

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

Answer: I'm running because I am a mom, an activist, and a public servant. I know that I am the best candidate to represent District 2 on Chicago's Elected School Board. I am the only candidate running in District 2 who has children currently enrolled in CPS. What sets my candidacy apart even further is my intentional choice to opt-in to living in, learning from, and listening to one of the most diverse communities in the city; parenting a child with an IEP as a parent with disabilities; decades of advocacy in Chicago; and extensive experience navigating city bureaucracy throughout my professional career. There has never been a person with disabilities sitting on the Chicago Board of Education. It is absolutely essential that someone with direct, lived experience have a seat at the table where decisions are made. The fact that I am a person with disabilities, parenting a child with disabilities, and have been on the ground, in our schools, fighting for our kids means I will bring experience to public education that has never been valued by our leaders. Other city boards have had dedicated disability seats for decades, beginning with the CTA under Mayor Harold Washington's administration. Diversity without disability is not diversity, full stop.

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

Answer: I am a woman with disabilities, I have a child with disabilities, and I work as a volunteer advocate for families of children with disabilities across CPS - helping them understand their rights, joining them for IEP meetings to advocate on behalf of their children, and using every opportunity available to move disability justice forward in Chicago Public Schools.

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: For students with disabilities in Chicago Public Schools, the inadequate funding from the federal, state, and local levels certainly plays a role in why it is so difficult to navigate the system and to secure even the most basic accommodations. However, I believe it is a much larger issue than just resource allocation.

CPS operates through a fundamentally ableist lens, utilizing deficit frameworks and aggressive, adversarial opposition to fulfilling their commitments to students with

disabilities. The district must entirely shift the culture at the central office and school levels, as well as the practices they employ when it comes to serving students with disabilities.

People with disabilities do not have deficits. We are forced to function within systems and spaces that have deficits. And yet, CPS has the largest legal team of any city department or sister agency. The central function of this team is to maintain the minimum threshold for legal compliance without actually providing services or ensuring that every child can learn. This is deeply offensive and completely unacceptable. While protecting municipalities from litigation can and should be one of their roles, we must demand that internal teams work through a comprehensive, collaborative, and long-term reimagining of their central purpose.

To be frank, there is not a single thing about special education in CPS that I would keep with the exception of the recent name change to the Office 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: As a Board member I will work closely with various stakeholders, including CPS Parents for Buses (who have proposed numerous well researched and concrete solutions) who I am proud to be endorsed by, to build a coalition to solve this issue. I would invite the union(s) who work with and for school bus drivers to identify long term solutions, understand the workforce pipeline, and address any systemic barriers to ensuring long-term strategies. I would also reach out to my network both in Chicago and other cities to understand how districts have successfully solved this problem in the past and to explore municipal policies that could be modeled here going forward.

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: As a Board member, I would advocate for expanding and improving Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs within CPS to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have equal access to career readiness opportunities. This must involve intentional reforms to remove barriers that prevent disabled students from fully participating in these programs. I support expanding CTE offerings across all schools and ensuring that every high school student has access to pathways in trades like carpentry, electrical work, agriculture, HVAC, and welding. I also believe that the expansion of and access to dual credit programs and the exposure to areas like law, web development, public safety, and business is critical to achieving meaningful equity in education and beyond. Every student, regardless of geography, race, or economic background, should have access to these programs, along with college counseling services and support for post-secondary applications.

The fact of the matter is that access to education and programs like CTE, dual credit, and even selective enrollment high schools, is driven by the same inequities we see across every point of intersection with marginalized identity. For example, disabled students are underrepresented in selective enrollment schools and other advanced programs. CPS data shows that only 3% of students with disabilities attend selective enrollment schools, far below what equitable representation would require. A meaningful shift toward equity must include improving access for students with disabilities to every educational opportunity, from selective programs to career training.

Finally, as someone who lives with disabilities, I believe lived experience matters. I am excited by the opportunity to bring this perspective to the Chicago School Board and advocate for comprehensive systems change that ensures all students, especially those with disabilities, can fully realize their potential through access to high-quality educational and career pathways.

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: The arbitrary and discretionary allocation of capital budget investments at the district level must be reformed. A full database of capital investments should be publicly available on the CPS website and all future decisions should be accompanied by a methodology for those decisions. Lastly, program-related new investments, like building a STEM Lab in a school building, should not be directed from the facilities budgets. Furthermore, CPS and the Board should also aggressively pursue TIF funds to maximize their capital budget revenue and ensure a more equitable use of those funds through dedicated investments in CPS facilities.

As a member of the Board of Education, I will support and advocate for prioritizing the most urgent capital investments including accessibility for people with disabilities.

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 think that we need to see an independent audit, not only of CPS finances but also of practices and procedures. The public and the Board have a right to see what methodology is currently used to dictate LRE 1, 2, or 3 IEPs, how and why students are moved out of GenEd and into cluster programs and that data MUST be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income, language, and geography to understand whether the application of our processes have any disproportionate negative impacts in practice. I would also propose robust parent, student, and special education team engagement that includes surveys, focus groups, local in-person meetings, and whatever other methods that ensure participation is available to all relevant stakeholders.

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

Answer: Most of our schools begin each year with a dramatically understaffed special education team - this is a huge barrier to their ability to identify, assess, evaluate, establish 504s and IEPs, and secure appropriate placements when applicable.

This issue is more prevalent at chronically under-resourced neighborhood schools in Black and brown, lower income communities who are not able to compensate for funding shortages by in-filling funds from other sources. This issue could be easily addressed by correcting a flaw in the funding allocation policy for special education staff at the school level.

Every year, the district determines SPED funding by looking at the number of students with IEPs + the number of minutes and subtracts the total number of outgoing students with IEPs. For example, at Hibbard, the district will subtract the number of IEPs in the graduating class of 6th graders.

The district does not, however, use any projection to determine the estimated number of incoming students with IEPs and/or the number of students that will be identified as needing IEPs (generally in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades).

The result of this approach means our school loses at least 3 three SPED staff positions and between .5 - 1.5 FTE case managers in our new budget. Of course, eventually, we regain that funding loss at the mid-year re-allocation and scramble to hire new staff, after being understaffed for the first half of the year.

This process repeats itself, year over year, without fail. I will work to amend the existing allocation methodology and address this issue without requiring new monies or related cuts to other budget areas.