Jessica Biggs

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

Candidate: Jessica Biggs

District: President

Question 1:
In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Answer:
I started my career as a special education teacher, and that experience has informed how I have understood every teacher I have met since. In my schools, I was the person who made sure IEPs were written well and written comprehensively, with a strong team around the table, and then actually followed. I carried that into the principal's office at Burke Elementary in Washington Park, and I carry it now as a CPS parent and as the leader of the Southwest System of Care at the Southwest Organizing Project, where I build partnerships between schools, health providers, and community organizations to support the whole child. For the last two years, I have served on the Board of Education representing District 6. I have voted according to my conscience, including against an amended FY2027 budget built on $150 million in state funding that was never committed. I am running for President because of the obligation this district owes its students, particularly to students with disabilities. That obligation is nonnegotiable, and it is not simply a line item. A board president's job is to hold everyone in this system accountable for every child.

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:
CPS is a bureaucracy that has too often made families carry a burden that the district is legally required to carry itself.

I have sat at a lot of IEP tables as a special education teacher and later as a principal. I know what it takes to write a plan well and then actually deliver it with the staff and hours a school has. I have also watched families walk into those meetings already exhausted, because they had to fight to get an evaluation, to get services written into the plan, and to get those services delivered. That is simply not a communication problem. That is what happens when a system routinely makes the parent its

enforcement mechanism. Understanding eligibility, least restrictive environment, procedural safeguards, and how to challenge a placement is a full-time job. Families with resources hire advocates and attorneys; families without them get the default. The inequity starts there, before a single service is delivered.

Delay is the most common form of denial in this district. Most of it is not anyone's intent. It is late evaluations, positions that sit unfilled, services that exist on a plan but not on a schedule, placements that are not finalized when the school year starts, and transportation that does not materialize -- a child who has no bus route has no school, if this is what their IEP says. But a year of a child's life is not recoverable, and no compensatory remedy gives it back. Whether the cause was neglect or paperwork makes no difference to that family.
There are good people doing this work inside CPS, including in the Office for Students with Disabilities. I have worked alongside them. The problem is that we ask them to hold together a system serving tens of thousands of students with a level of staffing and support that does not match the obligation, and then we reorganize that office and change the staffing model in ways families and school teams learn about after the fact. The 2018 state public inquiry found that CPS procedures themselves were delaying and denying services, and families remember that. Real improvements have been made since then. But trust does not rebuild on the same timeline as compliance. When the ground keeps moving underneath them, families stop believing what the district tells them.

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 answer is not to blame the educators fighting for our students. It is to blame a board that treats special education quality as a standing governance responsibility rather than an occasional agenda item.

The board already has the instrument for that and has not been using it. The Special Education Advisory Committee was created to bring parents, advocates, educators, and other stakeholders directly into the board's work on special education. Under Mary Fahey Hughes it did exactly that — convening working groups that met to do real work - including helping to select the Chief of the Office of Students with Disabilities. That committee has not played anything close to that role recently, and I consider it one of

the clearer failures of this board. It is a missed opportunity. A twenty-person board is difficult for any family to navigate, and nearly impossible for a parent who is already spending their evenings fighting for their own child's services. A functioning special education committee gives them one door instead of twenty. Making that committee genuinely functional again is something I would take on directly as President.

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:
The district has the facility data. What it does not have is a plan, a target, or a deadline to reach ADA compliance. Until it has all three, accessibility will keep losing to whatever other capital issue is more urgent - or politically expedient - in a given year.

The first step is for the board to adopt an actual accessibility roadmap. The Facilities Master Plan names building accessibility as a priority without committing the district to anything: which buildings, in what order, by when, at what cost. A roadmap to which the public can hold us accountable is also one a future board cannot quietly abondon. That roadmap needs money attached to it in a way that does not fluctuate with political attention, which means setting a protected floor in board policy for the share of the annual capital plan that goes to accessibility, and reporting against it every year.

It also has to aim at the right standard. "First floor usable" is not accessibility. A student who can get through the door but cannot reach the library, the science lab, the gym, or the main office does not have equal access to their school, and neither does a parent, an educator, or an LSC member who uses a wheelchair. The sequencing should be driven by geography and community need, so that every

neighborhood in this city can point to a fully accessible school. Right now, in too many neighborhoods, families cannot.

