

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Connie Anderson****District: 10b****Question 1:**

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

Answer:

I did not come up through the ranks of the political establishment. As a community leader, CPS high school robotics coach, and a small business owner, my objective is to fight for our children, their teachers and for better schools to strengthen our community. With fully funded schools and staffing for special education services, Hands-on job training and career and technical education classes, art/music and healthy, safe and modern school facilities, we can build a community that can succeed and thrive. If we come together, we can create a brighter future for 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 CPS special education can feel like a system they have to fight rather than a system designed to support them. Parents are often forced to become advocates, case managers, and experts in special education law just to ensure their child receives services they are entitled to.

The frustration is compounded when there are staffing shortages, inconsistent implementation of IEPs, delays in evaluations or services, and poor communication between schools and families. No parent should have to repeatedly advocate for their child to receive the support already identified as necessary.

As a School Board Member, I believe CPS must put families at the center of decision-making, fully fund Special Education, strengthen staffing and training, improve accountability for IEP implementation, and make the system easier for parents to navigate. Parents should not have to fight the system to get their children the education they deserve.

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:

Families should not have to choose between their neighborhood school and a school their child can physically access. When more than half of CPS buildings are not fully accessible, we are telling students with disabilities—and disabled parents, teachers, and community members—that they are not equally welcome in their own schools.

CPS needs a clear, funded, and measurable accessibility roadmap rather than treating accessibility as an issue to address whenever a building is renovated.

- *Comprehensive accessibility audit of every CPS facility
- *Clear priorities, timelines, and dedicated funding
- *Families, students with disabilities, educators, and disability advocates must have a meaningful voice in determining priorities and evaluating completed projects.

Every student deserves access to a safe, healthy, modern neighborhood school, and accessibility must be part of that promise.

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:

- *What has changed since 2023 that has resulted in such a significant increase in cluster classrooms?
- *How many students are being placed in cluster classrooms, and what are the specific reasons for those placements?
- *Are students being placed in more restrictive settings because of their individual IEP needs, or because schools lack the staffing, training, related services, or resources necessary to successfully support inclusion?
- *How consistently are IEP teams considering general education with appropriate supports before recommending a more restrictive placement?
- *What data does CPS collect on students who move from general education to cluster classrooms, and who is monitoring whether those placements are actually improving student outcomes?
- *Are there differences in cluster-classroom placement rates by school, neighborhood, race, disability category, or socioeconomic status? If so, why?
- *What investments in special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related-service providers, assistive technology, and professional development would allow more students to participate meaningfully in general education classrooms?
- *How are parents and students being included in placement decisions, and what happens when a family disagrees with the recommended placement?
- *What is CPS's measurable plan to strengthen inclusive education while ensuring that students who genuinely need specialized settings receive them?

Question 5:

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

Answer:

In my view, cluster programming can be an important option, but it should never become a default placement or a substitute for true inclusion. The right question is not whether CPS should have cluster classrooms—it is whether each student is receiving the services and learning environment that best meets their individual needs.

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:

CPS should strengthen transition planning beginning in middle school and ensure that every student’s IEP includes meaningful, individualized goals for employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation. Families should understand the plan, the resources available to them, and what will happen after graduation.

We also need stronger partnerships with employers, colleges, vocational programs, workforce organizations, and community-based service providers so students gain real-world work experience, job training, internships, and independent-living skills before they leave CPS.

Most importantly, CPS must address the gaps that families experience during the transition from school-based services to adult services. The district should have dedicated transition coordinators who help families navigate agencies and connect students to employment, benefits, transportation, housing, and continuing education before graduation.

As a School Board Member, I would push for measurable transition outcomes and accountability—including tracking employment, postsecondary enrollment, and independent-living outcomes after graduation.

Our responsibility does not end when a student receives a diploma. Success means giving every young person the skills, connections, confidence, and support to build a meaningful life after CPS. We must make sure the transition years are a bridge to opportunity—not a cliff.

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 is to close the achievement gap for students with disabilities by fully funding and strengthening Special Education services across CPS.

The numbers are unacceptable. When only a small percentage of students with IEPs are meeting state standards, we have to ask whether students are receiving the instruction, interventions, accommodations, staffing, and resources they need to succeed—not simply place the blame on the students or their families.

I would focus on three things: adequate staffing, strong instruction, and accountability. CPS must recruit and retain highly qualified special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related-service providers, and specialists. We must provide educators with meaningful professional development and the resources to implement IEPs effectively. And we need transparent accountability to ensure services are actually being delivered.

I also believe we must strengthen inclusive education and make sure students with disabilities have access to rigorous general education opportunities and their nondisabled peers whenever appropriate, while maintaining specialized settings when a student genuinely needs them.

Most importantly, parents must be partners—not people who have to fight the system to get their child what they are entitled to receive. We need to listen to families, use data to identify where students are falling behind, and invest resources where the need is greatest.

Every child can learn and deserves the opportunity to thrive. Our responsibility as a district is to remove the barriers standing in their way.