

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Karen Zaccor****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:

It's critical to have a team (11 or more board members) that is unified behind fighting to transform CPS into a system that embraces equity in actions, not just words. That includes working to make CPS a Sustainable Community Schools district according to the true vision of SCS. It includes implementing the Black Student Achievement Plan and the Whole School Safety Policy with fidelity. It includes ensuring that our most vulnerable students have the supports they need to succeed and are not treated as second class citizens, as has so often been the case. It includes a continuous fight for progressive revenue and rejection of austerity practices. I bring 40 years of experience fighting for education justice, 29 years of teaching, 15 years of being a CPS parent, and 2 years of behind the scenes leadership on the board to building an effective team.

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:

It's frustrating on many levels: getting your child assessed, understanding what their IEP or 504 plan provides for them, communicating with relevant staff about progress and making sure your child has everything they are entitled to in order to progress, feeling like a full participant in IEP meetings, getting concerns addressed, ensuring transition plans—the list goes on. Parents can end up feeling like if they don't advocate, their child might lose out because everybody's eyes are not always on the prize. And that's not a burden parents should have to bear. I'll give just one small example from my school. My school held quarterly meetings for parents whose children were in the cluster program. They did not investigate when was the best time and held the meetings at 3 in the afternoon. Very few parents were able to attend then, so they lost out on the opportunity to get information and to meet other parents whose children were in the program. It ensured less discussion about problems, less opportunity for collective advocacy and contributed to parents feeling like their children and their voices didn't matter.

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:

As little money as CPS has for capital development, making buildings accessible for those with physical disabilities will be a slow process, so step one is definitely to demand the funding to which CPS is entitled. But it also goes without saying that the district needs to immediately develop a plan, and it is my general belief that whenever major plans are created, there should be participation of the stakeholders involved. So students and staff with disabilities and their families should be involved in crafting this roadmap. Not all schools are taking actions to maximize accessibility in how they use school spaces. In my school, we had a number of students in wheelchairs. We had only one first floor classroom so that was put to use. One possible action is to use dividers or repurpose first floor rooms that weren't originally meant to be classrooms to create more classroom spaces that are accessible. In schools that already have first floor classrooms, instead of automatically having the youngest children on the first floor, schedule room use from the point of view of providing accessibility. A second thing my school did was to make some modifications to the freight elevator so that students accompanied by teachers could use it. That helped not only the students in wheelchairs, but students and teachers with injuries that prevented them from using the stairs. Some schools have elevators that are not currently usable but could be made usable, so that is something that could increase accessibility. It's not only getting upstairs to the classrooms, it's also redesigning bathrooms to be accessible. The district has a plan through which it rehabs a girls bathroom, a boys bathroom, and a teacher bathroom in an admittedly small number of schools per year. They should ensure they are prioritizing schools with a population of people with disabilities and also ensure that part of the rehab involves making the bathrooms accessible. The failure to develop a plan illustrates how often the needs of students with disabilities are not at the forefront of CPS's agenda. So once we have a plan, we will need to take action to make that a priority for capital development.

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:

This year we were told that 60 new cluster classes were added. That seems like a very high number, and in truth I did not ask questions about that, so I will need to go back and ask these for real. (1) Are the cluster classes being added concentrated in a particular grade level?

2) If cluster classes for older students are increasing, why weren't the students assessed at a younger age? Or is the increase because we are lowering class size for cluster classes?

3) If students are younger, what is the difference in criteria that has led to the increase this year?

4) Especially for the very youngest students, have we tried a more inclusive model first? If not, why not?

Question 5:

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

Answer:

My high school had a large cluster program. I was a gen ed teacher, but twice I taught a science class to cluster students, including a group that needed AAC devices to communicate. It would have been extremely challenging to teach my cluster students and gen ed students in the same classroom. I would essentially have been teaching two different classes at the same time. So I do think there is a need for cluster classrooms. But in terms of expansion, only once did I have a student that I thought maybe needed to be in a cluster setting, and twice at my school students were transferred out of the cluster program. That leads me to think that expansion is due to a higher percentage of students being designated as needing a cluster program at the youngest ages. I know that students are being diagnosed with autism at a higher rate due to better methods, but it does make me wonder why we were able to include a higher percentage of students in the regular classroom previously and whether there are other things we could be trying and learning about how to better support more students in an inclusive setting.

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:

I have visited a school where students were regularly going out to sites where they could authentically practice job skills in addition to having those skills be part of their class work. But that kind of programming is not universal and it needs to be. It’s very important that we have opportunities for young people after they age out that fit their abilities. That requires not only that schools themselves work intentionally on job skills, but that CPS finds partners in the larger community that can benefit by having employees with cognitive disabilities and are willing to be part of a hands-on training process. It’s not realistic to think that those students will be able to navigate the world of work on their own. It should be a higher priority for CPS to ensure that our students with intellectual disabilities have a pathway to employment just like planning for the future is a priority for our gen ed students.

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:

By definition, students with learning disabilities have normal intelligence. So the evidence suggests that we are not adequately providing the tools to learn the material in different ways that work with students’ disabilities. We might also need to consider the particular method of assessment as well. Just as we know that standardized tests tend to reflect socioeconomic status, it is possible that pen and paper or computer based tests reflect more standard ways of processing information. I had students that I used to test orally—same test, but the student was able to talk to me about the particular concept instead of writing it all—and they were able to show proficiency. So I would say there’s a variety of things we need to address, from better teaching methods to normalizing alternative assessments.



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