And the district has to stop treating student transfer as a substitute for compliance. Moving a child out of their neighborhood school because the building will not accommodate them is not an accommodation. A real accommodation would be the district solving its problem with that child's schooling, and their community.All of this should be public: accessibility status building by building, progress against the roadmap, and dollars spent, reviewed by the board on a set schedule. What a board reviews in public gets done.

I will also be straight about the fiscal reality, because you deserve that, rather than just a promise. This district is in a serious financial position and capital dollars are constrained. That is an argument for a disciplined, sequenced, multi-year plan with real funding behind it. We cannot abide another decade of deferral.

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

Answer:
This is a nuanced question, and an important one, because the answer shapes the daily experience of thousands of children and neither a blanket defense of these programs nor a blanket objection to them is honest about what they do. When a cluster program opens in a neighborhood school, a child who needs an intensive setting can receive it close to home rather than being bused across the city or placed outside the district altogether. Transportation has been one of the most serious and persistent sources of harm for students with disabilities in this district. Roadblocks include routes that do not exist at the start of the year, rides long enough to consume a meaningful part of a child's day, and families who cannot get to a school far from where they live. A program in the neighborhood means a walk to school, a sibling in the same building, a parent who can actually attend an IEP meeting, and a child who stays connected to their own community. Well-run programs can also concentrate specialized staff, training, and equipment in ways that are hard to replicate one classroom at a time.

The cost is that best practice and federal law both point the other way. Students belong in the least restrictive environment in which they can make meaningful progress, and inclusion is not a courtesy — students with disabilities learn more when they are alongside their peers, and their peers learn more too. Separate settings are also easier to enter than to leave. Once a student is in one, the general education classroom stops being the reference point for what they should be able to do. The curriculum gets modified a little further each year, the goals get written against where the student is rather than where they could be, exposure to grade-level content narrows, and the daily contact with peers that builds social skills and friendship thins out. None of that requires anyone to decide a child cannot learn.

It happens gradually, in a room where everyone is working hard, which is exactly what makes it so difficult to see and so difficult to reverse. The students who lose the most are the ones who never needed a separate setting at all and ended up there because the general education classroom was not equipped to hold them.

An increase in these classrooms is not automatically evidence of a problem. There may be good reasons for some of it: more children identified and diagnosed, earlier identification, a more efficient IEP process getting students to services faster, and a genuine rise in the intensity of need at certain grade levels. Any of those would be real. But a 250% increase since 2023 is a very large number, and a district serious about its obligations would treat it as a figure to dig into rather than a figure to explain away. I would want that examination done with people who know this work: outside experts, the advocacy community, and parents of students with disabilities themselves — convened through a Special Education Advisory Committee actually functioning as it was designed to, rather than through a one-time presentation the board receives and moves past.

What matters most is whether each placement was driven by that child's needs and their IEP. I want enough intensive programming, close to home, for every student who genuinely needs it, and I take the transportation and community-connection arguments for neighborhood programs seriously. What I want to guard against is expansion becoming a strategy this district drifts into without ever choosing it — where separate classrooms grow because they are the available answer to a capacity problem, rather than because they are what students need. No one sets out to do that. It is precisely the kind of thing that happens when nobody is questioning the dramatic expansion of cluster classrooms, which is why the board should be questioning this.

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:

It starts with treating transition planning as real work, rather than a compliance exercise. Too often, a transition plan is just a form completed at the required age with goals no one revisits. It should begin well before high school ends, be built around what the student actually wants for their life, and be measured against progress every year. For students between 18 and 22, the program itself should be

built around work — paid or credited work-based learning with real Chicago employers, independent living skills, transportation training, and self-advocacy, in integrated and competitive settings wherever possible. Segregated placement is not preparation for an integrated adult life.

The handoff at the end matters as much as the years leading up to it. CPS should have formal, functioning agreements with the state agencies and providers that pick up at 22 — vocational rehabilitation, pre-employment transition services, developmental disability services, workforce partners, City Colleges — so that the adult service connection is made while a student is still enrolled rather than after they have left. No family should learn about a waiting list the month their child ages out. Families also need the roadmap years in advance. They need benefits, guardianship and its alternatives including supported decision-making, waiver waitlists, housing, employment supports. That information currently reaches the families with the resources to go looking for it. It should reach every family, in their language, from the district.

