

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Michelle N. Pierre****District: 1b****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 Dr. Michelle Pierre, an educator, CPS parent, and former teacher, principal, and district leader with nearly 30 years of experience in public education. My commitment to students with disabilities is also personal. As a child, I was identified with a hearing disability and received speech services. I remember those supports positively—not as something that defined me, but as additional help that allowed me to succeed. Throughout my career, I have taught in inclusive classrooms, led schools serving students with significant disabilities, and overseen academics in a large urban district. I am running for the Chicago Board of Education in District 1B because I believe every child deserves excellent instruction, the services they need, and a school system that responds to families. My experience has taught me that disability should never determine how much we expect a student to achieve.

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 too often they have to fight for services that their children are already entitled to receive. On the campaign trail, parents have repeatedly told me about difficulty getting appropriate supports, delays in services, and unanswered calls or emails when they are trying to resolve a problem. A parent should not have to become a special education expert simply to make the system work for their child. CPS needs clearer communication, stronger accountability for IEP implementation, sufficient staffing, and an accessible way for families to get problems resolved quickly. Boston Public Schools, for example, provides families with a dedicated special education guide and helpline to help them navigate services—an approach worth examining for Chicago.

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 first step is to move from identifying the problem to having a transparent, funded, multiyear accessibility plan. The Board should require a school-by-school accessibility assessment, prioritize improvements based on student and community need, establish a public timeline and budget, and report progress annually. Accessibility should also be incorporated into every major capital renovation rather than treated as a separate project. Most importantly, families should know what features are accessible at every school before they enroll or attend an event. A neighborhood school cannot truly be a neighborhood school if a child, parent, staff member, or community member cannot enter and fully participate in it.

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 would want to understand what is driving that increase before drawing conclusions. I would ask: What disabilities and student needs account for the growth? Are placements being made through

individualized IEP-team decisions or because schools lack staff and supports to serve students in general education settings? How many students move between more- and less-restrictive environments over time? Are academic and behavioral outcomes stronger for students in these programs? What opportunities do cluster students have to learn and participate with their nondisabled peers? And are families being meaningfully included in placement decisions? The central question should always be whether a placement is meeting an individual student's needs and not whether it is administratively easier for the system.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

I believe a strong school system needs a continuum of services. I served as a principal with citywide programs for students with autism, emotional- behavior differences, and intellectual disabilities, so I know there are students for whom a specialized classroom can provide the intensive services and environment they need. At the same time, specialized programming should never mean isolation or lower academic expectations. In my schools, special education and general education teachers planned together, including through lesson-study practices, so students were exposed to strong grade-level instruction with appropriate supports. We also intentionally created opportunities for students with disabilities to learn and participate alongside their peers. Cleveland's current special education framework reflects a similar continuum: services can range from supported general education to specialized classrooms based on the student's IEP, while emphasizing education with nondisabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

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 planning must begin well before a student turns 22 and should be connected to a real postsecondary pathway. Students should leave CPS with more than a completed IEP, they should have experiences that prepare them for employment, college or training, independent living, and participation in their communities. I would want CPS to strengthen partnerships with employers, City

Colleges, apprenticeship programs, state agencies, and community organizations; expand work-based learning and internships; and ensure families understand adult services before students leave CPS. Montgomery County Public Schools offers a useful model. Its transition services are explicitly organized around postsecondary education, job training, employment, adult services, independent living, and community participation. It also operates community-based programs for students ages 18–21 where they can practice employment and independent-living skills in real-world settings. Chicago has the size and employer base to build an equally ambitious transition system.

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 high-quality grade-level instruction combined with the individualized supports students need to access it. The proficiency rates cited in this questionnaire—10.5% in ELA and 7.1% in math for students with IEPs—are unacceptable and should cause us to examine both instructional quality and service delivery.

This has been a consistent focus throughout my career. As a fifth-grade inclusion teacher in Baltimore, my co-teacher and I differentiated instruction for all students without creating a visible divide between "special education" and "general education" students. At times I worked with students with IEPs while she worked with students without IEPs, and at other times we reversed those groups. Our students with disabilities achieved some of the highest gains in the county. As a principal, I required special education and general education teachers to plan together and use lesson study so that specialized supports were connected to grade-level expectations. As a district academic leader in Cleveland, I helped lead a systemwide focus on rigorous instruction and stronger supports for students with disabilities. NAEP later reported that Cleveland's fourth-grade students with disabilities improved in reading between 2013 and 2015. That experience reinforced my belief that students with disabilities can make significant academic gains when we combine high expectations, strong instruction, appropriate supports, and accountability for results.

The lesson I have carried through every role is simple: support and rigor are not opposites. Students with disabilities deserve both.