



**Board of Education Candidates Disability
Questionnaire 2024
Candidate: **Jason Dónes****

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

Answer: My name is Jason Dónes, and I am running for the Board of Education because I believe every child should have access to a strong public school within walking distance of their home. I believe in a community-led education movement that builds on the incredible work special education advocates have been doing to demand accountability and a movement that elevates the voices of parents, educators, and students — not the voices of billionaires focused on lining their own pockets. I am running for Chicago's elected school board to advance the progress we've made and to fight for fully funded and fully staffed schools in every neighborhood. My entire career up to this point has been dedicated to improving the lives of working-class families. From tutoring and teaching on Chicago's West and South Side to coaching and supporting educators across the city who our families depend on. From policy advocacy getting our culturally responsive teaching standards into rule to leading an org dedicated to improving the conditions for Black and Brown educators. As an LSC member in a school facing shifting demographics, I continue to prioritize the interests of those most dependent on our schools and most vulnerable to resource cuts.

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

Answer: I have interacted with the special education system as a teacher on the West and South Side, a teacher-coach across the district, and as a godparent. I have worked with students of a wide variety of disabilities and special needs—from least restrictive settings to low-incidence classrooms. As a coach, I supported many SPED teachers across the district and as an adult facilitator for the district, I interfaced with the district office SPED support team.

As a godparent to an intelligent, non-verbal 6-year-old at CPS school. Throughout his first year, I stepped in as his advocate in IEP meetings because his mother felt like she did not have the knowledge or support to navigate them. In a room full of specialists and educators assigned to support, his mother feels alone. Maybe add more about how that experience was emotionally/logistically

I am a proud product of Chicago Public Schools (K-12) and attended a neighborhood school, magnet school, and selective enrollment high school. Over the years, I observed many close friends and family navigate the special education system with CPS, and while improvements have been made, by and large, families are still struggling with many of the same issues today and lack tools to hold leadership accountable.

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 have a right to be frustrated. They are navigating significant delays and bureaucratic nightmares when it comes to trying to get the resources they need, such as IEPs, 504s, and other services. Parents more or less have to become experts in the system and the law just to help out their own kids. All of this was worsened by the pandemic, with thousands of students missing their IEP meetings or initial evaluations.

As we all know, all of this is happening partially because the system does not have capacity to meet the present needs. We have so many students who need, deserve, and have a legal right to an equitable education. We are failing them because of a lack of resources to meet demand. I think the root issue is that, as an education system as a whole, we have failed to bring in adequate dollars into CPS and into special education from outside sources. This elected board is going to have renewed responsibility to advocate for funding public education at a higher level, and I fully intend to use it. In addition to better meeting immediate needs, I hope that this long-term goal could go some way to bringing families services that are not only adequate but easier to navigate in general.

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: While Chicago Public Schools has made some strides in addressing transportation needs for students with disabilities, including securing a state grant for 50 new electric buses, there is a lot of work that needs to be done. A progressive approach to ensuring equitable transportation starts with prioritizing accessibility as a core part of any transportation plan, not as an afterthought. We need to expand the number of accessible buses in a sustainable way, ensuring that all students, particularly the ones who need it most, have reliable, timely, and safe transportation. This means investing not only in more accessible vehicles but also in scaling the training of drivers and aides to accommodate the specific needs of students with disabilities.

We also need to think about how we can not just build our relationships with vendors but move this service to direct employment, and then plan to create some redundancy or backup plans in the systems. This year, all of the problems of the last several years were exacerbated this year because the workers at a crucial vendor for CPS transit went on strike for better working conditions. It shows how potentially bringing some of these services into the city and finding the resources to manage this transit service could mean that those workers have better labor conditions and that we aren't buffeted by issues beyond CPS control on an issue as important as students getting to school. We need to think about bringing workers into direct district employment in a broad way, but nowhere has that need been more demonstrated than in getting our kids to school.

