

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Katherine Dunneback****District: 9b****Question 1:**

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

Answer:

My name is Katherine Dunneback. I live in the Morgan Park neighborhood with my husband and twin sons, both of whom have ADHD and Anxiety diagnoses, and had their educational needs met via IEPs throughout their time in CPS (they graduated from Clissold Elementary School in 2022). I am in the 22nd year of my career as a speech-language pathologist. A majority of my career has been spent serving students and families in Title 1 schools. I also have experience working with families transitioning from the state Early Intervention program to the CPS early childhood program, working with CPS teams to develop and implement service plans for students in private schools following completion of district diagnostic evaluations, and working with families and IEP teams as a private clinician to assist in developing the most appropriate plan for shared students. While working with my children's IEP team at Clissold, I decided to complete training in special education law via Wrightslaw to improve advocacy skills and knowledge of special education law. As a CPS parent, I used this training and my knowledge as an SLP to assist other parents of diverse learners in advocating for their children in the CPS system. I am running for school board because it is a logical next step in my career as a service provider and advocate for children and their families.

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:

In my experience working with CPS families, much of their frustration stems from inconsistent communication from the district and lack of resources to aid in their understanding of the special education process. As an SLP working with CPS families, I often found I was able to reduce the frustration those families were feeling by explaining the steps of the diagnostic process to them and by helping them develop questions to ask their IEP teams in order to clarify miscommunications. In the end, many times these families simply felt unheard and undervalued in the special education process. As a

board member, I would work to make communication more consistent and transparent between the district and the families it serves, including providing opportunities for parent education related to their children's rights as well as the special education process.

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:

Federal and state standards and guidelines for building regulations related to ADA accessibility must be followed. This is non-negotiable. As a board member, I would ensure that budget discussions related to infrastructure include funds for ADA compliance, understanding that this goes beyond simple building access such as ramps. I would also work to amplify the voices of disability rights groups to local and state officials working on issues related to ADA policies and procedures. A phrase I have often heard from disability rights groups is, "nothing about us without us," and this is a concept I have taken to heart and intentionally recall when places at tables of power at which I am seated are being set.

As the representative of subdistrict 9B, I would take a survey of the LSCs and administrators of the schools in my subdistrict to determine what accessibility issues currently exist within them that are preventing students from attending their neighborhood schools. Increasing transparency and communication between district schools and their representative board members is a primary goal of mine. Understanding current issues in neighborhood schools related to accessibility and sharing with families the processes that need to be completed in order to resolve them is an example of a way to meet that goal.

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 an SLP, anytime I see an issue, my first question is, "what is the underlying cause of the issue?" Are the number of individuals in Cluster programs the result of ADA compliant building availability? Are the supports and resources necessary (i.e. staff and differentiated materials) to integrate higher needs students in the general education classroom available and accessible to all schools? Is the issue related to school capacity?

When there is an increased number of students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, Tier 1 instruction and curriculum both need to be reassessed for efficacy. I would want feedback from staff and administrators in the schools in my subdistrict on the curriculums being implemented and if they need more training, more staff, or other support in order to implement them with higher fidelity. I would also ask how staff and administrators in schools in my subdistrict are including students in the Cluster program with their general education peers and what additional resources they need in order to do so. In my experience, implementing programs such as Young Athletes and Best Buddies into schools with Cluster programs results in an improved sense of community amongst students and staff across support levels and increases opportunities for inclusion of Cluster students with general education peers. I have seen first hand the use of these programs change school culture to be more respectful and inclusive.

Question 5:

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

Answer:**Pros:**

- Keeping students in their home schools gives them access to the academic and social opportunities with non-disabled peers that help build community.
- Normalizing diversity of learning and disability within schools normalizes diversity and disability within communities.

Cons:

-May result in an increase in IEP teams recommending this more restrictive learning environment if it is more easily accessible.

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:

Transition programs should be in place and working with organizations such as Access Living and businesses within a student’s own neighborhood/community in order to help them develop job skills that can be used to acquire employment post-graduation. My work at Saint Xavier University with adults with disabilities who recently graduated from transition programs has shown me the harm that results from a lack of communication and support regarding support services available to individuals once they turn 22 and age out of the public school system. The district should provide family education on topics such as registering for PUNS or obtaining legal guardianship before their student turns 18 in order to help students thrive as adults in their communities. Providing consistent and accessible parent education on these and similar topics is part of my goal to support special education families once I am elected.

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 is establishing sustainable, equitable funding for all neighborhood schools in order to reduce student-to-teacher ratios, ensure highly qualified staff are in place and adequately trained to differentiate instruction, and to guarantee that all students truly have access to the free and appropriate public education to which they are legally entitled.