

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Dr. Angel Alvarez****District: 4a****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 running for the CPS Board the parent of a child with a disability, a former CPS student, and president of the CPS Office for Students with Disabilities Family Advisory Board. For the past decade, I have advocated for CPS families. I served on two Local School Councils, was a leader in CPS's Parent Advisory Council, and created a district-wide survey of families of students with disabilities that went further than what the State currently collects. That work has extended to gifted education, English language learners, students experiencing homelessness, and fiscal accountability because I believe the same failures of identification, transparency, and follow-through show up across all of these areas. I'm running because CPS needs a Board members who has done this advocacy from the outside and knows exactly where the system breaks down.

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 know why, because I'm one of them. I have filed complaints against CPS for these failures. CPS has systemic problems both identifying and serving students with disabilities. It takes CPS too long to identify children with disabilities because the district is not adhering to Child Find screening requirements, which mandate identification by age five. Moreover, the IEP process is overly bureaucratic and, at times, adversarial. I understand special education not just as a parent, but as someone who served on CPS's Parent Advisory Council, where I raised concerns that went unaddressed before the council was disbanded. I now serve as president of CPS's OSD Family Advisory Board, where I reformed meeting practices to provide rapid response to parent concerns. I have shared my research into disparities students with disabilities face in CPS with the Board and conducted a district-wide survey of families of students with disabilities that had a higher response rate than the survey conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education. I know parents are frustrated by how long the IEP process takes, the

adequacy of accommodations, and the lack of compliance with IEPs are not followed. To address this, I have proposed universal screening, the incorporation of SMART goals in every IEP, the use of research-based interventions, and the need to incorporate best practices and mechanisms of accountability across all our schools.

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 has over \$14 billion in deferred maintenance costs and no real strategy to make its buildings safe and accessible for all students. I attended those Facilities Master Plan meetings. Simply saying accessibility is a priority with no specific funding or timeline is a talking point, not a strategy. The district needs to stop hiding behind the excuse that its buildings are old and instead publish exactly which schools are inaccessible, why, the estimated costs to fix them, and when this will be done. That means both long-term capital plan to fix the architecture itself, and a rapid-response system so that when something like an automatic door or elevator breaks, it gets fixed in days, not months. These issues are not just about our students, it impacts teachers and staff with disabilities, parents with disabilities who should be able to attend school parent-teacher conferences, and community members who should be able to access schools when they are polling places. CPS has had this data for years. Failure to act isn't an oversight, it's a choice, and costs us more the longer we wait.

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 will ask the same questions I have been asking. I am very familiar with the Corey H. settlement and have referenced it in my complaints against CPS. I also think the Endrew F decision requiring a "more than de minimis" educational benefit is more applicable when evaluating the appropriateness of cluster programs.

As president of the OSD Family Advisory Board, one of my stated priorities was to investigate "The operation of cluster programs within CPS, the changes over the years, and the outcome of students." I demanded that CPS share the exact number of children in cluster programs and asked why the numbers are ~3x higher than would be expected based on their stated criteria. I asked about their problems with transportation. I asked about the reporting of outcomes for students in cluster programs to see if they are actually serving the best interest of the students. I will continue to ask tough questions and continue to perform my own research because CPS is not living up to the standards our children deserve.

As a board member, I would ask the questions CPS has refused to fully answer so far. Why are cluster placements roughly three times higher than the district's own stated criteria would predict? Is the expansion of cluster programs being driven by staff shortages, funding incentives, principals defaulting to the easiest rather than least restrictive one, or other factors? What happens to a student's access to transportation, extracurriculars, and grade-level peers once they are placed in a cluster classroom, and is anyone tracking whether they ever transition back? Are we measuring outcomes at all? Under Endrew F., a placement has to provide more than a de minimum educational benefit, so CPS should have to show its data, not just intentions (as I have argued in complaints filed with the State). I've already been asking these questions as president of the OSD FAB, where I demanded exact enrollment numbers and pushed on transportation and outcome reporting. I'm familiar with the Corey H. settlement, Endrew F., and other case law because I've had to be. CPS won't answer these questions or truly address these problems unless someone with legal knowledge and a board seat forces them to. I'm the best person to do that.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

The strongest argument for cluster programs is a clinical one: just as patients would benefit from specialty care centers, children with disabilities would benefit from an environment designed around their needs, specialized equipment, educational resources, and well-trained teachers and staff who are experts in their condition. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who thrive in these settings and go on to Gallaudet or NTID are read examples of this working well. What gets discussed less is the community these students build with peers who share their experience. But cluster programs are not a panacea, and the rapid expansion of them comes with real costs.

