



ENGAGING UNDERSERVED FAMILIES

In the Cultural and Linguistic
Competence Dispute Resolution
System Assessment Process

2023

About This Guide

This guide is a companion resource to the Cultural and Linguistic Competence Dispute Resolution (DR) System Self-assessment Tool (CLC Tool) to support the engagement of families in the assessment process, especially those from underserved populations who may be less likely to use dispute resolution options due to language, access, or socio-economic barriers. Although the focus of this guide is specific to the CLC self-assessment process, the practical suggestions for engaging underserved families offered throughout can be applied more broadly.

This guide was informed by the states who piloted the CLC Tool, as well as consultants, CADRE Advisory Board members, and families of children with disabilities.

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Introduction

An agency's self-assessment of its dispute resolution (DR) system is incomplete without a thorough exploration and understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of underserved families. Successful improvement efforts incorporate these perspectives and lived experiences and recognize the commonalities among and differences within groups. In this guide, CADRE offers valuable information on:

- the benefits of engaging underserved families,
- planning for family engagement,
- fostering connections with underserved families, and
- other crucial considerations to keep in mind.

Key Terms Used in the Guide

Underserved

Populations who may be less likely to use DR options due to language, access, or socio-economic barriers. Examples of underserved families can include but are not limited to those who are: living in poverty; from non-dominant cultures; from tribal or migrant communities; English learners; experiencing a disability; disconnected technologically; unhoused or experiencing housing insecurity; without documentation of immigration status; LGBTQI+; foster or non-traditional parents; impacted by the justice system; with limited literacy skills; and in the military. Families may identify with more than one group and may identify with one group more than another.

Engage

To invite, include, and actively involve individuals or groups for the purpose of working together on a shared goal.

Cultural Broker

Cultural brokers link groups of people from different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of connecting those groups. Cultural brokers have relationships with underserved populations and may be trusted to speak on behalf of another individual or group.

Microaggression

Microaggression is a statement or action members of a marginalized group may regard as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against them as a member of that group. For example, scheduling a meeting during a religious holiday may be considered a microaggression for some meeting participants.

Benefits

Provides an opportunity to receive feedback from underserved families.

Builds and strengthens relationships.

Builds confidence in the system.

Offers insights into lived experiences of underserved families.

Reveals barriers to access and participation.

Provides opportunities to identify concerns and create solutions with families to improve access and participation.

Ultimately better meets the needs of children and youth.



Determine the Purpose of Engagement

To effectively engage diverse families in the self-assessment process, DR teams need to be clear about the purpose of the engagement process. The purpose of engagement will drive all other decisions, including the types of activities, who will be invited to participate, and additional logistics. The value of having a **specific** purpose or two for engaging underserved families will give the team clear direction and increase the likelihood of meaningful engagement aligned with their goals. The purpose may fall into one or more of these general categories: 1) to increase understanding of underserved families' lived experiences navigating the early intervention or special education systems and resolving conflict, 2) to obtain feedback on the cultural and linguistic competency of your DR system, and 3) to develop or improve relationships with underserved families.

The purpose of engagement can evolve over time. For example, a team might have a limited understanding about the Native American families in their area. The team's initial purpose for engagement might be to understand how Native American families tend to think about and engage with early intervention/special education conflict. Once the team has a better understanding of the lived experiences of Native American families, the team's purpose for engagement might broaden to focus on identifying the barriers underserved families may have in accessing or using the DR system.

Often, multiple purposes for engagement are identified and attended to simultaneously. Some may be ongoing and foundational, such as building trust, and others may be shorter in duration and change over time, such as obtaining feedback on the cultural and linguistic barriers that may prevent underserved families from a particular group from accessing and using mediation.



Digging Deeper

The table below provides some examples of how a DR team can delve deeper to determine a *specific* purpose for engaging families in the self-assessment process:

General Category	Questions to Ask Your DR Team	Specific Purpose Statements
To understand underserved families' lived experiences navigating the early intervention and special education system and resolving conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we think we know about the lived experiences of underserved families in our area? • What assumptions have we made that need to be checked? • What do we need to know to get a clearer idea of experiences? • What underserved families have we had little to no contact with? What is our understanding of their experiences? Do we need to target engagement efforts to a specific population of underserved families? • How do various underserved families generally think about conflict? 	<p>To better understand how Somali families tend to think about and engage with conflict.</p> <p>To better understand the challenges families from rural areas may face in resolving early intervention and special education disputes.</p> <p>To better understand how Korean families prefer to receive resources from and communicate with the agency.</p> <p>To explore barriers Black families encounter in accessing the dispute resolution system.</p>
To obtain feedback on the cultural and linguistic competency of the dispute resolution system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In which function areas and indicators do we want to invite family perspective? • Are there specific outreach efforts or materials on which we would like feedback? 	<p>To determine if the DR options and processes are socio-economically equitable.</p> <p>To identify opportunities to minimize perceptions of power imbalances.</p> <p>To gain feedback on the technical assistance provided to underserved families seeking dispute resolution.</p> <p>To gain feedback on language access of DR intake processes.</p>
To develop or improve relationships with underserved families of CWD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of relationship do we want to have with underserved families? • What relationships do we need to be initiate? • Do we need to repair or strengthen an existing relationship? 	<p>To make initial connections with at-risk families through parent centers.</p> <p>To begin fostering trust with immigrant families via cultural brokers.</p>

Identify Underserved Families



Who are the underserved families in your state or area that may be less likely to use DR due to language, access, or socio-economic barriers?

