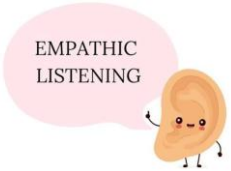
Reconciling Differences:

Listen & Empathize	Explore Options	Build Small Agreements	Find Underlying Interests
			
Build Trust Paraphrase what you hear. Check assumptions & feelings.	Lower Pressure Suggest possibilities for part or all of the issue - without asking for commitment	Create progress Break the solution into pieces. Ask questions and verify perceptions.	Identify common ground Handle one idea at a time. Focus on agreement and search for more.

Facilitation Rule: Slow the conversation down, make people feel heard, and lock in small wins

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How do these help you?

- Reduce stress and uncertainty
- Strengthen relationships with families
- Improve IEP meeting outcomes
- Prevent escalation into formal disputes
- Keep the focus on student success

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Building Your Teacher Toolbox

- Resources you can use today:
  - Local Task Force Resource Hub
  - State Task Force
  - PEAL Resource Library
  - Parent Ambassador Network
  - Annotated IEP
  - Multilingual resources
  - PaTTAN Family Engagement Framework

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"I've tried everything, and nothing is working. What else can I do?

System of Support

ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION

STATE COMPLAINT SYSTEM

MEDIATION

DUE PROCESS HEARING

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Dispute Resolution Continuum

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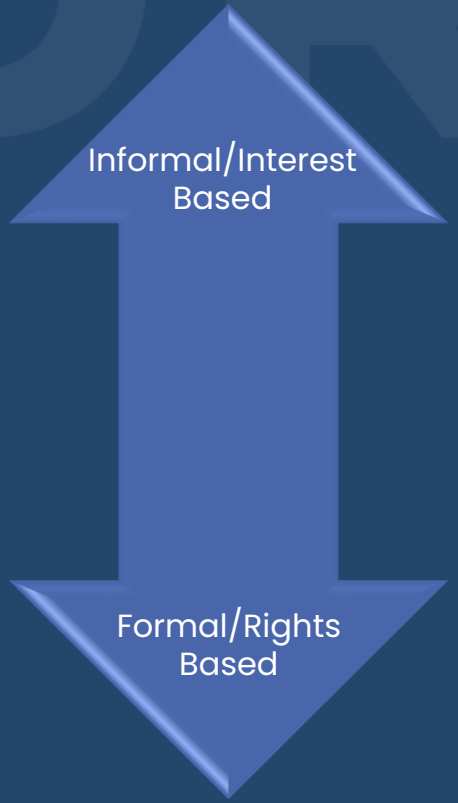
Alternative Dispute Resolution

- *Special Education ConsultLine*
- Call Resolution Process (CRP)
- *Facilitation – IEP/IFSP Meeting* and Resolution Meeting
- Hearing Officer Settlement Conference
- *Resource Account Management System*

State Complaint System

Mediation

Due Process Hearing



Alternative Dispute Resolution

What options are available?

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

CONSULTLINE

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Special Education ConsultLine

- A toll-free information help line for families and advocates of children with disabilities who have questions or concerns about the education of a school-aged child.

- Provides the same technical assistance to families who are preparing to participate in mediation and/or represent themselves in a due process hearing.

- ConsultLine specialists will answer procedural questions to help parents understand the mechanics of mediation as well as various procedures involved in preparing for a due process hearing.

