Chicago Board of Education Candidates
Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: 4A

Candidates:
Angel Alvarez
Ellen Sherratt
Karen Zaccor

Candidate: Dr. Angel Alvarez

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

Dr. Angel Alvarez: I am running for the CPS Board the parent of a child with a disability, a former CPS student, and president of the CPS Office for Students with Disabilities Family Advisory Board. For the past decade, I have advocated for CPS families. I served on two Local School Councils, was a leader in CPS's Parent Advisory Council, and created a district-wide survey of families of students with disabilities that went further than what the State currently collects. That work has extended to gifted education, English language learners, students experiencing homelessness, and fiscal accountability because I believe the same failures of identification, transparency, and follow-through show up across all of these areas. I'm running because CPS needs a Board members who has done this advocacy from the outside and knows exactly where the system breaks down.

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?

Dr. Angel Alvarez: I know why, because I'm one of them. I have filed complaints against CPS for these failures. CPS has systemic problems both identifying and serving students with disabilities. It takes CPS too long to identify children with disabilities because the district is not adhering to Child Find screening requirements, which mandate identification by age five. Moreover, the IEP process is overly bureaucratic and, at times, adversarial. I understand special education not just as a parent, but as someone who served on CPS's Parent Advisory Council, where I raised concerns that went unaddressed before the council was disbanded. I now serve as president of CPS's OSD Family Advisory Board, where I reformed meeting practices to provide rapid response to parent concerns. I have shared my research into disparities students with disabilities face in CPS with the Board and conducted a district-wide survey of families of students with disabilities that had a higher response rate than the survey conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education. I know parents are frustrated by how long the IEP process takes, the adequacy of accommodations, and the lack of compliance

with IEPs are not followed. To address this, I have proposed universal screening, the incorporation of SMART goals in every IEP, the use of research-based interventions, and the need to incorporate best practices and mechanisms of accountability across all our schools.

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?

Dr. Angel Alvarez: CPS has over $14 billion in deferred maintenance costs and no real strategy to make its buildings safe and accessible for all students. I attended those Facilities Master Plan meetings. Simply saying accessibility is a priority with no specific funding or timeline is a talking point, not a strategy. The district needs to stop hiding behind the excuse that its buildings are old and instead publish exactly which schools are inaccessible, why, the estimated costs to fix them, and when this will done. That means both long-term capital plan to fix the architecture itself, and a rapid-response system so that when something like an automatic door or elevator breaks, it gets fixed in days, not months. These issues are not just about our students, it impact teachers and staff with disabilities, parents with disabilities who should be able to attend school parent-teacher conferences, and community members who should be able to access schools when they are polling places. CPS has had this data for years. Failure to act isn't an oversight, it's a choice, and costs us more the longer we wait.

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?

Dr. Angel Alvarez: I will ask the same questions I have been asking. I am very familiar with the Corey H. settlement and have referenced it in my complaints against CPS. I also think the Endrew F decision requiring a "more than de minimis" educational benefit is more applicable when evaluating the appropriateness of cluster programs.

As president of the OSD Family Advisory Board, one of my stated priorities was to investigate "The operation of cluster programs within CPS, the changes over the years, and the outcome of students." I demanded that CPS share the exact number of children in cluster programs and asked why the numbers are ~3x higher than would be expected based on their stated criteria. I asked about their problems with transportation. I asked about the reporting of outcomes for students in cluster programs to see if they are actually serving the best interest of the students. I will continue to ask tough questions and continue to perform my own research because CPS is not living up to the standards our children deserve.

As a board member, I would ask the questions CPS has refused to fully answer so far. Why are cluster placements roughly three times higher than the district's own stated criteria would predict? Is the expansion of cluster programs being driven by staff shortages, funding incentives, principals defaulting to the easiest rather than least restrictive one, or other factors? What happens to a student's access to transportation, extracurriculars, and grade-level peers once they are placed in a cluster classroom, and is anyone tracking whether they ever transition back? Are we measuring outcomes at all? Under Endrew F., a placement has to provide more than a de minimum educational benefit, so CPS should have to show its data, not just intentions (as I have argued in complaints filed with the State). I've already been asking these questions as president of the OSD FAB, where I demanded exact enrollment numbers and pushed on transportation and outcome reporting. I'm familiar with the Corey H. settlement, Endrew F., and other case law because I've had to be. CPS won't answer these questions or truly address these problems unless someone with legal knowledge and a board seat forces them to. I'm the best person to do that.

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

Dr. Angel Alvarez: The strongest argument for cluster programs is a clinical one: just as patients would benefit from specialty care centers, children with disabilities would benefit from an environment designed around their needs, specialized equipment, educational resources, and well-trained teachers and staff who are experts in their condition. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who thrive in these settings and go on to Gallaudet or NTID are read examples of this working well. What gets discussed less is the community these students build with peers who share their experience. But cluster programs are not a panacea, and the rapid expansion of them comes with real costs.