Collecting demographic data can provide a clear perspective of who is and is not using the dispute resolution system. This information can be found by exploring the following:

- Statewide and local Census data,
- Free and reduced lunch data,
- Child Find data,
- Data collected by Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) serving your state and localities,
- Data collected by agencies that provide supports to families across the state, and
- Data collected by State or regional chapters of national associations that support families.



DR teams with limited knowledge about the underserved populations in their area and unsure of how to begin engagement efforts should consider communicating with individuals within the agency who work with underserved populations and cultural brokers, such as English Language Learner specialists. Consider also reaching out to the state’s Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs). CPRCs are federally funded to specifically support underserved families of students with disabilities in a geographically defined community, although not every state has one. Parent Centers can be wonderful partners in CLC system improvement efforts and can be a possible source for meeting cultural brokers. To find the PTI(s) or CPRC(s) in a state, visit the [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#). Connections to underserved families or cultural brokers can also be made through local education agencies, early intervention service providers, other state agencies, health care providers, religious or spiritual leaders, culturally and linguistically diverse support agencies, or other local sources.

Key Considerations in Identifying Who to Engage

- Keep the purpose of the engagement in mind when identifying the cultural brokers and underserved families who will be engaged in the process.
- When convening, ensure the size of the group is large enough to allow for diversity in perspectives and experiences and small enough to foster opportunities for each person to feel part of the group and to contribute. One facilitator per group of 8-12 people is optimal to foster meaningful engagement.
- Underserved families with lived experience or relevant knowledge can provide insights about barriers within the DR system. The DR team may need to provide additional context or training resources (e.g., how to tell their stories, how to interpret data), and determine points of entry into the discussions.
- Determine if there are professionals or dispute resolution staff that should not participate in a gathering due to potential power imbalances or other dynamics that could interfere with fostering an inclusive environment conducive to sharing.

Determine Engagement Mechanisms



Work with cultural brokers to determine what engagement mechanisms might work best for underserved families.

The DR self-assessment process provides many opportunities for engaging underserved families. Teams should consider informing the statewide special education advisory panel or interagency coordinating council of plans to assess the cultural and linguistic competency of the DR system. Invite them to provide input on developing an engagement plan, including assistance with determining the purposes of engagement in the process and identifying cultural brokers. Offer them an opportunity to provide direct feedback on the cultural and linguistic competence of the DR system.

Below are some additional examples:

- Collaborate with cultural brokers, individually or as a group, to plan for engagement with underserved families.
- Work with cultural brokers to identify opportunities to meet underserved families where they live and gather.
- Ask cultural brokers familiar with underserved families' experiences using the DR system, or who themselves are underserved family members, to provide feedback on the DR System.
- Collaborate with cultural brokers in facilitating initial discussions with underserved families.
- Integrate questions related to cultural and linguistic responsiveness into feedback surveys administered at the conclusion of a DR process.
- Partner with PTIs and CPRCs to incorporate engagement efforts with underserved families into their existing events or structures, or to identify engagement strategies that would work for their centers.

Plan For Family Engagement



Intentionality is crucial to developing a plan that is likely to result in the meaningful engagement of underserved families in the self-assessment process. Create a comprehensive and detailed plan that encompasses the following:

1. Specific purpose for engagement throughout the process

2. Specific underserved populations to engage

3. Appropriate means of communication or outreach for each underserved population

4. Locations, times, and methods of engagement

5. Key messages to convey

6. Potential questions to ask

Key Considerations in Planning

Keep the purpose of the engagement in mind when planning. When the specific purpose of the engagement is clear, planning decisions are easier.

Messaging

- Determine the key messages to convey, including how shared information will inform the self-assessment and improve the system. Let families know of interests in continued engagement and how families will be informed of the progress of the self-assessment and ensuing improvement efforts.
- Ensure invitations clearly communicate what families can expect from the process. Use the invitations to set an inclusive and welcoming tone that corresponds to the purpose of engagement.

Meeting Spaces

- Choose meeting spaces and room set-ups that align with the purposes of engagement. For example, is space needed to allow for confidentiality, or would a public space where families regularly convene be better suited to the purpose? Ensure that the spaces and room set-ups are comfortable and inviting.
- Ensure that the locations and times are convenient to families. Allow enough time for families to share their experiences and perspectives on specific questions. Consider whether meeting virtually affords greater accessibility.

Mitigating Barriers to Engagement

- Identify and provide necessary accommodations and interpretation services. Ensure materials are clear, understandable, and accessible in multiple formats to address varying information literacy levels.
- Reduce barriers and show how the agency values families' engagement by providing drinks and food, childcare on site, stipends for involvement, or assistance with transportation. Be creative and flexible with how families are engaged.
- Use cultural brokers to facilitate or co-facilitate discussions. Ensure that facilitators are skilled and culturally and linguistically responsive. Consider if the presence of someone from the dominant culture will interfere with families sharing their perspectives and how to address those challenges.
- Decide how family perspectives, input, and feedback will be captured and how it will inform the self-assessment. Check with families to get explicit approval of how their input will be shared, and verify that any written summary or quote is accurate.

