Ellen Sherratt

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

Candidate: Ellen Sherratt

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 Ellen Sherratt. I hold a PhD in education built on a foundation in economics, and I have spent more than 25 years studying what makes teaching effective and how school systems build a workforce that delivers for students. I have contributed to more than 40 publications, worked with the Illinois State Board of Education and with legislators in Springfield, and helped lead the national push for the American Teacher Act, which would establish a $60,000 minimum salary for teachers. I am running because I am deeply committed to building the best school system possible. I am not beholden to any one political interest - Not labor, not business or billionaire donors, not any single advocacy group, and not a mayor. I answer to the kids, and to the District 4A families who send those kids to school every morning. This is the first year every seat on this board is elected, which changes what accountability means, because the people who live with these decisions finally get to choose who makes them. I want to use what I know about evidence, budgets, and staffing to make CPS deliver what it already owes students, starting with the students this system has failed longest.

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:
As I talk to parents across District 4A, I hear a version of the same story over and over, and it is rarely a story about bad people. There are talented, committed professionals in the CPS special education department, and I have met principals, special education teachers, case managers, and special education classroom assistants who go far beyond what anyone could reasonably ask of them. Parents will tell you that themselves, usually in the same breath as their complaint. The frustration is not with the people. It is with the system that they are working inside of on a daily basis.

What families describe is a large bureaucratic system that they have been left to navigate largely on their own. I have spent my career studying how school systems staff and support classrooms, and one of the most consistent findings across that work is that the rules on paper matter far less than whether the adults inside a building have the time, the training, and the stability to follow them. That is what has broken down here. An IEP is a legal entitlement, not a favor, but in practice services tend to arrive when a parent pushes hardest, knows the vocabulary, can take a weekday morning off for a meeting, can afford an advocate, or can credibly raise the possibility of due process. That produces the inequity you would expect. Families with the most time, money, and English fluency get closer to what the law already promises them, and families without those advantages get less. Parents grow exhausted not because any single meeting is unbearable, but because the work of noticing never ends. An evaluation timeline slips. A case manager leaves in January and the replacement does not know the child. A classroom assistant position sits open and minutes quietly stop being delivered. Each time, the responsibility for catching the problem falls back on the parent.

I also think families are frustrated because they have heard promises before. After the state's findings that CPS had delayed and denied services to students with disabilities, an independent monitor was put in place and the district committed to reform. Families remember that. So when they are told that another plan is coming, a certain amount of skepticism is earned, and the district has not yet earned its way out of it. Underneath all of this is a system that has learned to treat special education as a compliance question rather than an instructional one. When success is measured by whether the paperwork is defensible instead of whether the child learned to read, families can feel the difference even when no one says it out loud.

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 Educational Facilities Master Plan already names building accessibility as an important priority, and that was the right call. What it needs now is to be far more explicit about the goals for achieving it. A priority without dates, dollar figures, and someone responsible for the schedule is a statement of values rather than a plan, and families with disabled children have been asked to accept statements of values for a long time.

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Being explicit starts with publishing a building by building accessibility assessment that the public can actually use. A citywide percentage tells a parent nothing. A searchable record showing which entrances, restrooms, elevators, upper floor classrooms, playgrounds, and auditoriums are accessible at each school tells a parent whether their child can attend. That information already exists inside the district in some form, and making it public costs very little.

From there the plan should set an interim floor and a longer term goal of full accessibility. The floor should guarantee that every part of the city has at least one fully accessible neighborhood elementary school and one fully accessible high school within a defined number of years, because until that is true, the phrase neighborhood school remains a fiction for a child who uses a wheelchair. Full accessibility across every building will necessarily be further out, and I want to be straightforward about why. CPS' capital resources are limited and there are real competing needs in buildings across this district. What matters is that we are making significant and steady progress toward it every year, and that we are reporting on that progress transparently enough that families can hold us to it.

