

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

Answer: I'm a recently retired CPS teacher, former CPS parent, and long time advocate for our students and families. As one of the people who worked for over 10 years to make the elected school board a reality, I am running to implement the vision we worked for and which we've heard expressed by families. The most important part of that vision is to make this a more equitable system, where every child has access to a well-resourced, high quality school that they can walk to. Sustainable Community Schools are the embodiment of this move toward more equity. We also heard from parents that they want a board that is transparent, accessible, and takes seriously the input received from parents. That requires us to "bring the board to the people," meaning to regularly be out in our communities, wherever people gather, to hear their ideas and concerns so we can bring that input to the board.

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

Answer: As a classroom teacher, I have had extensive experience with many aspects of the special education system. I have read IEPs, participated in IEP conferences, worked with co-teachers, worked with SECAs, and of course worked with students who have IEPs. In my very small school, I have sometimes had a large percentage of students in my class with IEPs. I have also taught classes of cluster students. My experiences indicate a lot of room for improvement, but I can say that from when I started teaching in 1995 to when I retired just this past June, I have also seen a lot of improvement. I know special education teachers spend a lot of time writing IEPs so that students get the correct amount of assistance, but I have found them to be overly generic and not particularly helpful to me as the general education teacher in terms of determining what I can do to provide the assistance most beneficial to that student, so one area of improvement is to have a more functional IEP format. I was a high school science teacher and I did not mostly have co-teachers with a background in science. It's a lot to ask of someone that they be sufficiently knowledgeable in every subject, and even though it is not required that they be content experts, they have to know enough to be able to adequately assist students. I taught physics, for example, a very challenging subject and frequently I did the modifications myself, so a second area of improvement is to provide resources and encouragement for special education teachers to

get some background in the area they will be co-teaching in for areas like high school math and science. Students come to high school with IEPs written covering math and literacy, but frequently not science and social studies—yet, clearly those subject areas are rooted in math and literacy so it makes sense that help would be needed in those subjects as well, so a collaboration between 8th grade teachers and high school teachers to ensure the IEP will work for high school is a third area of improvement. Students only get minutes in core classes when often they need assistance for an elective class also. Cluster students are often not integrated into classes with other students, even in subject areas where that should be readily possible. Training to work with cluster students is not provided to SECAs who are asked to do many different things that they just have to figure out on the job. So these are other areas that could be improved. On the plus side, when I first started teaching, at the elementary school level, many students who could have been in an inclusion setting were in self-contained classes and that seems much less the case now. And when I started I either didn't have a co-teacher at all or just had one occasionally, and now co-teachers are assigned full time to classes with students whose IEPs say they need that assistance.

**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: The CPS bureaucracy has in many cases not been helpful when it comes to serving students with disabilities, hence the reason for intervention. Families have faced roadblocks in getting their children's needs identified, getting the services their children are entitled to, and getting information in a timely way. Even though problems with busing happen annually, the district does not appear to have made adequate plans to solve them. It's hard not to feel like a second class citizen in these situations, and I have talked to some parents who left CPS because they could not get their child's needs addressed. Schools without a full-time case manager are not able to respond to parents as quickly and many schools are not adequately staffed. SECAs are not given sufficient respect nor training to do the best job possible, so there is less incentive to stay under those conditions and high turnover is not good for students. Transitions from middle school to high school and from high school into post-secondary options fail to take into account the difference between the phases, leaving students with inadequate support. Parents don't always know their rights and don't feel prepared to assert a strong point of view about what their child needs. We need to increase funding for staff—full time case managers, enough special education certified teachers, and enough SECAs—and for professional development that will make a difference for these students and their families. We need to lower the barriers to getting

access to those resources, and turn our system into one where parents are treated as partners and more priority is given to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable students.

**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: The fact that so many students with disabilities are still not receiving the busing services they are legally entitled to is cause for concern, especially because this has become an annual problem. CPS should be getting in front of it. There needs to be work done over the summer with the bus companies to plan out the routes to ensure they are completed and tested with dry runs in advance of the beginning of school. CPS needs to ensure that bus drivers make a decent salary and take steps to reduce the unnecessary obstacles to becoming a bus driver. Bus aides are needed also and work needs to be done to ensure that people who work as bus aides have other part time work options if they need them so that they can take on the job. More opportunities need to be offered to parents to work as bus drivers or bus aides.

**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 am proud to say that the high school I just retired from, Uplift Community High School, is leading the way in ensuring that students with disabilities get opportunities for college level classes. Uplift is an Early College STEAM School and something like 35% of the college credits earned are earned by students with IEPs. This is in stark contrast to schools where only top students are offered the opportunity to take college level classes: proof of what is possible. Many CTE programs are in hands-on areas like culinary arts, agriculture, hair and beauty and can appeal to students who prefer hands-on learning, as

many students do. Getting students the information they need about how to enroll in those programs is one necessity. Students choose high schools without having had the opportunity to see what CTE programs are really about. So it would be helpful to organize a way for students to get a taste of the possibilities and how they lead to careers as they are thinking about high schools. Students with disabilities should of course be included in that process and be given the opportunity to apply to schools based on the career pathways offered and then be able to enroll in those pathways. Because classes that are part of CTE pathways are considered electives, they may not currently have co-teacher support, so that needs to be assessed. Some kind of audit should be done to find out why students do not have equal access because it may not be the same reason at every school, and in order to work toward solutions we need to identify the source of the problem.

**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: Modernizing the buildings is a core part of my platform. I want us to move to educating our students in clean, green, sustainable buildings, and improving accessibility will be a fundamental part of that. We already know that many of our buildings are in need of extensive repair and renovation from leaking roofs to non-functional HVAC. We can start with that knowledge to prioritize those in most need. Then, through a combination of seeking grants, lobbying the state and federal governments to meet their funding obligations to CPS, and additional fundraising, we can begin those renovations. The communities should be involved in the design and planning process, and that would include disabled students and their families. By building accessible design into the larger modernization process, we'll ensure that our buildings are healthy, functional places for everyone.

**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: Uplift has a very large cluster program and I have taught two cluster classes as well as worked with some of the cluster students on the Student Voice Committee and on a project with one of my other classes. I have experienced a few cases where students who were in the cluster program were moved to inclusion classes with co-teachers, but honestly, although I was a general education teacher and not an expert, I think most of the students were correctly placed in cluster. So that is a startling statistic. Here are some questions I would ask:

What changed in the last two years? What was the previous pattern of cluster enrollment over a number of years and how do both the current and previous patterns in Chicago compare to other school districts? What criteria is being used to move children to cluster classrooms? Is this a situation where students are being restricted and isolated because the classrooms in general don't have the support they need, or is it that these students were previously languishing in classrooms and this increase in cluster rooms represents fresh support? What level of modifications and support would be needed for students to be able to function in the general education classroom and is that feasible?

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

Answer: Everything that has been asked about in this questionnaire is a priority, but I think my top priority would be adequate staffing coupled with professional development that includes how co-teachers can work productively together to best serve the students. So that means both general education teachers and special education certified teachers in the same professional development and on the same page, each teacher contributing their expertise to better help the other do their job. One thing that I haven't discussed in another question is the importance of students being empowered to advocate for themselves, beginning at the lower grades. Daily in the classroom and at the IEP meetings as well, students should be encouraged to voice their needs and what methods work best for them.



Student empowerment is a priority also.