The economic argument can never be what drives placement. Like policies for every child CPS should make, it must be in the best interest of the student, full stop. Cluster placement removes children from general education, limits their interactions with peers, and denies their non-disabled classmates the chance to learn alongside them. This risks stigmatizing disability rather than normalizing it. Worse, the rapid expansion of cluster programs in CPS creates a moral hazard: it rewards schools for choosing the placement that's easiest to staff, not the one that's always the least restrictive or provides the best environment for the child, and the burden of a wrong placement falls entirely on the student and family, not the school or district. Moreover, it ignores externalities including the burden that transportation places on the family and the unsustainable way that CPS manages placement. That's why I pushed for clearer, stricter guidelines on when cluster placement is appropriate, and for an informed consent standard so families understand exactly what they're agreeing to, including the pros and cons, before a child is placed.

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:

The disability cliff is real and endangers the livelihood of our students with disabilities when they do not have adequate support after graduation. The 18-22 transition years are a bridge as our children reach adulthood and must be treated as such, instead of an afterthought when the student is nearing graduation. Students and families must be taught about services through the Illinois' Division of Rehabilitation Services, transitioning into adult home and community-based service waivers, connecting with non-profit support groups, and entering the job market. Those connections have to start years before graduation, not the final IEP meeting before it.

That means earlier identification, accommodations students are actually owed, and IEPs built with an eye toward an uncertain future. That means CPS can't just recommend SMART goals, but must enforce their use and build best practices that keep improving. During the transition years, students need real work experiences, not as a fallback option for students who won't go to college, but as a legitimate and valuable path for any student with the talent and desire for it. Social-emotional learning also needs to extend beyond the classroom into real-world scenarios these students will actually face as adults. We have to prepare students for a job market that is changing quickly, as AI reshapes which career paths remain viable, students with disabilities need adaptable, diverse skills, not just a single narrow track that may not exist by the time they graduate. This problem is not limited to special education, but the need for reform is greater with our students. CPS can't do it alone. We have to actively push the city's workforce and youth-employment agencies to build real pathways for students with disabilities, and a board member should be the one holding both sides accountable for building it. If we do, when our children approach the cliff, they will soar.

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 the most effective means of improving student outcomes: early identification and early intervention for students with disabilities. That's why I called for university screening to correct for CPS's lack of compliance with Child Find. This would empower families with the information they need to advocate for better accommodations and support their child's needs at home. But identification means nothing if CPS doesn't know what happens next. The district does not systematically investigate outcomes for students with disabilities, has not established best practices for their instruction, and does not track whether the curriculum it uses actually works for our students. This is highlighted with the rapid growth of cluster programs that lack sufficient evidence that they are in the best interest of the students who are placed. I've done some of this work myself: I called out CPS for not knowing what curriculum its own schools use for not requiring evidence-based outcomes. I've found outcomes for students vary significantly by school, proof that CPS could identify and replicate what works if it chose to look. And identification has to lead somewhere: I've shown that students with disabilities are systematically kept out of selective enrollment schools and gifted programs.



Dr. Angel Alvarez

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CPS needs to embrace the Endrew F. standard- more than de minimus progress- when evaluating whether these students are actually being served, not just placed. And I want to be clear about what's coming: when the state testing data is reported, proficiency rates for students with disabilities will show an increase from SY24. That will not be because of improved instruction or better support. It is largely because the State lowered its proficiency standards and because CPS has started identifying higher-functioning students with disabilities who were previously going without accommodations. The Board should not accept this as evidence of progress. Demand that policies focus on what's in the best interest of students and outcomes will improve for all students, especially those with disabilities.