

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Norma Rios Sierra****District: 3a****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 running for the school board so that every student across our district can go to a fully resourced school where they feel welcome and safe. I'm running to be a voice for working and immigrant families to ensure opportunity and access for all our students, no matter where they live or where they come from. I am running to protect our schools and students from attacks by the federal government. And I'm running against corporate and outside interests that want to extract money from our public schools instead of investing in our students by making the wealthy pay their fair share.

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:

I have spent the past year and a half as a sitting board member trying to understand all the ways in which our families are frustrated. I see many gaps in communication and in the way CPS engages with families. I also think there is so much mistrust and past harm created by the decisions made by previous boards and leadership that even with the most intentional engagement, CPS struggles to connect with school communities. This is where I see so much value in an elected school board. Having the ability to elect candidates that are connected to the communities they represent is essential in helping repair the damaged relationships left by harmful decision making.

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:

I think the first step should be to develop a sustainable plan to make each and every school ADA accessible. I also know that these types of improvements also require adequate funding. I am in support of progressive revenue options that would help CPS be able to complete all capital improvement projects that make our schools accessible for all of our students, staff and families.

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 supports are provided to special education staff. I would also like to understand in what ways our principals and administration are trained and supported. I do know that budget cuts often create additional challenges in particular for our students and staff with special needs. Although CPS is seeing an overall drop in enrollment, the students that are enrolling have increasing needs and we need to be prepared to continue to support all of our students in environments that are healthy and safe and that create the best conditions for student success.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Although cluster programming can allow for ease in scalability and specialization, scheduling and coordinating can be complex and students may not experience consistent support.

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 think this is an excellent opportunity to collaborate with the many labor partners that exist in Chicago to expand our CTE programming. Expanding all the alternative options for work training and career support are critical for many students across the entire city. Increasing transitional supports and creating spaces where young people can continue to receive support outside of the school system also requires partnering with city and community partners.

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:

As an immigrant student myself I understand that when our ELA students receive the proper supports their ability to excel is limitless. I support wrap around services that help our students receive additional translation services and supports that can help them acclimate and adjust to their educational environment.