My doctorate is in education, but the training underneath it is in economics, and I have spent a good deal of my career reading school budgets closely enough to know that priorities live or die in the capital plan rather than in the narrative section at the front. None of this happens without money that survives contact with the rest of the budget. Accessibility work should sit in a named, dedicated capital line rather than a category that gets absorbed the first time a boiler fails in February. This is where budget discipline stops being an abstraction. When the district carries expensive debt and passes budgets with unappropriated spending, capital dollars are precisely what get squeezed, and accessibility is precisely the line that loses the argument. A board serious about disabled students has to be serious about the district's finances, because one pays for the other. Finally, the board should hear a public annual report on progress: buildings completed, buildings remaining, dollars spent, dollars still needed, and how far behind schedule we are. It is also worth remembering that this is not only a student issue. When most of our buildings are not fully accessible, disabled parents cannot easily attend an IEP meeting, disabled neighbors cannot reach their polling place, and disabled applicants are effectively excluded from working in our schools. The remedy is the same one, and the constituency is larger than we usually acknowledge.

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 want to start with what I think is at stake, because it shapes every question I would ask. Federal law gives students the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate for them, and I read that as a responsibility to educate children alongside their classmates, in their own neighborhood schools, whenever that can be done well. A child who is moved out of the building where their siblings and their friends from the block go to school loses something real, and their family loses the ability to show up at 2pm when something goes wrong. My concern is that the growth in cluster classrooms, whether by intention or simply by accumulation of individual decisions, may be pulling the district away from that right. Before I would support or oppose anything, I want to understand why it is happening.

Analyzing exactly this kind of data is what I have done professionally for twenty five years, so I would start with the least restrictive environment data itself, disaggregated and going back several years, broken out by school, by race, by neighborhood, by English learner status, and by disability category. If this pattern is concentrated in particular schools or particular communities, that tells us a great deal on its own.

The second thing I would want is the staffing data alongside it. I would ask how many of these placement changes followed a special education teacher vacancy, a classroom assistant vacancy, or a case manager departure at the child's home school. If placement decisions track staffing gaps rather than student need, then we are not really talking about a special education question, we are talking about a hiring and retention question wearing a different uniform.

I would also want to know who initiated each change. In what share of cases did the recommendation come from the IEP team, and in what share did it come from a network or central office administrator? Were parents presented with a cluster placement as one option among several, or as the only option available? I would ask how many students placed in a cluster setting have since returned to general education, because a placement that students never leave is not really a placement, it is a track. I would ask what each setting actually costs per pupil including transportation, so that if a fiscal incentive exists we can say so honestly and build a guardrail against it. I would ask how far these students are traveling

from home. And I would ask what the state's independent monitor has said about this trend and what the district has said in response, in the actual correspondence rather than a summary of it.

Question 5:
In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of expanding cluster programming for students?

Answer:
There are cluster classroom settings that serve some students well. For children with significant medical, behavioral, or communication needs, a small and consistently staffed room with specialized adults, the right equipment, and lower sensory demands can be genuinely better than a general education classroom. Concentrating specialized staff in one place can mean those staff are less thinly stretched. Some families ask for this placement and report that their child is calmer and safer because of it. Federal law contemplates a continuum of placements for exactly these reasons, and pretending that inclusion is always right for every child does not serve anyone. There should also be cluster programming in every community in Chicago, so students do not need to travel across the city for an appropriate placement.

That said, the central risk of expanding this programming is very real and needs to be named, too. Students have a right to be included in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible, and to be educated in their own neighborhood schools whenever that can be done. That is not a preference or a philosophy. It is federal law, and unnecessarily segregating children with disabilities from their classmates is not only heartbreaking for those children and their families, it is illegal.

