

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026Candidate: **Michael Neal**

District: 6b

Question 1:

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

Answer:

Before there was a campaign there was a commitment to serve the community and the city I was born and raised in. I have spent nearly all of my adult life serving in schools. Running for this seat is an extension of my service.

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:

The lack of system wide coordination, the turnover of leadership and the overall lack of knowledge and understanding of the importance and impact on families.

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:

Educating and advocating and collaborating with families and experts in the field to heighten the need.

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 inquire about best practices across the nation and the district. Also by reaching out to the teachers and support staff I would listen to the experiences and challenges that are being faced on a regular basis.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Students with learning disabilities deserve an opportunity to be exposed to a variety of instruction. This exposure would be beneficial to students. The con would be if a school isn't quite prepared or resourced to handle expanding cluster instruction.

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:

By actively pursuing opportunities for charitable and philanthropic partnerships we could create strong support and a plethora of resources designed to help and support students with career options as they graduate / age out of school.

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:

It would be similar and even more robust for the vision I have for all schools. To offer opportunities of learning and understanding that the education of our students needs to encompass the community as well as the in school educators. That combined with gathering highly resourced organizations would help to insure that families and students would receive quality information and a quality education.