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ConsultLine Topical Issues

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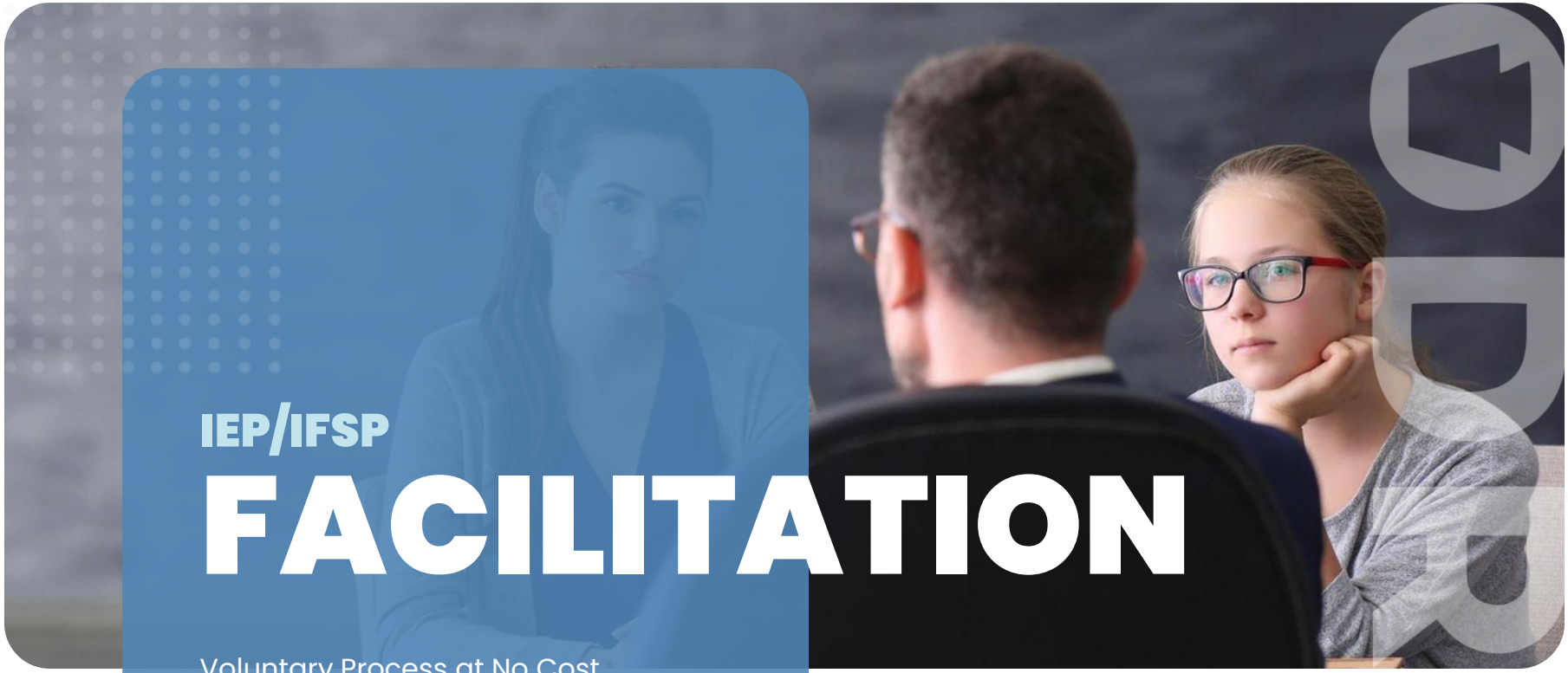
- Timeline Violations
- Discipline Rule Violations
- Child Out of School
- Lack of Notice Provided to the Parent
- Lack of Consent
- Parent Was Not Informed of Student's Progress as Required by the IEP
- Behavior Plan not Being Followed
- IEP Implementation



IEP/IFSP

FACILITATION

Voluntary Process at No Cost
for IDEA-related Claims

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Benefits of IEP/IFSP Facilitation

- Supports communication between the parties and has a positive impact on the school/family relationship
- Provides expertise in communication and conflict resolution strategies
- Helps participants explore concerns, identify options, and resolve disagreements before the issues result in more formal dispute resolution options.

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Resource Account Management System (RAMS)

- ra-pdespecialed@pa.gov

- Inquiries come in through voicemail, email, or website submission
  - Stakeholder submissions include:
    - Parents/Guardians
    - Advocates
    - Legislative members
    - School District Directors/Supervisors/Teachers
    - Other States

- Regional Advisor assigned based on location
  - More information gathered
  - Provide resources, not recommendations
  - Facilitate communication between educational entity and family

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Formal Dispute Resolution

What happens when there continues to be disagreements?

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Bureau of Special Education

State Complaint

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State Complaint Process

- As part of its general supervisory responsibility, the State Educational Agency (SEA) must implement complaint procedures in a manner consistent with 34 CFR §300.151-300.153 in the IDEA.
- Can still utilize IEP facilitation or mediation
- Eligible Allegations: Includes procedural and FAPE violations, evaluation disputes, and service implementation issues.
- Relief Provided: Could include student-specific and/or systemic corrective actions.
- Group Complaints: Complaints affecting multiple students are investigated and tracked as such.

Common Allegations

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- FAPE
- LRE – Least Restrictive Environment
- IEP Implementation (including Related Services)
- Access to Records
- Extended School Year
- Evaluation Timelines
- Parent Participation
- Positive Behavior Supports
- Discipline Procedures

PROCESS OF

MEDIATION

What can you expect at a mediation?

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Mediation

- Voluntary
- Depends on the willingness of the parties to discuss their concerns openly and honestly
- Mediation agreements are binding in a court of law
- Can still utilize a due process hearing or state complaint

Commonly Mediated Issues

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- FAPE Placement
- LRE – Least Restrictive Environment
- IEP Implementation
- Related Services / Level of Services
- Extended School Year
- Evaluations
- Transitions
- Accommodations
- Functional Behavioral Assessments

REQUESTS FOR

DUE PROCESS

A due process hearing can be requested for disputes.