Students in separate settings are less likely to be taught grade level content, and lowered expectations have a way of becoming self fulfilling. I have spent enough years inside the research on teaching and student expectations to take that risk seriously rather than treat it as a talking point. Very few students move back out, which means a placement made in first grade can shape a child's entire school career. Students are often moved away from their neighborhood and their peers, which carries a social cost we rarely count.

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 a real problem and families are right to fear it. A young person can spend twenty two years inside a system that knows them well, and then on a single day in June that system stops, and nothing on the other side is obligated to pick them up. Most of what goes wrong is a planning and coordination failure rather than a resource failure, and both of those are fixable.

The first piece is the IEP itself. Transition planning is supposed to begin by age fourteen and a half, and too often the transition section of the document reads like boilerplate that was copied forward from the previous year. Written well, it names a specific goal for life after school, identifies the concrete skills that goal requires, assigns responsibility for teaching them, and gets revisited honestly every year rather than restated. That is not an expensive reform. It is a question of whether the district trains and expects its teams to write these plans as though someone will actually rely on them, and whether the board asks to see evidence that they do. I would want CPS to sample transition plans and report on their quality, because right now no one outside the individual school knows whether they are any good.

The second piece is the handoff. The transition out of school should be a coordinated event with a checklist and a named contact, not a graduation ceremony followed by silence. Well before a student's final year, the district should be working alongside the state agencies that will serve that young adult, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, city workforce programs, community providers, and local employers, so that the adult supports are identified and open before the school supports close. Employers in particular are an underused partner. Paid work experience during the transition years is one of the strongest predictors of employment afterward, and CPS should be building standing relationships with employers across the city rather than leaving each school to find its own. I have spent years working with the Illinois State Board of Education and with legislators in Springfield, and I know how to get a district and a set of state agencies into the same room and keep them there, which is most of what this problem actually requires.

The third piece is knowing whether any of it worked. CPS should follow up with students with disabilities in the years after they exit and report publicly on employment, further education, and independent living. Evaluating whether programs actually deliver is the work I have done for my entire career, and I can tell you that a system which does not measure its results will not improve them. At the moment the district largely does not know what happens to these young people after they leave, and that is a choice we could stop making.

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.

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Question 7:
What is your top priority for improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities in CPS?

Answer:
My top priority would be making sure that every student with a disability is taught by a prepared, supported, and stable adult, and then holding the district accountable for whether those students is meeting their IEP goals and making academic progress.

Proficiency of ten and a half percent in English language arts is not a statement about what these children are capable of. The large majority of students with IEPs have disabilities that do not preclude reading at grade level. A number that low is a statement about instruction, about whether the teachers serving these students have been trained in evidence based reading instruction, whether they have the time and materials to deliver it, and whether they stay in the building long enough to know the child in front of them.

That is the work I have done for twenty five years, so I would push on three things. The district should publish monthly vacancy reporting by school for special education teachers, classroom assistants, case managers, and related service providers, fill the highest need schools first, and enforce caseload limits rather than treating them as aspirations. It should invest in structured literacy training with real follow up coaching for every teacher who serves students with IEPs, rather than a single day of professional development in August. Illinois has adopted a statewide literacy plan, and CPS should be the district that implements it most seriously for the students furthest behind instead of the last one to get there. And it should report proficiency and growth for students with IEPs by school every year, presented publicly to the board rather than buried in an appendix.

There is one group that belongs in this answer and is almost always left out of it. Special education classroom assistants spend more direct time with our highest need students than nearly anyone else in the building, and they are frequently left out of the district's professional development entirely. An assistant can be placed with a child who has complex communication, behavioral, or medical needs and be expected to work it out on instinct. I am endorsed by SEIU Local 73, which represents these assistants across CPS, and what I hear from them is not a request for less work. It is a request for real training. That means paid time to attend it, instruction in the specific strategies their students actually need, and coaching that continues across the year rather than a single orientation at the start of it. If we are serious about outcomes for students with disabilities, we cannot keep treating the preparation of the adults closest to those students as an afterthought.