

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Debby Pope****District: 2b****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 a retired high school bilingual teacher; I taught at underfunded neighborhood high schools. I have spent decades in the social justice, women's rights and anti-war movements. As a parent, teacher, union activist and now, as a Board member, I have fought to ensure that our schools are safe, well-funded, and that they meet the needs of all of our students. My children went to CPS from pre-k-12 and my granddaughter is a second grader with a 504 plan. I pledge to fight for full funding so that our schools can provide all students with the supports and services they need to reach their maximum potential.

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:

I think that poor communication from the district and from case managers is one major factor. Whether it is linguistic barriers, lack of easy-to-understand information about their child's rights or, in all too many cases, inadequate staffing in our schools, parents face many obstacles in getting the services their children need and deserve. I think that there is also, too often, an attitude that the 'expert' knows best when, in reality, the parent or guardian is the real expert on their child's behavior/issues.

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:

Fighting for additional capital funding is one crucial step. We cannot have a scarcity mindset where leaking roofs and outdated heating systems are pitted against ramps and elevators. CPS schools average over 85 years old. If they are to continue to serve our students, we need to retrofit them to be accessible to all students and families. It would be a big step forward if more students could attend their neighborhood schools and not have to spend long hours riding a bus to accessible buildings.

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:

I am very concerned about the significant increase in cluster classrooms, particularly this year. The district has created over 60 new cluster classrooms. While a cluster setting is the LRE for some students, many students can benefit from being in inclusion settings for at least a part of their school day. Having worked as a general education teacher with special education co-teachers, I believe that this model can serve a wide range of students with disabilities, especially with the support of SECA's and RSP's.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

The cons are, as I mentioned above, students that could benefit from inclusion are not included. This has both academic and, perhaps even more so, social/emotional impacts on these children. It also deprives their gen ed peers from the opportunity to get to know and interact with their peers who are separated into cluster classrooms.

The possible benefit is that more children will get the help and support they need in smaller classrooms where teaching can be more 'customized' to meet their individual needs. In some cases, it may bring them to schools that have a wider range of services available in the building such as PT, OT and speech.

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:

These transitional years are critical in providing students with disabilities life skills, career training etc. Additional coordination, bridge-building and work with employers, unions, community colleges and other institutions that can provide career paths and/or training for these older students is vital. These students need opportunities to try out various vocational prospects with ongoing support and CPS needs to train and support SPED staff in the best ways to provide help and support for our older students.

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:

I think additional training and time for staff in writing quality individualized (not cookie-cutter) IEP's would be one step. Working to communicate better with, and provide support for parents and caregivers, would be another.