

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2024**Candidate:** Danielle Wallace

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

Answer: I'm Danielle Wallace, a passionate educator, youth advocate, and community activist with over 15 years of experience working in and with Chicago Public Schools. As a mother of two sets of twins and someone who has personally experienced the challenges of navigating an under-resourced education system, I am deeply committed to ensuring every child has access to quality education, mental health support, and equitable resources. I'm running for the Board of Education to bring the voices of parents, students, and communities to the forefront and to work toward building a more inclusive, restorative, and empowering school system that reflects the vision and values of all Chicagoans.

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

Answer: Yes, I've been all up in the special education system in CPS—as a parent, an educator, and through my roles as a clerk and a disciplinarian. As a mom of kids with diverse learning needs, I know firsthand how hard it can be to get the right support. The wait times for assessments felt endless, and the communication between schools and parents? Let's just say it left a lot to be desired. But I also got to see the inside of the system when I worked as a clerk and disciplinarian, and it was clear to me how often families are left out of the conversation when it comes to decisions that impact their children.

Here's the thing—our kids deserve better. It's not just about getting the IEP in place; it's about truly co-creating it with families and using every resource we can to meet our students' needs. That means we need to bring in the village—hospitals, specialists, mental health professionals, and community partners—to make sure no child falls through the cracks. It's not just the school's job, it's all of our responsibility to rally around our students. My experiences have made me even more committed to pushing for transparency, collaboration, and the resources we need to make sure CPS is a place where every student thrives, no matter their challenges.

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: Families of students with disabilities are frustrated navigating the special education system in CPS because the process often feels like an uphill battle. First, the long

wait times for assessments and services leave families feeling like their children's needs aren't being prioritized. In some cases, students wait months or even years before receiving the support they deserve. On top of that, there's a lack of clear communication between schools and families. Parents are often left out of critical conversations, only being called in at the beginning and end of the process, which makes them feel disconnected from the decisions impacting their kids.

The system is also overly complicated, with layers of paperwork, meetings, and terms that can be hard to understand. Families often feel like they're fighting just to get basic services for their children, and many don't have the support to navigate it all. On top of that, the inconsistencies in how resources are distributed across schools make it even harder, especially in underserved communities. It's frustrating because parents know their children's potential, but the system doesn't always seem designed to help them reach it.

At the end of the day, it feels like the system isn't working with families, but against them. That's why we need a shift towards co-creating the process with parents, bringing in the village—hospitals, specialists, and community partners—to ensure students are fully supported. Families want to be heard and included every step of the way, and until that happens, the frustration will remain.

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: As a board member, I would build on the steps CPS has already committed to this school year to ensure timely transportation for students with disabilities. CPS has introduced the "hub-stop" model for general education students and is addressing the bus driver shortage through financial stipends for families transporting their children. I would ensure that CPS meets its goals and explore additional community-based solutions, such as partnering with local transportation services. Additionally, I'd advocate for stronger communication between schools and parents, ensuring real-time tracking tools are widely available.

By expanding partnerships with local transportation companies and ensuring transparency

with parents, we can prevent future delays and guarantee students are not missing valuable school time.

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: As a board member, I'd be fighting hard to ensure equal access for students with disabilities to career training programs like CTE and Dual Credit courses. It's time we make sure our disabled students aren't left behind. First, we need to remove the barriers that prevent them from enrolling, whether that's by providing adaptive tech, job coaching, or creating more inclusive learning environments. This can't just be about ticking boxes; we need to actively engage with community organizations to build partnerships that give students with disabilities real-life work experiences and pathways to success.

I'd also hold schools accountable for making sure they meet equity goals—it's not enough to offer these programs if students with disabilities aren't being supported in accessing them. We'd track participation, bring parents into the process, and make sure every student has the chance to leave CPS ready to thrive in the real world, no matter what challenges they face. This is about equity, opportunity, and making sure every student can see their full potential realized.

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: To address the lack of accessibility in CPS buildings, the district must first prioritize developing a comprehensive roadmap that outlines clear steps for making schools fully ADA accessible. This means starting with a thorough audit of all facilities to identify which schools are most in need of upgrades. From there, CPS needs to allocate

dedicated funding in each annual budget to ensure progress is being made consistently. Partnering with accessibility experts and community stakeholders, including disabled students and parents, will ensure that solutions are practical and meet real-world needs.

In addition, CPS should explore phased construction plans, so that schools can remain operational while accessibility improvements are made. Lastly, transparency and accountability are key—this means keeping the public informed through regular updates on progress, timelines, and setbacks. Making neighborhood schools truly accessible is not just a physical improvement but an equity issue that must be prioritized.

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: 1. What specific factors led to this rise in cluster classrooms? Were other supports and interventions in the general education setting exhausted before moving to these placements?

2. How are Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) being evaluated to ensure that students are placed in the least restrictive environment?

3. What training and resources are general education teachers receiving to support students with disabilities?

4. Are there systemic barriers, such as lack of staff or resources, preventing meaningful inclusion in general education classrooms?

5. How does CPS plan to monitor and reduce the need for cluster classrooms moving forward?

These questions would help ensure that any increase in restrictive placements is based on genuine student need and not a failure of the district to provide adequate supports.

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

Answer: My top priority for improving access to education for students with disabilities in CPS would be to make inclusion the norm while ensuring classrooms have the necessary supports like adaptive technology, co-teaching models, and trained staff. Additionally, I



would prioritize partnerships with hospitals and universities to provide specialized services—such as speech therapy, mental health support, and occupational therapy—in a timely manner. By leveraging these partnerships, we can ensure that students receive the care they need without long delays, improving both their academic and social development.