



**Board of Education Candidates Disability
Questionnaire 2024
Candidate: **Aaron "Jitu" Brown****

Question: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Answer: I am a Chicago Public Schools alum and parent and a proud resident of the Austin community on Chicago's West Side. For over 30 years, my work has focused on educational justice and equity. For many years I was the education organizer at the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, one of Chicago's longest standing community organizations, where I organized campaigns for greater investment in public education, worked to improve schools serving Black students, and ran youth leadership programs in schools. I have worked in coalition with Access Living in the struggle for education justice. I was the lead organizer in the campaign to save Dyett High School from closure, which culminated in myself and others going on a 34-day hunger strike that led to Dyett being reopened with over \$14 million in new investments. Out of that campaign, I helped envision the Sustainable Community School model now being implemented in communities across the country. What we did for Dyett I want to do for schools across the 5th District and across the city. From 1999 - 2013, I served on Local School Councils and trained hundreds of LSC members across the city. I was the community school coordinator at Chicago's first community school, South Shore School of Entrepreneurship and taught Black history at St. Leonard's High School, the nation's only accredited high school serving people returning from incarceration. Since 2013, I have served as National Director for the Journey for Justice Alliance of grassroots organizations in 40 cities. I am running for Chicago's Board of Education because my unique understanding of school communities, systemic failures, and vision will equip me to be both effective and accountable when elected.

Question: Have you interacted with the special education system in CPS in any capacity? If so, what was your experience?

Answer: I had the honor of working in coalition with Access Living with the Grassroots Education Movement with full support for children with disabilities as part of our platform. Prior to that, I designed and implemented leadership programs (Nash, Douglas, Al Rab9y, South Shore HS & Fuller Elementary) that have welcomed and in some cases centered youth with disabilities.

Question: Many families of students with disabilities talk about the challenges they face trying to navigate the special education system in CPS. Why do you think families are so frustrated?

Answer: It is important that resources are provided in a way that is truly accessible to parents working to get support for their students. We should be thinking about: How does CPS communicate that information and is that adequately accessible to parents? And how are parents who need that info treated in the process? I'm interested in seeing Know-Your-Rights type workshops that support parents knowing what is available to them and their children in a supportive environment because if the district isn't parent friendly, then that creates a climate where children don't get the resources they need.

This one of the many places where the approach of sustainable community schools would be useful so that parents have a space to inform the care their children need and ask for the support they need to understand what's available.

Question: At the beginning of this school year, over 1,500 students with disabilities legally entitled to transportation had not received a bus route. These routing delays, common since 2020, result in students missing valuable school hours and parents missing work opportunities. What steps will you take as a board member to ensure that students are provided bus routes in a timely manner?

Answer: We know that budgets are moral documents. The district has neglected transportation services for children with disabilities because they are not a priority. I will focus on transforming CPS policy from an emphasis on privatization to a real commitment to equity. Children with disabilities WILL be a priority when i am on the school board.

Question: Preparation for life after high school is important for all students, especially those with disabilities. Research shows that students with access to transition programs such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Dual Credit courses have greater graduation and employment outcomes than their peers. However, in CPS, disabled student enrollment in these programs lag well behind their nondisabled peers. As a board member, what would you do to ensure equal access for students with disabilities to career training offerings?

Answer: I will require equitable access to CTE programming and other resources such as Life Skills (life after HS) classes for all students with disabilities.

Question: Over 65% of CPS schools are not fully ADA accessible. In practice, this means that "neighborhood schools" are not an option for many students with physical disabilities, let alone disabled teachers, disabled parents, disabled voters, or other disabled community members visiting our schools. The 2023 CPS Facilities Master Plan identifies building accessibility as an important priority, but the district

has not adopted a roadmap or plan to achieve better building accessibility. What steps should the district take to address a lack of accessibility in its buildings?

Answer: The district should start with a needs assessment in partnership with Access Living and develop short, mid and long term goals and objectives to ensure that CPS is ADA compliant.

Question: CPS has a history of segregating students with disabilities. The Corey H. settlement in 1998 required the district to move toward meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities for students who could make meaningful progress in a less restrictive environment. In the last two years, the number of cluster classrooms in the district has increased by 200%, presumably because these students cannot be supported to make meaningful progress in the general education setting, even with supports. As a board member, what kinds of questions would you ask to understand this sharp increase in restrictive placements?

Answer: I would ask:

- What kind of staffing could be provided to support students with disabilities being able to gain an education in the most community with their peers?
- Why have we seen the 200% increase in cluster classrooms? How did we get here?
- Is there specific federal or state funding CPS could be lobbying for that is dedicated for students with disabilities that could help resource providing them with the needed supports?
- What benefit do we see in students learning in environments with other young people across difference? What kind of peer-to-peer support could enable the social-emotional learning of all students in classrooms that include students with disabilities?

Question: What would be your top priority for improving access to education for students with disabilities in CPS?

Answer: Rapid development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) in CPS, assess the need for special education educators and move the district to hire the appropriate number of educators. With a sustainable community school focus. engage more social service agencies with compassionate professionals that can provide more individualized support for students with special needs.



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