This is also work CPS should not attempt alone. Access Living, the independent living centers, and disability-led organizations know this terrain far better than the district does, and the district should be building on that expertise rather than reinventing it.
And we should measure what happens after students leave. Post-school outcomes — employment, postsecondary enrollment, community participation — reported publicly and disaggregated. Right now, we largely stop counting at the door. If we do not know how our graduates are doing at 23, we cannot honestly claim the program is working.

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:
Instruction. Excellent, consistent, everyday instruction in the modalities and with the accommodations that allow students to succeed.

Special education is complicated, and the issues around it are serious — compliance, placement, staffing, services, legal obligation. All of that is real and I have spent this questionnaire discussing those critical issues. But there is a tendency in this work to let that complexity crowd out something simple, which is that a child with a disability needs the same thing every other child needs, and needs it more: a great teacher, teaching well, every day. We do not talk about students with disabilities that way often

enough. We talk about their services and their settings and their paperwork, and somewhere in there the most basic thing a district owes them — outstanding instruction — becomes a secondary consideration rather than the whole point.

That was my mindset as a special education teacher and it was my mindset as a principal. The question I cared most about was not whether the paperwork was in order, though I made sure it was. It was whether the teaching in that classroom was good enough for the child sitting in it. A cluster classroom, a resource setting, a general education classroom with co-teaching — the setting determines what supports a child needs, not whether great instruction is what moves them. It always is. And every system in this district, from central office to the network to the school building, should be organized around making that instruction better. We spend enormous energy arguing about placement and comparatively little asking what is actually being taught once a child gets there.

Those proficiency numbers — roughly one in ten students with IEPs proficient in ELA, fewer in math — are not primarily a compliance failure. We could be fully compliant on paper and still produce those outcomes. They are an instructional failure, and this board has largely not treated them as its business. I would change that: explicit, public board goals for the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, reported at least quarterly, with the CEO evaluated against them. Not buried in an aggregate number where tens of thousands of students disappear.

Two of those numbers deserve to be pulled out and looked at directly, and I would insist the board do it. Black students and English learners are identified for special education at rates that do not match their share of our enrollment, and they are more likely to end up in more restrictive settings once identified. That pattern is not new and it is not unique to Chicago, but we must answer for it. It usually reflects a general education classroom that was not equipped to teach a child well — a student who needed strong early literacy instruction, or language development support, or a teacher trained to tell the difference between a disability and a still-developing English learner, and did not understand, so a referral becomes the available answer. Every one of those misidentifications is an instructional failure twice over; once for the instruction the child did not receive, and again for the placement that followed.

Getting instruction right starts with talent, which is the central issue in special education right now and the work I know best. We cannot deliver specially designed instruction with vacancies and long-term substitutes. As student needs grow more specialized, the pipeline work matters more, not less, and this is exactly the moment to keep investing in it rather than letting it slip because of the budget. I have championed the district's teacher residency and Teach Chicago Tomorrow, and I want that same approach applied deliberately to special education, starting with our SECAs. The paraprofessionals already in our classrooms have deep experience with our children and a genuine love for them. Many want to become certified special education teachers and cannot afford the pathway. Building that route — tuition support, coursework that fits a working schedule, mentorship, a real career ladder — would

give us educators who already know the work and already know our communities. The same is true for clinicians and case managers, where the shortages are just as real.
It also means supporting the educators we already have. Special education teachers and SECAs need substantial and ongoing professional development, adequate planning time, manageable caseloads, clinician access, and strong curricular options built for the students in front of them rather than adapted on the fly at ten o'clock at night. General education teachers need co-teaching support and real preparation to serve students with disabilities in their classrooms, because that is where inclusion either works or quietly fails — and it is also where the overidentification problem either gets solved or does not.

This means protecting children in the budget. This district is facing a real deficit, and I have not been shy about the choices it forces. But we cannot balance a budget on the backs of children with disabilities. Their services are a legal obligation and a moral one. When cuts come, they land hardest on the students with the least margin, and the district usually pays for it later anyway, in complaints, due process, and compensatory services.