



**Board of Education Candidates Disability
Questionnaire 2024
Candidate: **Anusha Thotakura****

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

Answer: I believe every child in our city deserves access to a high-quality public education, and I'm running to make that a reality. I have always been passionate about educational equity. It is a value instilled in me by my immigrant parents, who attribute their opportunities to their educational experiences. I believe my passion, training, and grasp of the policy and politics of our local school system make me the best candidate for this position. The combination of my knowledge and political skills will be a vital asset as District 6's representative on the school board. As we have seen too many times over the years, our city's schools can be helped or hampered based on the relationship of our elected representatives to Springfield. Having a representative with both local and state-level relationships is not just a "plus" - it is necessary to ensuring that CPS gets the funding it needs.

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

Answer: I volunteer as a debate coach at CPS and work with students with disabilities. I can see firsthand the necessity for all schools to have full-time special education case managers so all students receive the services they need.

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: From my observations and discussions with families around the district and other stakeholders, families of disabled students are frustrated that CPS continues to not live up to its promises and legal obligations when it comes to providing adequate levels of care, supervision, enrichment, and transportation. Many families don't know their rights when it comes to special education, and even those that do have immense difficulties navigating the system to advocate for their children. Students remain unfairly clustered away from their classmates and neighborhood schools still lack adequate, universal Special Ed. The District continues to fall short of having schools be fully physically accessible. In a District where more than one in ten students has an IEP, this is unacceptable.

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: I am committed to ensuring that students have access to adequate transportation. Between a nationwide bus driver shortage, a pullback in bus routes from a CPS vendor, and budget gaps, CPS is currently facing immense difficulties in ensuring every student can get to school on time, every day—especially students with disabilities. I am committed to increasing driver recruitment that ensures, at minimum, that every student with an IEP and 504 has a ride to school. I would also support asking the General Assembly to relax state credentialing requirements for bus drivers and offering one-time incentives to increase recruitment. These changes and more could come as part of a resolution of the complaint advocates recently filed with the State Board of Education.

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 strongly support expanding CTE opportunities, especially for students with disabilities. It's one of the reasons that I'm endorsed by the Chicago Federation of Labor. I will work to ensure that all CPS schools are complying with changes to state law that advocates secured in 2021 which amended the Dual Credit Quality Act and the Children with Disabilities article of the School Code to ensure that complete, accurate information about Dual Credit and CTE programs are being made available to disabled children and their families. I would also support encouraging parents to consider these options for their children with disabilities at each “touchpoint,” that is, any time CPS has an opportunity to formally interact with a parent in-person. Finally, I would support increased efforts to monitor and apply for grant funding to implement Perkins V to further enhance outreach and recruitment efforts for these programs.

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: Chicago's schools are more than 80 years old on average, with the oldest dating back to the year of the Chicago Fire. It is vital that we work to update CPS' physical infrastructure, and these updates must include specific, measurable, achievable plans to move to 100% accessibility and allow every family to access their neighborhood school if they want to. I will push for the adoption of just such a long-term accessibility plan, if elected, as well as a short-to-medium-term plan with a focus on South Side elementary schools where these problems are more prevalent.

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: While we know some of the causes of this phenomenon—prior cuts to special education positions district-wide, a growing population of students with disabilities, and difficulties with recruitment and retention—I would want to better understand precisely where these newer cluster classrooms are located, how the District has tried to recruit SECAs since the pandemic, and whether it has pursued all available funding supports for special education positions, which could've helped avoid some of the issues we are now seeing.

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

Answer: Modernizing the physical infrastructure of our schools so that they are accessible, safe, climate resilient and available to all is among my top priorities. For CPS students with disabilities, this does not mean just updating schools so that they are first-floor accessible, because these students need and deserve more than a first-floor education. CPS needs a plan to move to 100% complete accessibility District-wide.