

Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

Candidate: **Hilario Dominguez**

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 Hilario Dominguez, a CPS graduate, a special education teacher, and a father. I grew up in Pilsen, the son of a house cleaner and a truck driver, and after Johns Hopkins I came home to teach, starting at Pablo Casals Elementary in Humboldt Park. I spent six years in special education, so I was in a CPS classroom during the years ISBE later found that this district had been denying students the services they were owed. I watched it happen to my own students, and I watched their families find out too late, if they found out at all. Most of what I know about this district, I learned from fighting for things my students were already owed. The people making those decisions were never in the room, and I think that should change.

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:

For several valid reasons, and I saw all of them firsthand as a special education teacher. The system assumes families already know what their child is entitled to. If a parent does not know what to ask for in an IEP meeting, nobody in that room is going to volunteer it. So outcomes track who has the time, the language fluency, the education, or the money for an advocate. Services get written into a plan and then do not get delivered, because positions are vacant or a provider is split across buildings. Families are usually not told when that happens. That is what ISBE found in CPS between 2016 and 2018.

And there is no straightforward way to get a problem fixed. A parent who raises something gets routed between the teacher, the case manager, the network and central office, and the timelines that are supposed to protect them are frequently missed. And we know all of this lands hardest

on Black and brown families and families who do not speak English at home. Corey H. was filed almost thirty years ago and we are still having this conversation. Enough is enough.

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:

We need to make a plan because right now there isn't one. The 2023 Facilities Master Plan calls accessibility a priority and stops there. I would push the Board to adopt a real roadmap with a target date, annual milestones, and a public report every year on what actually goes on.

We need to publish the condition of every building so families can look up their own school. We need to sequence the work by need, not by which buildings are easiest. That means starting where the gap is pushing students out of their neighborhood school, and on the South and West Sides, where the oldest buildings and the least investment overlap.

We need to fund it as protected capital. Accessibility work loses every year when it competes with staffing in an operating budget, so it needs its own pipeline. Our buildings average 86 years old with more than \$3 billion in deferred maintenance, and would use this office to fight for state and federal capital dollars.

A kid should not have to wait on an elevator to have a real choice, so that means honest information for families, transportation that works, and making sure accessible buildings are also the ones with the fewest programs.

This is not only about students either: Parents, teachers, and community members use these buildings, and they are polling places. They need to be accessible to everyone, for a variety of uses.

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 want to say up front what I suspect the answer is, because it shapes the questions. When a school cannot staff inclusion, meaning no coteacher, no SECA, a case manager carrying too many students, the fallback is to cluster kids. The placement decisions are about what a student needs and becomes about what the building can cover. If that is what is happening, then this is a staffing problem wearing an educational label.

Here is what I would ask:

Where is the growth concentrated? Which schools, which networks, which neighborhoods, and how does that map against vacancy rates for special education teachers, SECAs, and related service providers?

Who is actually making these placement decisions? Are IEP teams deciding, or is a placement effectively determined before the meeting by what the district says is available?

What is the racial and economic breakdown of the students being moved, and how does it compare to the district overall?

Are these newly identified students or students who were previously in general education and got reclassified. Those are two very different stories?

What is the district's LRE data trend since 2023, and where does that put us against Corey H. and against the state?

How many of these placements were requested or agreed to by families, and how many were presented as the only option available?

What would it cost to serve these same students in general education with the supports they are entitled to, and has anyone actually run that number?

And who at central office is accountable for the LRE trend line. If nobody owns it, that explains a lot?

I want these answers in public, disaggregated, and reported to the Board on a schedule.

Question 5:

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

Answer:

Cluster programs should exist. There are students who genuinely need a smaller, more intensive setting, and IDEA accounts for that. A well-staffed cluster room offers a lower ratio, staff with specific training, and an intensity that can be hard to build in a general education classroom. It can also be steadier for a kid than an understaffed inclusion setting where the teacher was never hired and the SECA keeps getting pulled to cover a lunchroom.

What worries me is when the setting gets chosen for the wrong reason. A student in a segregated placement can lose the peers, the curriculum, the expectations, and the social life of a general education room, and those are hard to get back. Placement tends to stick, so a student who lands in a cluster room could very well stay there. We also know it tends to concentrate by race and by income, which is the whole history behind Corey H. And once a district has cluster seats, they tend to fill, because a school with a placement available will use it.

A 250 percent increase does not look like a considered educational shift. It looks like what a district does when it cannot staff inclusion. If we could not hire the co-teachers and the SECAs, and clustering became the workaround, then we need to admit that we did not expand a program... instead, we found a cheaper way to comply ~~paper~~ while giving students less.

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:

We need to start earlier. Transition planning is supposed to begin at 14.5, and we know that it doesn't usually start that early as it is.

We need to make it part of career pathways instead of a separate track. One of my priorities is a paid job for every high school student before they graduate, built with the trades, the unions, City Colleges, and employers. That will include students with disabilities, and it will mean real jobs at real wages, not sheltered work.

We need to staff it. Transition specialists carry caseloads that make individual planning impossible, so the quality of a student's plan comes down to which building.

We need to connect families to the adult system before the cliff. Waiver waitlists, DRS, vocational rehabilitation, and Social Security work rules all take years, and starting at 21 is too late.

And we need to measure it. The district should publish what happens with these students after they exit: employment, wages, and whether they are connected to services. Nobody has to answer for the cliff right now because no one is paying attention to the outcomes.

Background

According to the 2024 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:

Staffing. If I only get one priority, that is it.

Look at what those numbers actually describe. A student is supposed to get thirty minutes a week with a reading specialist and gets ten, because the position is vacant or the provider is covering three buildings. So the priority is filling and holding these positions, meaning we need special education teachers, SECAs, case managers, therapists, psychologists, and social workers. That will take competitive compensation, caseloads people can actually carry, and pipelines through Grow Your Own so we are building this workforce out of the communities our schools already serve.

I will also have the district report publicly, by school, on whether students are getting the minutes their IEPs require, because right now a family has no way to know. Inclusion does not work without a co-teacher, transition does not work without a transition specialist, and cluster classrooms grow when there is nobody to staff the alternatives.