

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

Answer: I am a CPS parent, so I have a significant stake in the success of the system. I am also an experienced educator. I was previously a special education teacher and then a principal at CPS's Burke Elementary. I choose to become a teacher and then a school leader in large part because of the inequalities I saw in my community and the world. Everyone deserves access to an excellent education, regardless of zip code, regardless of wealth, regardless of anything. I sought, in my small way, to make that a reality. That is a large part of why I became a principal. Often good leadership is what makes the difference between an excellent school and a failing one. When I was appointed principal of Burke the school was on probation - its students were performing far below grade level and its culture was disorganized, unkind, and hostile. By the time I left, the school was no-longer on probation and the school culture was a beautiful mix of high expectations, compassion, care, and joy. I am running for school board because every Chicago student deserves a school like that. I want to take what we know creates schools worthy of their students and apply those lessons to schools across Chicago. This is a pivotal moment in Chicago's history, and I want the best for my daughter and every CPS student.

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

Answer: I interacted with CPS's special education system in two ways. The first was as a former special education teacher. I also interacted through the system as a principal. Burke had a high concentration of special education students for whom the system would often struggle to deliver necessary services. This issue came to a head during Rahm Emmanuel's administration when CPS began to withhold services as a budget balancing mechanism. I fought tooth and nail for my students to get the services they deserved. I understand how CPS treats special education students and I understand just how critical it is that we do much much better.

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: They have every right to be frustrated. CPS makes getting special education services extraordinarily difficult. In too many cases, we engage in a "wait and fail" model before providing students the support and intervention they need. Every CPS school needs

to have strong multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) structures that provide support and intervention from the moment students or parents indicate a need. This, however, cannot be a replacement for timely assessment and placement when needed. Every school must be equipped with a case manager (or multiple if the size of the student body requires) to ensure timely assessment and placement of students with disabilities.

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 must restore bussing for all students who need it - especially our special education students. To accomplish this we need to hire bus drivers. You can't bus kids if there is no one to drive the bus. I view the problem as an eminently solvable labor market issue that can be addressed through tried and true solutions:

- We will simplify the application process. You should be able to apply and schedule an interview within 24 hours. Bus drivers are in demand, we need to hire them as soon as we identify that they are a good fit. Anything less and they may go somewhere else. After they are offered the job, we need to expedite the background check process. Ideally we will be paying them while they go through their pre-onboarding and onboarding processes. Their pay should be contingent on them completing the process and being staffed. By taking on CPS's overly bureaucratic, time consuming, complicated, and expensive application process we can tackle the friction that causes people not to apply and to attrit during onboarding; We need to do everything we can to get these folks in the door.
- We must work to increase the supply of people trained to the job by funding Commercial Driver's Licensure and offering both coursework and the exam in Spanish and English.
- Lastly, we have to make the job attractive. We can do this by offering signing bonuses, raising wages to match or exceed the pay levels in suburban districts, the CTA and private CDL employers.

Instead of viewing bussing as a service that can be cut to make room for other needs, I will treat it as a necessity deserving of time and financial resources.

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 view CPS failure to provide access to CTE and Dual Credit programs as a symptom of CPS larger issues with delivering services for special education students. CPS simply treats special education students and their needs as less valuable and, often, as a cost to be avoided wherever possible. The first step to addressing issues ranging from CTE to the shortage of SECAs is to change how CPS conceptualizes special education students and their needs. If we don't have leadership that views special education services as something to be toggled up and down to better "manage utilization" then we will never have a system that provides special education students everything they need.

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: Accessibility is a necessity not a luxury. The first step to address this issue is for the district to put its money where its mouth is and commit to full accessibility in every building. The second step is to address the core causes of why accessibility retrofits are so expensive for CPS. From one-and-done contracting, to a lack of standardization across contracts, to a failure to embrace design-build, CPS's capital program insists on making choices that drive up the cost of infrastructure improvements. If we can lower the cost for each retrofit, while maintaining the same quality, we can retrofit more schools for the same sum of money.

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: In my career, I have personally witnessed this increase in cluster classrooms; I agree that this is a huge problem. We need to strive for inclusion classrooms as much as we possibly can as often as we possibly can; cluster classrooms should be used only as an absolute last resort. In my personal experience, I have seen kids in cluster classrooms who did not appear as though they needed to be there. My questions are as follows:

- How can we reverse this trend?
- What do we, as a Board, need to provide such that we can put more children with special needs in inclusion classrooms?
- What are the underlying causes of this trend? Is it the needs of students that are shifting, is it the evaluation system? Something else?
- How can we make sure that the system doesn't place kids who would perform well out of cluster classrooms in cluster classrooms?

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

Answer: My top priority is to institute a culture shift in CPS. I want CPS to value special education and our disabled students. I want CPS to provide services because it wants to not because someone is forcing it too. That sort of cultural change starts at the Board level by prioritizing people who care about special education for administrative positions and by making room in the budget for the full delivery of services.