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ODR Hearing Officers

Are impartial and are proficient in special education law

Possess the knowledge and ability to conduct hearings and write decisions according to standard legal practice

Have complete autonomy to administer the hearing and render a decision

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Most Common Issues

- Compensatory Education
- IEP Disputes
- Placement
- Evaluation

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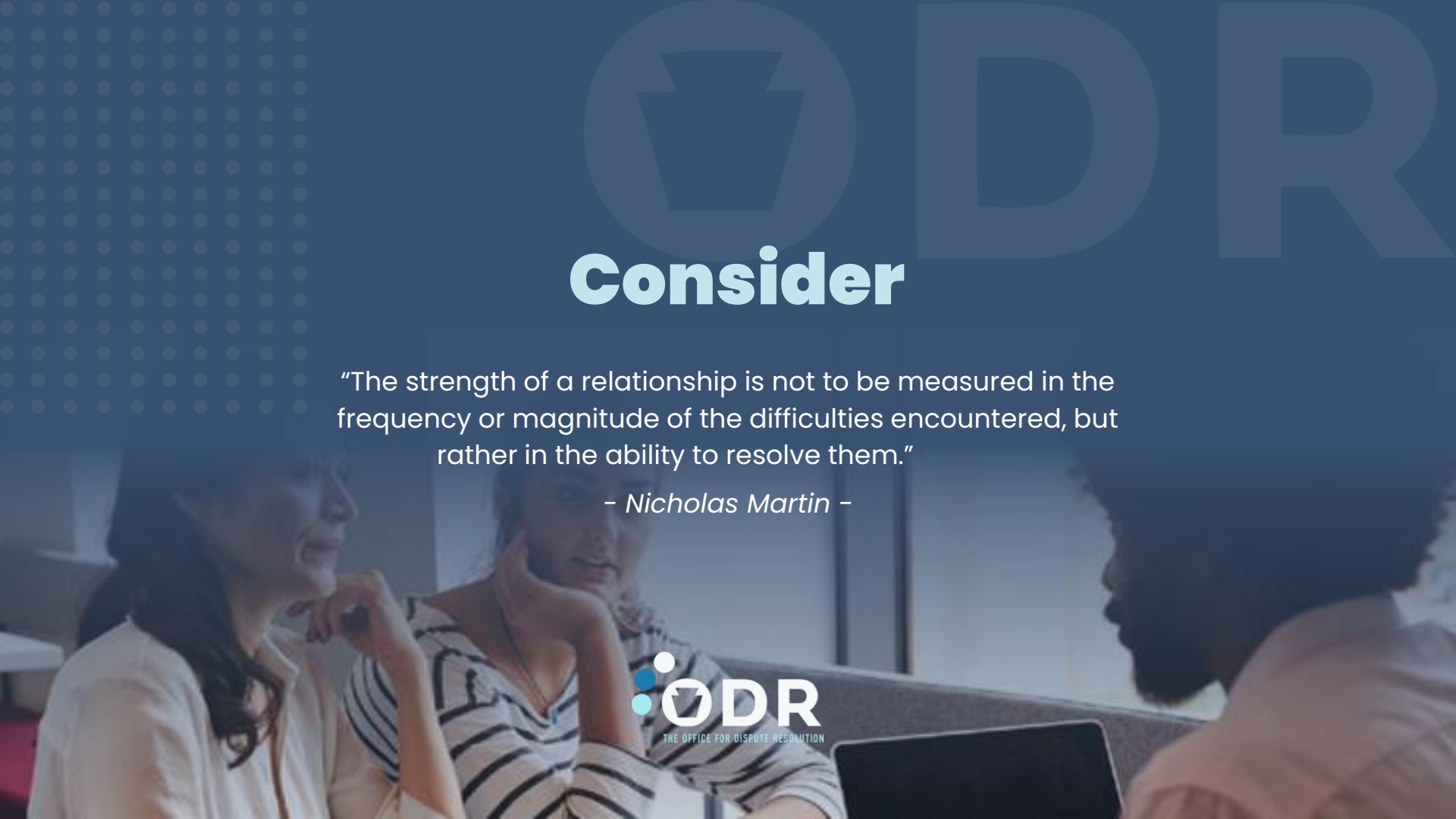
Consider

"The strength of a relationship is not to be measured in the frequency or magnitude of the difficulties encountered, but rather in the ability to resolve them."

- Nicholas Martin -



PLEASE CONTACT US

THANK YOU

Dr. Alyse Watson, alywatson@pa.gov

Ashley Smith, ashley.smith@odr-pa.org

Dr. Jackie Bartek, jbartek@ciu20.org

Cindy Duch, PEAL, cduch@pealcenter.org

Pennsylvania
Department of Education

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania