

**Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2024****Candidate:** Felix Ponce**Question: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.**

Answer: I have been a music educator for nine years and in that time I have served Chicago by promoting music programs through various organizations. I started an instrumental music program with three levels of band, drumline, color guard, mariachi and a jazz ensemble at Back of the Yards College Prep High School; I worked with The People's Music School to promote music education via their rigorous, tuition free music programs that serve Chicago students; and I have worked to create a pep band at Roosevelt University as their band coordinator. I am running because I want to create a CPS that has fully funded schools that support community growth. As a former music educator in the district, I have experience with struggling to provide basic supplies and instruments so students could participate in the arts. I have experience seeing students struggle with mental health because the social worker they see is only available once a week and is overworked. I have experience being at a school where the nurse is only available once a week. I also have experience seeing students flourish in sports, clubs and extracurriculars. School is more than just academics, and I want to provide a music educator perspective to the board's decisions to ensure we are supporting the whole child.

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

Answer: Yes, as a teacher in the district for seven years, I have witnessed the lack of staffing across the district. From a lack of classroom aides to overworked case managers, CPS is not fully supporting the needs of our students in ensuring that all students have access to their services. As a music teacher, my classroom was wonderful in that it was an opportunity for diverse students to come together and make music. My class was one of the few places where students in self contained classrooms could engage with general education students. Sometimes, aides were assigned to support students in this setting, but in many cases the aide was pulled from my classroom because there was another classroom with a higher need. Although I understood that need, it meant that my students would now not receive the support that they deserved to be successful. No student should be left without necessary services.

**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: I think parents can become frustrated for a number of reasons but they always want what's best for their child. Sometimes it can be the required and lengthy data collection periods, other times it may be that they don't see evidence of their child's learning difference at home. There are often difficulties in communicating exactly what is observed and recommended, or meetings are difficult to schedule because there are no interpreters or no subs are available to relieve teachers so they can be present. Unfortunately, each of these are a reality and we need to address each one.

**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 need to address the bus driver shortage by ensuring that they are paid fair wages and have access to adequate benefits. Pathways for community members to apply for these positions must be prioritized so that we staff these positions with people who care about the students and are invested in the community. We cannot outsource and privatize transportation just to save a quick buck. In the long run, we will continue to harm the people who matter most - the students with disabilities and their families.

**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: We need fully staffed schools to ensure that the programs offered will have the teachers and staff to support students with disabilities. I also believe that we need to take a look at each school and create metrics for them to work towards. This could include increasing the number of students enrolled in a CTE or dual credit classes by a certain percentage within a specific time frame. Investing in post-secondary explorations in high school would benefit all CPS students and we need to reinvest in the programs we previously had across the district.

**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 Facilities Master Plan was one important step in addressing our aging buildings but we need to move this plan into action. The average age of a CPS building is 84 years old and this affects accessibility for our community members with physical disabilities and safety for all students and staff. If any new constructions are approved, they should all be ADA compliant and in the meantime we should begin retrofitting schools that are already planning capital improvements. We must ensure that we do so without prioritizing one region over another and instead center equity and equal opportunity as we phase in changes. We can't keep pushing off the necessary fixes we need in the district to save money in the short run as it is clearly hurting our communities in the long run.

**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: We should examine which diagnoses are most common in cluster classrooms and consult with experts to evaluate whether cluster really is the best placement for students. We should also investigate why general education settings are not deemed appropriate for some students. Are there modifications we might make to general education settings which would benefit general education students and students with disabilities? For example, how would smaller class sizes or physical modifications to classrooms help or harm each group of students? Is there a full time case manager at every school? Are schools staffed with the appropriate number of general or dedicated aides and SECAs?

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

Answer: The priority is ensuring that schools are fully staffed to ensure that there are enough individuals providing services and that case managers are not overloaded. When I



was in CPS, my colleagues struggled to keep up with how many students they had on their caseloads. We can't keep cutting budgets and not fully funding schools and expect them to be successful. We need to reevaluate our priorities and ensure that we have a budget plan that does not shortchange this community of learners. This also includes our TAs and paraprofessionals who are vital to providing equitable services to the diverse learners.