

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Carlos Rivas****District: 3b****Question 1:**

In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Answer:

I am Carlos Rivas, the current elected member of the Chicago Board of Education representing District 3B. I began my career in education at Lowell Elementary School, the same neighborhood school where I graduated eighth grade, and later worked as a teacher, counselor, and family engagement professional. I am running for reelection because every student deserves access to a high-quality education and a school that serves as a strong source of support for students and families. My priorities include strengthening neighborhood schools, improving student outcomes, increasing transparency and accountability, expanding supports for students and families, and ensuring parents, educators, students, and communities have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their schools.

Question 2:

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 navigating special education can be complicated, time-consuming, and too often requires parents to constantly advocate for services their children are already entitled to receive. As a former teacher and counselor, I participated in IEP meetings and worked with case managers, clinicians, and other educators to support students with disabilities, so I understand how important clear communication and consistent implementation are. Families need to know what services their child should receive, who is responsible for providing them, and what they can do when those services are not being delivered. CPS must make the process easier to navigate, improve communication with families, address staffing shortages, and ensure students actually receive the services required by their IEPs.

Background

Currently, over 60% 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.

Question 3:

What steps should the district take to address a lack of accessibility in its buildings?

Answer:

CPS needs a comprehensive and transparent accessibility plan with clear priorities, timelines, and dedicated funding. Too many students, parents, educators, and community members still face barriers simply entering or fully participating in their neighborhood schools. The district should conduct updated accessibility assessments, identify the buildings with the most urgent needs, incorporate accessibility improvements into capital planning, and publicly report its progress. Accessibility must also mean more than entrances and elevators. Classrooms, bathrooms, playgrounds, auditoriums, technology, and other school spaces must be accessible so that people with disabilities can fully participate in school life.

Background:

A core tenet of The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is “the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.”

Despite this, CPS has a history of separating students with disabilities from their peers instead of including them in general education classrooms. A 1998 court settlement (Corey H.) required CPS to move toward *inclusion*, meaning students with disabilities should be taught alongside their non-disabled peers whenever they can make meaningful progress that way, rather than being placed in separate, more restrictive settings.

Since 2023, the number of “cluster classrooms” (separate, self-contained classrooms specifically for students with disabilities, apart from general education) has increased by over 250%.

Question 4:

As a board member, what questions would you ask to understand why the district is placing so many more students in these separate classrooms instead of general education settings?

Answer:

The increase in cluster classrooms deserves careful review, particularly because students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs. I would want the district to explain what is driving the increase, whether placements are based on

individual student needs, and whether staffing shortages or insufficient supports in general education classrooms are influencing placement decisions. I would also ask for data broken down by disability, race, school, and neighborhood; information about what supports were attempted before a more restrictive placement was recommended; and evidence showing whether students in cluster programs are receiving appropriate academic and social opportunities. Families, educators, clinicians, and students themselves should also be part of that conversation.

Question 5:

In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of expanding cluster programming for students?

Answer:

Cluster programs can provide smaller settings, specialized instruction, and concentrated supports that may be appropriate for some students based on their individual needs. However, they should not become the default response when a school lacks the staffing or resources necessary to support a student in a general education setting. Expanding cluster programming without sufficient oversight could unnecessarily separate students with disabilities from their peers and limit their access to the full academic and social experience of their school. The focus should always remain on the individual student and providing the services and accommodations necessary for that student to make meaningful progress in the least restrictive environment possible.

Background

Federal law allows certain students with intellectual disabilities to stay in school until they are 22. Ages 18-22 are known as the *transition years* where students focus on employment and independent living skills. Many students and families fear the “[disability cliff](#),” or lack of resources and career support that comes when students age out of the school system at the age of 22.

Question 6:

What can be done to ensure students with disabilities are well equipped for success in their career and lives after graduation?

Answer:

Transition planning should begin well before a student reaches the end of their time in CPS and should be built around that student’s individual goals, strengths, and interests. CPS should strengthen connections with employers, community colleges, universities, apprenticeship and workforce programs, disability service organizations, and other community partners so students have clear pathways to employment, continued education, and independent living. Students should also have greater access to work-based learning, career and technical education, financial literacy, transportation training, and other practical skills. Families need help navigating adult services before their child leaves CPS so that turning 22 does not result in an abrupt loss of support.

Background

According to the 2024-25 [Illinois State Report Card](#), 42% of CPS students overall were proficient in English language arts and 27% in math on the state test. Among students with IEPs (formal plans for students with disabilities), only 10.5% were proficient in ELA and 7.1% in math.

Question 7:

What is your top priority for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities in CPS?

Answer:

My top priority would be ensuring students with disabilities have the qualified staff, services, accommodations, and high-quality instruction required for them to make meaningful academic progress. Improving outcomes requires addressing shortages of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, clinicians, and related-service providers while also giving general education teachers the training and resources necessary to support students with disabilities. CPS should closely monitor whether IEP services are actually being delivered, use student outcome data to identify where additional support is needed, and hold itself accountable when students are not receiving what they need to succeed.