

Chicago Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: 3A

Candidates:

Peter Gonzales

Norma Rios Sierra

Candidate: Peter Gonzales

Question 1: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Peter Gonzales: I am Pete Gonzales, a parent, attorney, and catalyst for modernization change at the Illinois Secretary of State. Throughout my career, I have worked to advocate for people and families who too often struggle to have their voices heard, including veterans, immigrants, and survivors of domestic violence. I am running for the Board of Education because every child in Chicago deserves a strong neighborhood public school with the teachers, support staff, programs, and resources they need to succeed. I want to bring greater transparency and accountability to CPS, protect resources that directly serve students, and make sure parents, educators, and communities have a meaningful voice in the decisions affecting their 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?

Peter Gonzales: Families are frustrated because too often they have to fight for services their children are already entitled to receive. The special education system can be complicated and difficult to navigate, particularly for parents who may not know their legal rights or have the time and resources to continually advocate with the district. Staffing shortages can also mean that services promised in an IEP are delayed, inconsistent, or unavailable. CPS needs to treat families as partners, communicate clearly and consistently, make the IEP process easier to navigate, and ensure schools have enough special education teachers, clinicians, paraprofessionals, and other professionals to actually deliver the services students need. A family should not need an attorney or an expert understanding of CPS bureaucracy to secure an appropriate education for their child.

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?

Peter Gonzales: With more than 65% of CPS schools identified in the questionnaire as not fully ADA accessible, accessibility cannot continue to be addressed building by building without a comprehensive plan. CPS should conduct and publish a districtwide assessment of accessibility needs, establish a transparent long-term capital plan with measurable goals and timelines, and prioritize improvements based on need and community input. Accessibility should also be incorporated into every major renovation and capital project rather than treated as an optional addition. The Board should regularly review progress and funding so families can see which improvements are planned and when they will occur. Ultimately, students with disabilities should be able to attend their neighborhood schools, and parents, educators, staff, and community members with disabilities should be able to fully participate in school life.

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?

Peter Gonzales: The questionnaire notes that the number of cluster classrooms has increased by more than 250% since 2023, despite IDEA’s emphasis on educating students in the least restrictive environment whenever appropriate. I work hard to understand what is driving that increase and whether these placements are being determined by individual student needs or by broader staffing and resource limitations. I will ask for data on who is being placed in cluster programs, including breakdowns by disability, race, school, and geography; whether families are being meaningfully included in placement decisions; whether students are receiving appropriate opportunities to participate in general education classrooms; and what staffing or support would be required to serve more students successfully in inclusive settings. I will also doggedly fight to discover whether

shortages of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, clinicians, or other supports are influencing placement decisions that should instead be based on students' individual needs.

Question 5: In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of expanding cluster programming for students?

Peter Gonzales: Cluster programs can provide some students with a smaller setting, specialized instruction, and concentrated supports that may be appropriate based on their individual needs. But expanding separate programming can also create significant risks. Students should not be segregated simply because a school lacks the staff or resources necessary to support them in a general education classroom. Separate placements can reduce opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers and participate fully in their school communities. The goal should not be to eliminate an option that may be appropriate for some students, but to make sure placement decisions are individualized, made with meaningful family participation, and consistent with the requirement to educate students in the least restrictive environment. CPS must invest in the staffing and supports necessary to make meaningful inclusion possible.

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?

Peter Gonzales: Transition planning should begin well before a student approaches age twenty two (22) and should be individualized around that student's goals, strengths, and interests. The questionnaire specifically identifies the concern families have about the “disability cliff” when school-based services end. CPS should strengthen partnerships with employers, unions, apprenticeship programs, community colleges, state agencies, and disability service organizations so students have clear pathways into employment, additional education, and independent living. Career and technical education programs should be accessible to students with disabilities, and students should have opportunities for internships, work-based learning, transportation training, and independent living instruction. CPS should also work directly with families before students leave the district so they understand what services and supports are available after graduation rather than leaving families to navigate that transition on their own.

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?

Peter Gonzales: My top priority would be ensuring that every school has the qualified staff and resources necessary to implement students' IEPs and provide high-quality instruction. The proficiency gaps identified in this questionnaire are unacceptable: only 10.5% of CPS students with IEPs were proficient in English language arts and 7.1% in math according to the cited 2024–25 state report card. Improving those outcomes requires more than setting new targets. CPS must address vacancies among special education teachers, paraprofessionals, clinicians, and other support professionals; give educators manageable workloads and appropriate training; and make sure students receive the services and instructional time required by their IEPs. I will also demand the Board to regularly review academic and service-delivery outcomes for students with disabilities so we can identify disparities, determine what is working, and hold the district accountable for improving results.

Candidate: Norma Rios Sierra

Question 1: In no more than a paragraph, introduce yourself and why you are running to serve on the Board of Education.

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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?

Norma Rios Sierra: 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.