

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026**Candidate: Victor P Henderson****District: President****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 a Chicago attorney, former Certified Public Accountant, product of public schools, and father who has sent my children to CPS. I am running for President of the Chicago Board of Education because education can transform a child's life, and I strongly believe that CPS needs serious, independent, accountable leadership focused on student outcomes. My legal and financial background has taught me the importance of accountability, sound management, and respect for professional expertise. My governing philosophy is straightforward: the Board serves students and taxpayers and works collaboratively with families, educators, school leaders, employees, unions, Local School Councils, advocates, and community partners to strengthen Chicago Public 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:

Families are frustrated because too often they must become experts in a complicated system simply to obtain services their children are entitled to receive. An IEP should be a plan for educating a child, not the beginning of a struggle over staffing, services, placement, transportation, or implementation.

CPS also carries a history of special-education compliance problems that has damaged trust. Rebuilding that trust requires more than policies on paper. Families need timely evaluations, understandable information, meaningful participation in IEP decisions, reliable delivery of services, qualified staff, and a clear place to turn when something is not working.

Just as important, families need to be talked to and heard. Communication should be regular, respectful, and understandable, and parents should not have to fight simply to get answers about their child's education.

We should measure our success by whether students actually receive the education and services their IEPs require, not simply whether the paperwork was completed.

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:

Accessibility cannot be addressed through isolated projects or one building at a time without a clear strategy.

I would support a public, multi-year accessibility plan tied to CPS's capital budget, with specific priorities, timelines, and regular reporting to the Board. I would also support public hearings and a standing working group that includes parents, students, disability advocates, school leaders, facilities staff, and accessibility experts so the people directly affected have a meaningful role in setting priorities.

The district should begin by identifying the most serious barriers to access and establishing a transparent process for determining which improvements move first. Accessibility must mean more than getting through the front door; students should be able to fully participate in classrooms, restrooms, cafeterias, libraries, gyms, auditoriums, playgrounds, and emergency procedures.

I acknowledge that CPS has limited resources, and improvements must be sequenced responsibly. But limited resources cannot become an excuse for the absence of a plan. Families and school communities should know what CPS intends to fix, when it intends to fix it, and how those decisions are being made.

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:

My first question would be: "What is driving the increase?"

I would want data showing who is being placed in cluster classrooms, broken down by disability, race, school, geography, grade level, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and year. I would ask whether these placements are the result of individualized IEP team decisions or whether staffing shortages, program availability, space, budgeting, or administrative practices are influencing placement.

Chicago has confronted this issue before. In Corey H., concerns were raised that placement decisions were being driven too heavily by disability classifications and systemic factors rather than the individual needs of students. I would want to know whether any of the current increase reflects a return to system-driven rather than student-driven placement.

I would also ask:

- What supplementary aids and services were considered before a more restrictive placement?
- Are parents meaningfully participating in placement decisions?
- What percentage of students move from cluster classrooms into less restrictive settings?
- How do academic, behavioral, attendance, and postsecondary outcomes compare?
- Are students able to participate with non-disabled peers in electives, activities, meals, and other parts of school life?
- Are particular schools, neighborhoods, socioeconomic groups, racial groups, or disability populations disproportionately represented?
- Does CPS have sufficient special-education teachers, paraprofessionals, related-service providers, and supports to make inclusion successful?
- Are funding or staffing structures unintentionally creating incentives toward more restrictive placements?

Federal law requires placement decisions to be individualized and based upon the student's IEP and educational needs. We should make certain that a student's placement is determined by what that child needs, not simply by what is easiest for the system to provide.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

There can be an appropriate role for cluster programming. Some students may need a more specialized setting, intensive supports, smaller instructional environments, or services that cannot be provided effectively in a general education classroom. The starting point, however, must always be the individual student and what setting best supports that student's learning and progress.

The concern is when a specialized placement becomes the default because of staffing, funding, space, or program availability. That can unnecessarily separate students from their nondisabled peers and limit access to the broader school experience.

I would not begin with a policy of either expanding or eliminating cluster classrooms. I would begin with the student. CPS should maintain a continuum of appropriate placements while ensuring that each decision is individualized, educationally justified, made with meaningful parent participation, and consistent with the requirement to educate students in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs.

The question should be: What does this child need to succeed—not what is easiest for the system to provide?

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 cannot begin when a student is preparing to leave CPS. Illinois law requires it to begin by age 14½, and those years should be used to build a real pathway to education, employment, independence, and adult services.

We should make much greater use of our partnership with the City Colleges of Chicago. Many CPS students already earn college credit while still in high school through dual credit and dual enrollment. Students with disabilities who are able to participate should have equitable access to those same opportunities, with the supports necessary to succeed. We should also strengthen connections to programs such as City Colleges' After 22 program, which combines education, life skills, internships, and employment support for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Transition plans should also connect students to career and technical education, apprenticeships, employers, organized labor, state agencies, disability organizations, transportation training, and independent-living resources.

The goal should be a genuine handoff, not a cliff. Before a student leaves CPS, the student and family should know what comes next, be connected to the appropriate programs and agencies, and have a clear path forward.

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 would be ensuring that every student's IEP translates into effective instruction, appropriate supports, and measurable academic progress.

An IEP cannot simply be a compliance document. CPS must have the qualified teachers, paraprofessionals, clinicians, related-service providers, instructional supports, and interventions necessary to meet students' needs.

The Board's role is not to dictate classroom methodology. It is to establish clear expectations, provide appropriate resources, and demand evidence of what is working. I would want educators, Principals, families, students, disability advocates, and special-education professionals at the table as CPS evaluates and strengthens approaches such as co-teaching, inclusive instruction, targeted academic interventions, assistive technology, and professional development.

We also need better accountability. The Board should regularly examine whether IEP services are actually being delivered and whether students are progressing. not only on proficiency measures, but



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through academic growth, attendance, graduation, inclusion, and postsecondary outcomes. Where disparities exist by disability, race, socioeconomic status, school, or neighborhood, we should understand why and respond.

The numbers cited in this questionnaire demonstrate a serious achievement gap. Our obligation is not simply to provide students with disabilities access to school. It is to give each student the instruction, support, and opportunity necessary to learn, grow, and succeed.