The economic argument can never be what drives placement. Like policies for every child CPS should make, it must be in the best interest of the student, full stop. Cluster placement removes children from general education, limits their interactions with peers, and denies their non-disabled classmates the chance to learn alongside them. This risks stigmatizing disability rather than normalizing it. Worse, the

rapid expansion of cluster programs in CPS creates a moral hazard: it rewards schools for choosing the placement that's easiest to staff, not the one that's always the least restrictive or provides the best environment for the child, and the burden of a wrong placement falls entirely on the student and family, not the school or district. Moreover, it ignores externalities including the burden that transportation places on the family and the unsustainable way that CPS manages placement. That's why I pushed for clearer, stricter guidelines on when cluster placement is appropriate, and for an informed consent standard so families understand exactly what they're agreeing to, including the pros and cons, before a child is placed.

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?

Dr. Angel Alvarez: The disability cliff is real and endangers the livelihood of our students with disabilities when they do not have adequate support after graduation. The 18-22 transition years are a bridge as our children reach adulthood and must be treated as such, instead of an afterthought when the student is nearing graduation. Students and families must be taught about services through the Illinois' Division of Rehabilitation Services, transitioning into adult home and community-based service waivers, connecting with non-profit support groups, and entering the job market. Those connections have to start years before graduation, not the final IEP meeting before it.

That means earlier identification, accommodations students are actually owed, and IEPs built with an eye toward an uncertain future. That means CPS can't just recommend SMART goals, but must enforce their use and build best practices that keep improving. During the transition years, students need real work experiences, not as a fallback option for students who won't go to college, but as a legitimate and valuable path for any student with the talent and desire for it. Social-emotional learning also needs to extend beyond the classroom into real-world scenarios these students will actually face as adults. We have to prepare students for a job market that is changing quickly, as AI reshapes which career paths remain viable, students with disabilities need adaptable, diverse skills, not just a single narrow track that may not exist by the time they graduate. This problem is not limited to special education, but the need for reform is greater with our students. CPS can't do it alone. We have to actively push the city's workforce and youth-employment agencies to build real pathways for students with disabilities, and a board member should be the one holding both sides accountable for building it. If we do, when our children approach the cliff, they will soar.

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?

Dr. Angel Alvarez: My top priority is the most effective means of improving student outcomes: early identification and early intervention for students with disabilities. That's why I called for university screening to correct for CPS's lack of compliance with Child Find. This would empower families with the information they need to advocate for better accommodations and support their child's needs at home. But identification means nothing if CPS doesn't know what happens next. The district does not systematically investigate outcomes for students with disabilities, has not established best practices for their instruction, and does not track whether the curriculum it uses actually works for our students. This is highlighted with the rapid growth of cluster programs that lack sufficient evidence that they are in the best interest of the students who are placed. I've done some of this work myself: I called out CPS for not knowing what curriculum its own schools use for not requiring evidence-based outcomes. I've found outcomes for students vary significantly by school, proof that CPS could identify and replicate what works if it chose to look. And identification has to lead somewhere: I've shown that students with disabilities are systematically kept out of selective enrollment schools and gifted programs.

CPS needs to embrace the Endrew F. standard- more than de minimus progress- when evaluating whether these students are actually being served, not just placed. And I want to be clear about what's coming: when the state testing data is reported, proficiency rates for students with disabilities will show an increase from SY24. That will not be because of improved instruction or better support. It is largely because the State lowered its proficiency standards and because CPS has started identifying higher-functioning students with disabilities who were previously going without accommodations. The Board should not accept this as evidence of progress. Demand that policies focus on what's in the best interest of students and outcomes will improve for all students, especially those with disabilities.

Candidate: Ellen Sherratt

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

Ellen Sherratt: I am Ellen Sherratt. I hold a PhD in education built on a foundation in economics, and I have spent more than 25 years studying what makes teaching effective and how school systems build a workforce that delivers for students. I have contributed to more than 40 publications, worked with the Illinois State Board of Education and with legislators in Springfield, and helped lead the national push for the American Teacher Act, which would establish a $60,000 minimum salary for

teachers. I am running because I am deeply committed to building the best school system possible. I am not beholden to any one political interest - Not labor, not business or billionaire donors, not any single advocacy group, and not a mayor. I answer to the kids, and to the District 4A families who send those kids to school every morning. This is the first year every seat on this board is elected, which changes what accountability means, because the people who live with these decisions finally get to choose who makes them. I want to use what I know about evidence, budgets, and staffing to make CPS deliver what it already owes students, starting with the students this system has failed longest.

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?

Ellen Sherratt: As I talk to parents across District 4A, I hear a version of the same story over and over, and it is rarely a story about bad people. There are talented, committed professionals in the CPS special education department, and I have met principals, special education teachers, case managers, and special education classroom assistants who go far beyond what anyone could reasonably ask of them. Parents will tell you that themselves, usually in the same breath as their complaint. The frustration is not with the people. It is with the system that they are working inside of on a daily basis.

