

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026Candidate: **Therese Boyle**

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:

For over 35 years, as a teacher and school psychologist, I spent my career in service to the students and families of our Chicago Public School communities - working in schools all across the South Side. Now retired, I remain committed to Chicago's students and families and I'd like to give back. I have a deep understanding of the complex issues faced by Chicago's students. I am running for reelection because I believe my experience and skill set represents a unique resource for the Chicago Board of Education.

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 often face deep and heartfelt frustration as they attempt to navigate the complexities of special education in CPS. There are frustrations with evaluation and placement delays. Parents sometimes express that they were not allowed meaningful participation in IEP development. Parents can be frustrated by placement options. Staffing shortages can mean IEPs for students with disabilities are not implemented. Parents of medically complex students worry when a full-time nurse is not assigned to a school. There are delays getting transportation assigned for students with disabilities. Referrals for specialized evaluations can take a long time. Bilingual parents can experience difficulty when a translator is not available at meetings. Many of our buildings are not ADA accessible for parents and students.

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 am familiar with the 2023 CPS Facilities Master Plan; both the current facility deficiencies/critical needs data and the ADA usability designations. Only 166 schools were designated as "usable" which means approximately 450 schools do not have an elevator. I met with a principal of a school in 9B and he has been pressing for an elevator - but it has not yet happened. There are 163 schools with planned capital projects this school year; only 8 are designated as ADA projects. During 2026-2027, the Board plans to begin to implement the recommended committee structure for governance. There is an "Operations" committee which would be a good place to start in terms of advocating for the CPS subject matter experts to develop a long-term building accessibility plan. The committees will be electing chairs/co-chairs at the September 10th Agenda Review Committee meeting.

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:

The Special Education Advisory co-chairs met to talk about possible SEAC priorities for 2026-2027 and LRE was number one on our list. The addition of 60 additional cluster classrooms for 2026-2027 certainly raises concerns around how the district is thinking about inclusive vs. restrictive settings. I had an opportunity to speak with Joyce Pae, principal of The Chicago Academy. Principal Pae told me how her

school has partnered with the Gust Foundation (gustfoundation.org) to successfully increase inclusive practices at The Chicago Academy. I wonder if the district needs to invest in some professional development for teachers and other service providers around inclusive practices?

Question 5:

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

Answer:

The pros and cons of cluster programming present an "efficiency vs. equity" conflict worthy of King Solomon's wisdom. On the plus side, cluster programs can allow clinicians and other specialized service providers to work in one location making it more efficient to provide and coordinate services. Clusters also provide an opportunity to optimize resources in classrooms where students may require specialized equipment/technology. Our Students with low-incidence disabilities in cluster programs are able to interact with peers who have similar challenges, which may reduce stress.

Personally, I believe there are more cons than pros to increasing cluster programming. Cluster program placements may mean students spend a lot of time on the bus getting to and from school each day. If a school does not offer a continuum of cluster programs, the students may be required to transfer several times to new schools to find an age-appropriate cluster program. Attending a cluster program often means students will attend a different school than their siblings and their friends from the neighborhood. Clusters may fall into a pattern of limiting students opportunities to integrate into general education classes and keep students segregated. I've seen cluster programs that were isolated into their own 'wing' of the school where there were limited opportunities for students with disabilities and general education students to interact. LRE is the law and the district is obligated to consider LRE with fidelity when developing IEPs.

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:

CPS has a Transition Services Team that supports schools in planning for post-secondary education, job development activities, independent living skills training, community-based instruction, and travel training for our students with disabilities. CPS Transition Services also can provide staff development

and family workshops to help connect our students with disabilities to adult services. CPS has Southside Occupational and Ray Graham which provide extensive transition supports. Vaughn and Northside Learning also work to prepare students for when they leave CPS and enter the community.

I am not aware of how CPS supports families in terms of getting our students with disabilities on the PUNS list while they are still enrolled at CPS. Perhaps this is an area where CPS can provide better supports to families?

Chicago Community Colleges have several programs (After 22, Project Wright Access, TRiO Student Support Services) to support students who are aging out of CPS at age 22.

The disability cliff comes when families try to navigate the complex web of government and nonprofit agencies to find and become eligible for resources after age 22. Perhaps CPS can partner with IDHS, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and non-profits to develop better scaffolding to support families whose children are aging out of CPS?

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:

Students with disabilities need access to the core curriculum. Outcomes for students with disabilities will improve with the right supports. I believe co-teaching and inclusive classrooms are the preferred model for improving outcomes.