

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

Answer: As a K-12 graduate of CPS, a Chicago taxpayer, and a parent of a CPS student with special needs, I am running to represent families like mine who want to remain in the city we love and want quality schools for our children to do so. I am running for my daughter, who came to CPS as a newly adopted, blind English language learner. Despite my experience as a former teacher and attorney, I found the IEP process overwhelming and secured legal counsel for assistance. It occurred to me that if it was that complicated for me, what was it like for other families? So, I'm running too for the families struggling to navigate the byzantine IEP process to secure appropriate services for their student's unique needs. I run for the families that aren't even aware that their kids are entitled to such services.

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

Answer: I have personally experienced the challenges of navigating the special education system in CPS with my daughter, Rachelle, who was born without eyes. Initially, the district recommended that she receive push in and pull out services while in an inclusive classroom for 61-100% of her in school time. Oddly, the school to which she was referred, re-did her IEP (just 2 weeks after the district performed it) and recommended the polar opposite. They recommended that her time be spent with 2 special education students for part of her day, with the rest of the time in an intensive one-on-one instruction with a teacher for the visually impaired. That did not make sense for a newly adopted, newly arrived non-English speaker. I felt I had no option but to send her to the Chicago Lighthouse's preschool for all program.

Today, she is in an inclusive classroom and academically exceeds her sighted peers, but this is only as a result of my advocacy from preschool and beyond. She has attended CPS since kindergarten. Like many other students she endures long bus rides that begin at 6:00 a.m. and has returned home as late as after 5 p.m. Unfortunately, this reality means she spends 10 hours a day on school and travel, and severely limits the time we get to spend together at home.

The IEP process has improved over the years and my daughter actually led her most recent one, which was a joy to witness. But I doubt that the average CPS student has this

experience.

**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 am a former teacher, attorney and CEO, and I was highly overwhelmed by the process. I know the stress this causes for the average family from speaking with friends and parents of other students at my daughter's school. Navigating the IEP process takes time and diligence. Parents receive a lot of information but may not be aware of their rights or the resources to which they are entitled.

The process also yields uneven results. For example, my daughter was offered half day of preschool, but I pushed for full-day. No doubt parents don't know that they can push for more than they're offered. I learned that blind students were offered half day, but deaf and hard of hearing students were offered full day. The inconsistent offerings, the volume of paperwork, the number of people in the sessions can all serve to overwhelm a parent.

Red tape and a lack of communication cause unnecessary barriers to services. When families do actually get an IEP plan, many schools lack the resources to carry it out. As a result, students languish in cluster programs that amount to nothing more than babysitting, or families travel miles from home to a school that can support their students' unique needs.

Parents are frustrated because they are often left to navigate a complex system that denies students true meaningful educational experiences, while parents feel their advocacy goes unanswered. Parents and students should feel empowered through the IEP process, but the reality is many are not.

**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: Every student should have access to free transportation to school. To achieve this, I will call for the creation of a transportation committee on the board that will be tasked with assessing the current bus crisis, working with decision-makers to find solutions. Among the solutions I propose is creating a talent pipeline for CPS alumni and graduating seniors to train for commercial driver licenses (CDL) as apprenticeships. Collaboration with local CDL training providers such as Olive Harvey College could create a new pool of drivers.

There is a severe national bus driver shortage, which is exacerbated by poor bus route logistics. My daughter rides a bus that only has a few students. Not only is this economically unsound, but it's a waste of resources when thousands of families, including general education students, need access to transportation.

I am committed to working alongside community organizations to source other solutions. This initiative is crucial in ensuring that no student misses out on education due to transportation barriers. Empowering parents and leveraging community resources can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students to thrive academically.

**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 had the pleasure of serving on former Mayor Rahm Emanuel's Task Force on Employment and Economic Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities, where I worked with stakeholders to develop recommendations on expanding career access and training for people with disabilities, including students.

