In this issue, access to justice takes center stage. We often hear people assert: “All I want is my day in court.” Many who hear that, including perhaps some of our readers, often counter by citing quotations such as this one from Voltaire: “I was never ruined but twice: once when I lost a lawsuit and once when I won one.” Or Abraham Lincoln’s counsel: “Discourage litigation. Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out ... how the nominal winner is often a real loser.”

But there is something to that phrase, “my day in court,” a connotative dimension that inspires each of us. It suggests that there is a place — a court — where principles of procedural justice combine with norms of substantive fairness to shape the dignified, peaceful resolution of contested matters among disputing parties. That picture captures our imagination.

We can acknowledge — importantly — that the reality of being a litigant today may differ significantly from this idealized picture. But it is this vision of what can happen in court that stirs our aspirations for a life of ordered liberty and supports our intuition that if one does not have access to the courts, one does not have access to justice.

“Just resolutions of disputes,” of course, can occur in multiple settings, not only formal courtrooms that host common-law adversary trials. Many other settings enable each participant to give voice to concerns, acknowledge a counterpart’s claims, and seek a resolution. To conduct or engage in discussion to resolve matters effectively and fairly, disputing parties often meet in a conference room at corporate headquarters, in a classroom in a public school, in a church basement, or around a dining room table.

But if one does not have access to any such venue — or someone has access but lacks the skill set to prepare for and effectively engage in it — their disputes are often resolved by power, not principle. And when that occurs, the aspiration for and promise of justice is crushed.

Many talented individuals and organizations systematically confront, examine, and try to ensure access to justice in both its procedural and substantive dimensions. Articles in this issue report on initiatives that are occurring across multiple settings, including federal court programs to strengthen litigant access and engagement; public school system efforts to support collaboration between school officials and parents of children with special needs; government, universities, and advocacy organizations partnering to develop effective approaches for addressing the serious problems of violence and harassment on campus; and collaborative efforts among multiple service providers to help families going through a legal separation or divorce. The people who shape and drive such efforts deploy multiple skills, ranging from dispute systems design insights and dispute intervention talents to organizational leadership and engagement capacities.

The quest to develop meaningful access, which constitutes the driving theme of the recently launched Global Pound Conference Series, should command our collective passion and skills. This issue of the magazine focuses our attention on what is working — and what is not — closer to home, right here in the United States.

— The Dispute Resolution Magazine Editorial Board