In general, however, families for years have been put in tremendously difficult situations due to this shortage, and I think we also have to recognize that the monthly stipends provided in some cases do not solve all of the problems. Five hundred dollars is not enough money for many to send their children in an Uber twice a day, every school day, even if that were a totally safe and comfortable option. Families aren't asking to be put in charge of the logistics for sending their kids to school--the system is supposed to provide these services. As a school board, we need to think about how we can be creative and advocate for resources to fix these issues, and divvy up the dollars we have to address accessibility on the front end, as opposed to a host of back-end, frantic fixes. Families with special needs students and students with disabilities quite simply deserve better.

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: The fact that we're seeing that students with disabilities, as well as students of color and low-income students, disproportionately lag behind in CTE and Dual Credit enrollment opportunities is unacceptable — This has to change. CPS also offers fewer dual credit courses in general compared to the rest of the state and has said they do not have the resources to shift from AP to Dual Credit courses. I would push for expanding these courses and prioritizing recruitment initiatives for them so that students with disabilities, as well as all other underserved students, can access the same quality opportunities as their peers across the state.

I think this is another area where the board can look at the way we are allocating CTE and Dual Credit courses to increase offerings and perhaps put less emphasis on other special offerings in favor of that. I think this is also where the idea of community-led education comes into play. We need to get our ear to the ground to connect with students and parents to find out why they are not able to or not interested in enrolling their students in these programs. This could be done in the form of student surveys, LSC and parent group listening tours, school visits, and faculty meetings. This is also an area where the board as a whole could embark on a wider initiative to solicit feedback from students and families in special education.

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: It is my sincere belief CPS should take on the task of making all of its neighborhood schools fully ADA accessible. Leaning on my experience with long-term strategic planning, I would like to set an initiative in the school board to take a significantly more focused look at how our district addresses accessibility in long-term planning. We're so busy with fixing a broken system that is not meeting the day-to-day requirements for students and families, like timely responses and transportation to and from school, that we're missing such a huge piece of the accessibility challenge in CPS. We need to develop a long-term plan to make neighborhood schools a viable option for families with students, parents, and community members who are disabled. As a board member, I would advocate for a comprehensive, long-term plan to bring every CPS building up to full ADA compliance. This should include a data-driven approach that prioritizes upgrades for schools in areas with the highest rates of students with disabilities and where there is a history of programs

that serve populations with disabilities, ensuring we focus first on the communities with the greatest need. Additionally, I would explore partnerships with philanthropic organizations and large foundations to supplement funding for ADA improvements. These partnerships could help alleviate some of the financial burden and enable CPS to move forward on these projects faster.

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: How is CPS assessing students for placement in cluster classrooms, and what criteria are being used?

What kinds of students are most likely to end up in restrictive settings?

What is the process for monitoring and reviewing the progress of students in cluster classrooms, and are there pathways for students to transition back to general education settings when appropriate?

What additional funding and community partnerships might be necessary to support the inclusion of more students with disabilities in general education settings?

How did the pandemic impact or reduce progress in boosting inclusion?

Are there specific schools or areas where the increase in cluster classrooms is more prominent?

When in a student's educational journey are cluster classrooms more common?

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

Answer: I would begin by fully staffing and fully funding our schools. SPED/DL teams are already stretched. When a case manager has to split time across schools, students like my godson simply cannot get the full-suite of services required and the IEP transition process takes much longer than it should. There are also so many rules, services, and layers to understand. For parents, knowledge is access. I will create support groups for parents and connect with advocacy organizations across the district so that people can better understand the steps and resources available before having to navigate it. You cannot take advantage of services you do not understand. We need to guide our parents who will



always be our students' best advocates. Once a parent has provided consent, we have a strict legal timeline and schools need to be set up to meet that timeline. I will advocate for a centrally managed grievance system so that schools are given reinforcement (high support and high accountability) when it is clear they are out of compliance.

In addition, we need to address the needs of migrant families with children with disabilities, who are navigating a system while settling in a new country and learning a new language. They are facing so many additional challenges, such as not being able to meet with relevant staff at city-run shelters. We've had a huge increase in enrollment in the last two years and almost nothing done to relieve the burden on our already-strained special education system.