

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Ellen Rosenfeld****District: 4b****Question 1:**

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

Answer:

I'm Ellen Rosenfeld, an elected member of the Chicago Board of Education representing District 4. For nearly three decades, I've worked in and with CPS as a classroom teacher, family and community engagement specialist, and now as a board member. I understand what students and families actually need because I've lived it. Over the past two years on the Board, I've voted for fiscal responsibility, fiscal stewardship, student-centered governance, and independence from outside pressure. I voted against high-interest loans, wasteful spending, and policies that harm working families. I've visited schools constantly, held monthly office hours, and brought student and family voices to board decisions. I'm running for a full four-year term because we're just getting started. We have a \$734 million budget deficit that requires sustained work. We have declining enrollment that demands honest conversations. We have students who deserve better resources and outcomes in reading and math. I believe in public education. I lead by example; my kids went to CPS schools. I'm ready to do the hard work of the next four years to build a stronger, more equitable, more fiscally responsible school system for all 320,000 CPS students.

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 the system is broken in ways that hurt their kids. After years working with families as a FACE specialist and now on the board, I hear the same complaints: evaluations take forever; months go by while families wait for answers about their child's needs. IEP meetings happen, but services promised in those meetings don't actually get delivered with consistency. Communication can be poor; families don't know their rights, don't understand what services are available, and don't know who to call when things go wrong.

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:

The district must adopt and implement a concrete accessibility roadmap with timelines and funding. First, audit all buildings and identify what accessibility work is needed in each. Second, prioritize schools serving the most students with disabilities and create a phase-in schedule for repairs. Third, allocate adequate capital funding in the budget that doesn't compete with other priorities.

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:

As a board member, I need to learn more and bring these questions to our special education committee. I would ask: First, why has the number of cluster classrooms increased 250% since 2023? What's driving this trend? Second, are schools actually offering inclusion as an option, or are they defaulting to separate classrooms? Third, what data do we have on student outcomes in cluster classrooms versus inclusive settings? Are students in separate classrooms actually making progress? I know that students

with disabilities belong in general education classrooms with supports when they can make meaningful progress. A 250% increase in separate classrooms no doubt suggests we're moving in the wrong direction.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Pros: Specialized classrooms can provide intensive support and individualized instruction for students with significant disabilities who need that level of service.

Cons: Separation limits peer interaction, social development, and access to general education curriculum. Students miss the benefits of inclusion. Historically, cluster programming has been used to exclude rather than support.

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 unacceptable. The board's responsibility is ensuring robust transition planning that starts early, not waiting until age 21. Every student with a disability should have a clear transition plan by age 14 focused on employment, independent living, and post-secondary options. CPS can't solve this alone, but we can coordinate. We need partnerships with community colleges, vocational programs, job training organizations, and adult service providers so students have clear pathways after graduation, and then we need to track outcomes.

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:



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

Answer:

Accountability. Every IEP promise must be delivered with consistency. Right now, schools create IEPs but don't always implement them. The Board needs transparent data showing whether services are actually reaching students, and we need to hold schools responsible when they're not. Students with disabilities deserve what the law promises them.