

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026Candidate: **Michilla Blaise**

District: 5b

Question 1:

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

Answer:

Michilla Blaise is a CPS mom, Chicago Public Schools Board of Education Member for District 5B on the West Side of Chicago, and a Chicago native. Blaise began her public service career in 2007 as constituent services for an alderperson before founding Blaise and Associates, a group of campaign professionals supporting progressive candidates and issues. She has served on the boards of Westside Justice Center, the Northwest Home Equity Assurance Program, and the Grassroots Curriculum Task Force. As the District 5B Board Member, she is co-chair of the Black Student Achievement Committee, saved 2 top performing charter schools from being closed by their parent company, and Blaise has reinvigorated the fight for fully funded schools. Member Blaise has successfully lobbied Springfield and the City of Chicago for additional resources for CPS, established a working group to reimagine closed school buildings in the CPS portfolio, and convened a second working group to develop a framework to help under-enrolled schools.

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:

Disabled students and their families are often frustrated by how hard they have to work to secure the services that their children are required to have. I have heard stories of the impact of school administrators who will not allow children to be tested, about schools without the correct staff to support students with special needs, and buildings that are not fully ADA equipped.

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:

First, I have to underscore that the fight for fully funded schools must be revitalized and ramped up. We need the resources to address our aging school buildings. Our school repair priorities are based on crisis instead of improvements, but this year's budget included \$6M of ADA improvements. Their goal is to be able to provide at least first floor accessibility. The \$6M accessibility budget is not enough resources, and does not get us to where we need to be any time soon. We have to focus more attention to the needs of our disabled population.

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:

What is driving the increase in cluster classrooms?

What measurable target has the district established for reducing unnecessary separation from general education?”

Is this shift away from including disabled students in classrooms with students with varying abilities at the request of parents or is it easier for school officials?

Are we actually following the Least Restrictive Environment requirement?

Are we adequately funding co-teaching and inclusive instructional models?

Are schools receiving sufficient behavioral specialists and mental-health supports to keep students successfully included?

Are students from certain communities more likely to be moved into cluster classrooms than similarly situated students elsewhere in the district?

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Pro - Classrooms with general education students may be too loud, bright and/or active for some disabled students to feel comfortable and thrive. With this population, cluster programming may be a pro for some families. These students may see a gen ed classroom as inappropriate.

Con - The law requires CPS to move toward inclusion. Also, an over-reliance on cluster prams risks limiting disabled students from making friends and may result in lower academic performance.

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:

Begin transition planning early (ideally by age 14 or 14.5) to align Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals directly with the student's personal interests, career aspirations, and independent living goals.

Involve the student directly in leading their IEP transition meetings to foster self-advocacy and self-determination skills.

Expanded Vocational & Real-World Work Experience through internships and customized employment opportunities.

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:

Teachers need to be trained on how to support disabled students and learn co-teaching strategies so that instruction is differentiated effectively within inclusive classrooms. As a district, CPS need to aggressively recruit, retain, and allocate special education teachers, paraprofessionals, bilingual special educators, and related service providers (speech therapists, occupational therapists, behavioral specialists) to ensure every student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) accommodations and services are delivered consistently.