

**Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2024****Candidate: Lanetta Thomas**

**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 Lanetta Thomas, and I am running for the Chicago Board of Education because I am committed to advocating for all students, especially those who face challenges in accessing a quality education. As a neurodivergent individual and a parent of two children in Special Education, I understand firsthand the frustrations families face in navigating the system. My goal is to ensure that CPS provides the resources and equitable support every student deserves to thrive.

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

Answer: Yes, I have direct experience with the special education system as a parent. Navigating the system for my children has been challenging, with delays in services and a constant need to advocate for their rights. This personal experience drives my commitment to ensuring no parent has to fight so hard for their child's education.

**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 are frustrated because the system is often slow to respond, communication is lacking, and securing services requires constant advocacy. These barriers make an already difficult process even harder, leaving families feeling unsupported and overwhelmed.

**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: To address transportation delays, I will push for a dedicated task force within CPS that monitors and resolves routing issues in real-time. This team would work closely with transportation providers and families, ensuring students with disabilities have timely and reliable transportation to school.

**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: For equal access to career training, I will advocate for several specific actions to ensure that students with disabilities receive the necessary support to thrive in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. First, I will push for every high school to have a dedicated CTE counselor or transition specialist who focuses on connecting special education students with CTE opportunities. These counselors would provide individualized guidance, ensuring students are aware of available programs and understand how to participate. I will also advocate for the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in CTE classrooms, making sure that tools, resources, and curriculum materials are accessible to all students, accommodating diverse learning styles with options such as audio, visual, and tactile formats.

Furthermore, each student enrolled in CTE programs should have a customized plan that outlines specific accommodations, whether that includes modified equipment, extended task time, or one-on-one support. I will push for schools to work closely with special education staff and CTE instructors to develop and implement these plans effectively. To ensure accountability, I will advocate for CPS to collect and publicly report data on the participation and outcomes of students with disabilities in CTE programs. By tracking this data, we can identify and address barriers to equitable participation.

Additionally, I will work to establish partnerships with local businesses to provide inclusive internships, allowing students with disabilities to gain real-world experience that aligns with their training. These internships would be designed to support students' specific needs and help prepare them for employment after graduation. Finally, I will advocate for mentorship programs that connect CTE students with industry professionals and educators to offer guidance and ongoing support throughout their training and into their careers. This network will help students develop not only skills but also confidence and professional connections. Through these actions, I aim to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to career training opportunities and the necessary support to succeed.

**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: For building accessibility, I would advocate for several key actions as a board member. First, I would push for the creation of a CPS Accessibility Task Force composed of architects, disability advocates, parents, and CPS staff to evaluate all school buildings and identify specific accessibility issues. This task force would focus on schools in underserved communities and those with a high number of students and staff with disabilities. In addition, I would advocate for a district-wide audit of CPS facilities to assess their compliance with ADA standards. This audit would include identifying physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, bathrooms, elevators, and classrooms, with the results made public to inform a strategic roadmap for upgrades.

Based on the audit, I would push for a multi-year accessibility upgrade plan that phases improvements over time, beginning with the most urgent needs. This plan would set clear deadlines for each phase and allow for an organized rollout of accessibility improvements. I would also work with the district to secure dedicated funding for these upgrades by advocating for state and federal grants, capital bonds, and public-private partnerships. Ensuring that a portion of the CPS Facilities budget is reserved solely for accessibility upgrades would help prevent delays and guarantee prioritization of these projects.

While waiting for long-term renovations, I would advocate for temporary solutions like portable ramps, stairlifts, and accessible modular classrooms to immediately address the needs of students and staff with disabilities. Furthermore, I would push for all future school construction and renovations to follow universal design principles, ensuring new schools are fully accessible from the start, including features like ramps, elevators, and sensory-friendly signage and lighting. Finally, I would ensure CPS tracks progress on accessibility upgrades and regularly reports on the status of each school’s compliance with ADA standards. This data should be publicly available, allowing families and the community to hold the district accountable for its commitments. These actions will ensure a concrete, transparent, and accountable approach to making CPS facilities fully accessible, benefiting students, teachers, parents, and the broader community.

**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: For restrictive placements, I propose several key actions and resolutions to address the increase in students placed in restrictive settings. First, I will request a comprehensive review of the data related to these placements, examining the number of students in restrictive environments, the reasons for their placement, and any disparities by race, disability type, or socioeconomic status. Additionally, we will assess the availability of support services in general education settings, such as specialized teachers, aides, and assistive technologies. This data will help determine whether restrictive placements are due to a lack of resources in general education or if the current environment genuinely cannot meet students' needs.

If the data reveals that students are placed in restrictive settings because of insufficient resources in general education, I will advocate for increasing the number of special education teachers and aides, expanding co-teaching models where general and special education teachers collaborate, and providing professional development for staff on inclusive practices and differentiated instruction. These supports will help create a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities. I will also push for a district-wide review of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students in cluster programs, ensuring that restrictive placements are truly necessary and that students receive all accommodations they are entitled to. Progress will be regularly monitored, and transitions to less restrictive settings will be prioritized.

For students already in restrictive placements, I will advocate for individualized transition plans that outline a clear pathway back to general education settings where appropriate. These plans will include measurable goals and the necessary supports, such as additional aides, teacher training, or access to assistive technology, and will be regularly assessed to ensure readiness for inclusion. Furthermore, I will propose the creation of an Inclusion Resource Center within CPS to provide schools with expertise on how to implement inclusive practices, offer ongoing staff training, and serve as a hub for best practices and adaptive resources.

To ensure accountability, I will push for schools to report on the number of restrictive placements and justify why these placements are necessary. The district will set specific targets for reducing restrictive placements over time, and regular audits will be conducted to monitor progress. Schools that fail to meet inclusion standards will face corrective actions. Through these targeted supports, transparent monitoring, and accountability measures, CPS can move toward more meaningful inclusion, allowing all students to thrive in the least restrictive environment possible.

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

Answer: For improving access, my top priority is to ensure that students with disabilities are fully included in all aspects of their educational experience, both academically and socially. I will advocate for their inclusion in core and elective classes such as sex education, physical education, and the arts, allowing them to learn alongside their peers rather than being segregated. For example, in sex education, students with disabilities should receive age-appropriate instruction in the same classroom with necessary accommodations like visual aids, simplified language, or individualized support. Additionally, I will push for the implementation of co-teaching models where both general and special education teachers collaborate in the classroom. This approach allows students with disabilities to remain in general education settings while receiving the tailored support they need, applied across subjects and extracurricular activities.

Social inclusion is equally important, so I will work to ensure students with disabilities are fully integrated into school activities, clubs, and events. I will advocate for peer mentorship programs that pair general education students with students with disabilities to foster social integration and teamwork. To ensure that students' needs are continually met, I will push for regular progress monitoring by reviewing each student's IEP at least twice a year. This will allow for timely adjustments to accommodations and services, ensuring that inclusion efforts are both personalized and effective.

Furthermore, all teachers will need to undergo professional development to better understand and implement inclusive practices, including differentiated instruction and behavior management. This training will ensure that every teacher is equipped to accommodate diverse learners in their classrooms. To maintain accountability, I will advocate for every school to develop an inclusion plan, monitored and evaluated yearly, to demonstrate how they are working toward the full inclusion of students with disabilities in



general education settings. Schools will be held accountable to ensure that no student is unnecessarily isolated.

Through these actions, I aim to create a CPS where every student, regardless of ability, can thrive in an inclusive environment that supports their individual needs while allowing them to learn, grow, and socialize alongside their peers.