

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Jason Dónes****District: 3b****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 Puerto Rican Chicagoan, born and raised in Humboldt Park, a proud CPS graduate, former CPS teacher, CPS parent, and fourth-term Local School Council member. My mom raised me on her own with a minimum wage job, and I know firsthand what it's like to wonder whether your child is going to get what they need from their school. I've spent the past 16 years fighting to make sure working-class families don't have to wonder about that, as a teacher, as a LSC Chair, and as a community organizer. I am running to serve on the Elected Representative School Board because I believe families, educators, and students deserve a meaningful voice in the decisions that shape their schools. I've stood alongside parents of kids with disabilities advocating for the services their children are legally owed, and I know how exhausting and unfair that struggle can be. I want to bring everything I've learned to the Board and fight for fully staffed, fully funded neighborhood schools where every student, including students with disabilities, can learn, participate, and thrive with the support they deserve.

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 current system asks parents to fight for things their kids are already entitled to, on top of everything else they're already carrying. I know this firsthand. A few years back, I stepped in to help a loved one navigate the IEP process for their child because the parents felt lost and didn't know where to turn. I spent countless hours in meetings, reading through paperwork, and reviewing special education law just to make sure this child got the services they were owed, and I had a head start that most families don't have, because I was already a CPS teacher and education expert who understood how schools work. That experience is all too common and I hear similar scenarios at least once a week while canvassing. As a former CPS teacher and LSC member, I've also seen this from the school side, where staffing shortages, limited resources, and a lack of specialized support make it hard

for schools to meet kids' needs, which leaves parents to fill the gap, chasing down services, trying to interpret the law, and pushing to make sure their child's IEP is actually respected and implemented. No parent should have to become a special education lawyer just to get their kid the education they're entitled to. As a Board member, I'll push for real transparency in how services are delivered, real accountability for implementing IEPs, and the staffing and resources schools need to serve students with disabilities well, including support for families who don't speak English at home, who often face this same battle with fewer resources. I will not accept cuts to SECAs and SPED teachers which exacerbate the issue and leave our families and faculties with an unwinnable scenario trying to provide twice as much with half of the resources needed. Families are frustrated because we are cutting and restricting when we should be investing and developing.

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 should establish a clear, publicly accountable plan to make every school accessible, with specific timelines, funding commitments, and annual benchmarks for progress. We are rich in vision but lacking in implementation and so I would start with the audit of information we have to know where to prioritize our energy. The District already knows where the barriers are given that it's done the assessments found in the 2023 Facilities Master Plan. We should use that information now to build a comprehensive roadmap rather than addressing accessibility school by school, whenever there happens to be funds left over--something that is becoming much less common each year. I would prioritize schools that currently prevent students with physical disabilities from attending their neighborhood school, while also addressing accessibility for disabled staff, parents, and community members. And accessibility can't stop at the front door. A ramp at the school entrance doesn't mean much if a student can't get into all classrooms, the gym, the auditorium, or extracurriculars. Accessibility is not a "nice to have" facility improvement—it is a basic condition of what it means to be a public school that actually belongs to the whole public.

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 former CPS teacher and LSC member, I would want to understand what is happening at the school level that is contributing to this increase. I suspect that our resourcing model is worth interrogating. What would it take for proven inclusion models to be a pathway to more funding/staffing in the way that cluster programs can be? I would ask whether the growth in cluster classrooms reflects changes in students’ individual needs or whether other factors—like staffing shortages, lack of appropriate supports in general education classrooms, school capacity, or other district-level placement practices—are influencing placement trends. How are placement decisions being made? What data does CPS use to determine whether a student is receiving an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment? How are families meaningfully involved in those decisions? How do we make decisions for when our cluster students should be included alongside their peers? Are schools receiving the special education staff, related services, assistive technology, and behavioral supports needed to make inclusion successful AND how is the entire school staff supported & coached in how to allocate these resources most effectively? I would also want to examine any disparities in placement by race, disability type, school, and neighborhood. Most importantly, the District should be able to demonstrate that separate settings are being used because they are appropriate for individual students, not because CPS has failed to provide the support necessary for meaningful inclusion.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Cluster programming can be the right fit for some students. It can offer specialized instruction, smaller-group learning, and more concentrated access to trained staff and related services. The question for the Board should not be whether cluster classrooms are inherently good or bad, but whether students are being placed in them for the right reasons and whether those placements are producing strong outcomes. My concern is that separate classrooms can limit opportunities for students with disabilities to learn and socialize alongside their nondisabled peers, participate fully in school life, and access the general education curriculum. As a former CPS educator, I would be particularly concerned if cluster programming were expanding because schools lack the staffing, training, or supports needed to successfully include students in general education classrooms. That's not a placement decision based on what's best for the child, that's a resource and coaching failure. CPS should regularly review placements, measure student outcomes, and ensure families have a meaningful voice in determining the setting that best meets their child's 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 treat transition planning as an ongoing process that prepares students for the lives they want after high school. Students and families should have meaningful input into individualized transition plans that identify clear goals for employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation. CPS should strengthen partnerships with employers, colleges, vocational rehabilitation providers, Centers for Independent Living, and other adult service organizations so students can gain real work experience, career training, and independent living skills before they leave school. We also need to make sure families understand what services and supports are available after graduation and have help connecting to them before a student reaches 22. As a Board Member, I would want the district to track what happens to students after they leave CPS—including employment, continued education, and independent living—to determine whether transition programs are actually preparing young people for the futures they choose. Illinois already has programs that bring schools, rehabilitation services, and community organizations together to improve employment and independent living outcomes. CPS should build on what works and expand it; and elected members can play a major role in motivating the intergovernmental collaboration needed to make this happen. When

elected board members, alders, representatives and partners across different agencies are in communication, we can strengthen these ‘handoff points’ and continue to provide for our people.

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 would be ensuring that every student with a disability has an appropriately designed and consistently implemented IEP, along with the specialized instruction, accommodations, assistive technology, and other supports they need to make meaningful academic progress. As an educator and as a parent, I know that having a plan on paper is not enough if a school does not have the staff, training, or resources to carry it out. Those numbers, 10.5% proficiency in ELA and 7.1% in math for students with IEPs, are not acceptable, and improving outcomes requires looking not only at test scores but at whether students are actually receiving the services and instruction they are entitled to. I would focus on strengthening special education staffing, giving educators the training and resources to support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, and holding the District accountable for implementing IEPs consistently across schools. I would focus training on collaborative efforts including co-teaching best practices which often go underutilized and school policies which unintentionally hurt academic performance amongst students with IEPs. I would also push CPS to track academic growth, not just proficiency, and make that information transparent so the Board, educators, and families can identify where students are succeeding and where additional support is needed. As an LSC member, I see the information gap as a core issue. Faculty collect data they often do not have adequate time to react to and use in their instruction and decision-making and parents are often shown numbers without much guidance on interpreting that data. And families deserve to get this information in a language they understand in a way that is meaningful and actionable. IEP meetings and paperwork should be fully accessible to non-English speaking families, not one more barrier on top of everything else. Students with disabilities deserve the same high expectations and meaningful opportunities to learn as every other student.