Sample Action Item

Purpose: To better understand the impact public awareness and outreach efforts have on underserved families and identify opportunities for improvement.				
Underserved Population	Means of Engagement	Date(s) of Engagement	Questions to Ask	Resources Needed
Families from the deaf and blind communities	One-on-one interviews with cultural brokers working with families, such as representatives from the state's deaf-blind center	March – April, 2024	<p>What supports do families use to resolve special education or early intervention disputes?</p> <p>To what extent are families aware of dispute resolution options?</p> <p>How do they learn about dispute resolution options?</p> <p>How might we make it easier for families to find information on dispute resolution options?</p> <p>How might we modify the information on dispute resolution options so that it is clear and understandable?</p> <p>How can we revise our materials so that they are more culturally and linguistically appropriate to families?</p> <p>How might we engage directly with families?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact list • Staff time to conduct interviews • Meeting space

Connect with Underserved Families

DR teams may need additional support in connecting with underserved families. By building upon existing relationships with community partners or working with cultural brokers, teams can invite families to engage in ways that respect their communities and family cultures. Here are some important points to consider when seeking to engage with underserved groups:

- The historical experiences of the underserved groups in the area;
- The impact these experiences have on families;
- The wisdom, cultural assets, and resilience of underserved families;
- The perceived or actual power imbalances between underserved families and institutions;
- How the agency's culture and each staff member's culture come into play when engaging with underserved families; and
- Opportunities for personal and professional development to strengthen cultural and linguistic competency and humility.



The Importance of Personal and Professional Development

Continuing to develop and foster individual awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity is critical, especially when a DR team does not represent the underserved families using the system. Exploring one's culture and becoming aware of personal biases is often a beneficial starting place. Learning about other cultures through trainings, webinars, and literature can also be helpful. In addition, one of the most organic and enriching ways to grow in authentically understanding individual and group experiences is to interact with diverse groups, especially those from cultures that are less familiar.

Some examples of activities may include:

- research cultural events in the community and seek opportunities that invite respectful spectators,
- volunteer for organizations founded by underserved communities,
- engage with agencies that support underserved communities, and
- research minority-owned and operated businesses and become a regular patron.

In addition to personal experiences and individual professional development activities, exploring topics with a cultural broker in a learning community environment may be beneficial. When team members share resources, ask for feedback from colleagues and friends, explore ideas, and engage in team discussions, they foster a culture of learning. Working through the self-assessment tool process and reflecting with others offers opportunities for further learning.



Cultural and linguistic competence is a journey, not a destination.

Key Considerations in Personal Interactions

Trauma

Recognizing the potential presence of trauma when working with families who live in a societal system that does not meet their needs is crucial. Trauma is a response to a perceived threat to survival or emotional well-being of an individual or large group, such as a community or culture, that can lead to adverse physical and psychological changes in a person. There are ways to be proactive and trauma-aware without making assumptions about others' experiences:

- Assure that the environments for engaging with families are inviting and safe.
- Engage in thoughtful reflection and respectful interactions.
- Remember that trauma can go unrecognized, untreated, and can manifest itself in various ways.
- Respect personal boundaries and endeavor to engage people at their own pace.
- Let go of expectations that families must reveal their stories.
- Be transparent and let people know the purpose of engagement.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues and check-in to see how the conversation is affecting families.
- Have opt-in opportunities for engagement and offer choices.
- Reassure participants that shared experiences and stories will be kept anonymous and will only serve to inform the assessment process and improvement efforts.

Implicit Biases and Unintended Harm

Implicit biases—those attitudes, prejudices and judgements about people or groups that are unknowingly held—may cause harm even when people intend to be inclusive. If a family or community member has been unintentionally affected:

- Being receptive to understanding the impact of unintended microaggressions is difficult but vital in fostering relationships.
- Recognize that people want to be heard and understood.
- Missteps can be opportunities to create a shared learning experience only if the person affected by the missteps is open to this possibility.
- Take responsibility for the impact and ask how to make amends.
- Proactively meet the misstep with kindness to all parties involved and avoid shame. Shame leads to defensiveness, a roadblock to learning and growth.

In Conclusion

Family engagement is foundational to creating a more equitable and effective dispute resolution system. Understanding the lived experience of individuals within underserved communities as they navigate early intervention and special education, engage in conflict, and utilize dispute resolution options results in culturally and linguistically competent DR systems that lead to better outcomes for all families.

While this guide provides strategies to support teams with engaging families from underserved communities, recognizing the unique nature of the agency's current context when considering and implementing these strategies is important. Additional supports may be needed to incorporate family perspectives into the CLC assessment honestly and with transparency. CADRE has curated a number of [equity and cultural and linguistic competence resources](#) that can support this work. CADRE is also available for technical assistance. Contact us at: cadre@directionservice.org.

