

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2024**Candidate: Jennifer Custer**

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

Answer: I am running for Chicago School Board, because I want my children and all Chicago children to have a superior education. I believe that my experience in education and perspective of actually working with school boards in Illinois makes me uniquely qualified to serve. There are a lot of activists looking to serve on the board, and while their hearts are in the right place, the reality is there are superseding state laws that limit what a school board can and can not do. I hope to bring a professionalism to the board that is desperately needed as CPS engages in this new system. We are facing momentous challenges, and learning on the job is not an option. I have the acumen to address the fiscal, operational, and instructional challenges CPS faces day one.

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

Answer: I do not have personal experience dealing with the CPS special education system, but I do have many years of both teacher and administrative experience dealing with special education outside the CPS system. I have a strong working knowledge of special education law.

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: Part of the reason I think parents are so frustrated is the convoluted nature of special education law, and the processes that schools then follow in regards to special education. It is hard in any system to understand the laws that govern students who need more support in schools, and especially in a system as unique as CPS, it can be especially frustrating. There are many students to serve in the district, with varying levels of needs, and it can be hard to know what to do and who to ask for help.

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: Bringing busses to CPS will be important. I am also interested in how the current plan of bussing hubs will play out, and its effectiveness since its rollout in August. There has been very little update, and I would be curious to see if it has helped get students to school. Looking more closely at bus routes and examining their capacity and effectiveness could also be another step the board could take with the district in helping with this issue.

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: All students should have access to an equal education, no matter who they are. While some students may be limited to the classes they can take, based on the specifications of their IEP or 504, all students should have access to classes that interest them and set them on a path to success. To me, this is also where more support for students is needed in the form of classroom assistance and paraprofessionals to assist students with disabilities in the classroom.

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: This is going to need to be part of a larger look at the buildings and infrastructure throughout CPS. It's going to be important that CPS maintain its buildings properly, and

make them accessible to all students and staff. This is one of my top priorities as a school board member, and one I hope to tackle once sitting on the board.

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 be asking for more information about the student's needs, and how they have been supported thus far. I would be asking for progress monitoring data, and looking at student performance as well. We know many of our students are struggling with COVID learning loss, and is there a way we can support teachers in these least restrictive environments to help differentiate and better serve the needs of some of these students?

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

Answer: One of my top priorities would be first to understand the special education data and demographics of the district, but also to help educate our parents and communities on special education law and their rights and processes.