One of our main recommendations included creating a job readiness program, shadow opportunities, and an internship program in conjunction with Chicago Public Schools to build a pipeline into city jobs for students with disabilities. This program has yet to be realized. I would advocate for reviving and expanding this effort in collaboration with City Colleges of Chicago so that students with disabilities can receive college credits and certifications just as general education students do. This would increase/improve their odds of securing career pathways.

CTE programs are only available at a small number of schools (12-15 high schools) which compete in a RFP process to offer programming. I would push for collaboration between OODLSS and the CTE team to strategically ensure robust and inclusive workforce development programming that adapts to the unique needs of students with disabilities.

**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: First, I would ask the district to identify the schools with the largest population of students with IEP & 504 plans and the most dire upgrade needs and prioritize facility upgrades at those buildings. I would then push CPS to apply for the plethora of funding available at the federal level while also advocating for accessing TIF surplus funds to pay for the much needed repairs. Recently, CTU & CPS have advocated using TIF funds to help solve next year’s looming budget deficit. These funds would be better spent making capital improvements across the district. TIF funds are allocated for development in divested areas, and the Facilities Master Plan essentially demonstrates that schools with the most need are also located within those areas. Every school should be physically and academically accessible to students, their families and the public.

What I describe above is the initial tranche. I would have the district create a tiered plan focusing on the immediate needs and phasing in the remaining buildings.

**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: Federal requires that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment. To determine whether the district is consistently delivering on this mandate, I would want to know several pieces of data from CPS. The increase in cluster placements is shocking to say the least.

I would first want a review of students' Neuropsych evaluations and learn how many specifically determined that they had to be educated in a cluster setting. How many students are truly incapable of receiving meaningful education in a traditional class?

Next, I would ask what types of disabilities are driving the placements? Is this attributable in whole or in part to new arrivals? Are these placements for students with one severe disability, or are there students who need accommodations for multiple disabilities?

Had they previously been in an inclusive environment, and were they successful in those placements? Did the number of students with disabilities increase, or did the classifications switch throughout the school year? If their classification was switched, what drove the change?

I would also ask who made the recommendation for cluster placement. When I went through the process with my daughter the district recommended that she spend at least 61%—100% of her time with general education students, but the school-level IEP recommended the exact opposite. I would want a clear understanding of where the directive originated.

Did the Director of OODLLS review the data and validate the placements?

Finally, what options were parents given regarding inclusive classrooms? Are parents asking for cluster programs, or is this what the district directs them to do?

The answers to all of these questions help paint a clearer picture of the data and will lead the Board and administrators to make appropriate policy revisions or modify administrative processes.

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

Answer: My priority is to ensure that every school in Chicago has a robust and inclusive special education program in an accessible building that is fully navigable by students, families and stakeholders. It is unacceptable that parents are forced to transport their children across the city simply because their local school cannot accommodate or in some cases chooses not to provide inclusive education.

I will advocate for increased resources and funding to enhance special education services across all Chicago schools. This includes recruiting and retaining qualified special education teachers, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring access to assistive technologies and accommodations for students and educators.

We must build capacity for inclusive classrooms where special needs students learn alongside their peers as much as practicable. To do this we need more teachers with special education credentials and more, better-trained SECAs. (Perhaps now that their wages have increased, we'll see more interest in these roles). We also need a full audit and searching examination of special education service provision—its strengths and shortcomings, coupled with a strategic plan to address the gaps. Money is but one of the issues, the other is political will and leadership. With the new Director of ODLSS, I'm hopeful for change. Teachers and principals need additional training and accountability with regards to special needs students. There is also a need for parent education. The current IEP process is burdensome and inaccessible for many parents. We need to do more to help them understand their rights and responsibilities.

I am committed to promoting inclusivity and accessibility in our schools. This involves creating environments where students with disabilities feel welcomed and supported, and where their educational experiences are fully integrated into the school community.