What families describe is a large bureaucratic system that they have been left to navigate largely on their own. I have spent my career studying how school systems staff and support classrooms, and one of the most consistent findings across that work is that the rules on paper matter far less than whether the adults inside a building have the time, the training, and the stability to follow them. That is what has broken down here. An IEP is a legal entitlement, not a favor, but in practice services tend to arrive when a parent pushes hardest, knows the vocabulary, can take a weekday morning off for a meeting, can afford an advocate, or can credibly raise the possibility of due process. That produces the inequity you would expect. Families with the most time, money, and English fluency get closer to what the law already promises them, and families without those advantages get less. Parents grow exhausted not because any single meeting is unbearable, but because the work of noticing never ends. An evaluation timeline slips. A case manager leaves in January and the replacement does not know the child. A classroom assistant position sits open and minutes quietly stop being delivered. Each time, the responsibility for catching the problem falls back on the parent.

I also think families are frustrated because they have heard promises before. After the state's findings that CPS had delayed and denied services to students with disabilities, an independent monitor was put in place and the district committed to reform. Families remember that. So when they are told that another plan is coming, a certain amount of skepticism is earned, and the district has not yet earned its way out of it. Underneath all of this is a system that has learned to treat special education as a compliance question rather than an instructional one. When success is measured by whether the paperwork is defensible instead of whether the child learned to read, families can feel the difference even when no one says it out loud.

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?

Ellen Sherratt: The Educational Facilities Master Plan already names building accessibility as an important priority, and that was the right call. What it needs now is to be far more explicit about the goals for achieving it. A priority without dates, dollar figures, and someone responsible for the schedule is a statement of values rather than a plan, and families with disabled children have been asked to accept statements of values for a long time.

Being explicit starts with publishing a building by building accessibility assessment that the public can actually use. A citywide percentage tells a parent nothing. A searchable record showing which entrances, restrooms, elevators, upper floor classrooms, playgrounds, and auditoriums are accessible at each school tells a parent whether their child can attend. That information already exists inside the district in some form, and making it public costs very little.

From there the plan should set an interim floor and a longer term goal of full accessibility. The floor should guarantee that every part of the city has at least one fully accessible neighborhood elementary school and one fully accessible high school within a defined number of years, because until that is true, the phrase neighborhood school remains a fiction for a child who uses a wheelchair. Full accessibility across every building will necessarily be further out, and I want to be straightforward about why. CPS’ capital resources are limited and there are real competing needs in buildings across this district. What matters is that we are making significant and steady progress toward it every year, and that we are reporting on that progress transparently enough that families can hold us to it.

My doctorate is in education, but the training underneath it is in economics, and I have spent a good deal of my career reading school budgets closely enough to know that priorities live or die in the capital plan rather than in the narrative section at the front. None of this happens without money that survives contact with the rest of the budget. Accessibility work should sit in a named, dedicated capital line rather than a category that gets absorbed the first time a boiler fails in February. This is where budget discipline stops being an abstraction. When the district carries expensive debt and passes budgets with unappropriated spending, capital dollars are precisely what get squeezed, and accessibility is precisely the line that loses the argument. A board serious about disabled students has to be serious about the district's finances, because one pays for the other. Finally, the board should hear a public annual report on progress: buildings completed, buildings remaining, dollars spent, dollars still needed, and how far behind schedule we are. It is also worth remembering that this is not only a student issue. When most of our buildings are not fully accessible, disabled parents cannot easily attend an IEP meeting, disabled neighbors cannot reach their polling place, and disabled

applicants are effectively excluded from working in our schools. The remedy is the same one, and the constituency is larger than we usually acknowledge.

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?

Ellen Sherratt: I want to start with what I think is at stake, because it shapes every question I would ask. Federal law gives students the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate for them, and I read that as a responsibility to educate children alongside their classmates, in their own neighborhood schools, whenever that can be done well. A child who is moved out of the building where their siblings and their friends from the block go to school loses something real, and their family loses the ability to show up at 2pm when something goes wrong. My concern is that the growth in cluster classrooms, whether by intention or simply by accumulation of individual decisions, may be pulling the district away from that right. Before I would support or oppose anything, I want to understand why it is happening.

Analyzing exactly this kind of data is what I have done professionally for twenty five years, so I would start with the least restrictive environment data itself, disaggregated and going back several years, broken out by school, by race, by neighborhood, by English learner status, and by disability category. If this pattern is concentrated in particular schools or particular communities, that tells us a great deal on its own.

The second thing I would want is the staffing data alongside it. I would ask how many of these placement changes followed a special education teacher vacancy, a classroom assistant vacancy, or a case manager departure at the child's home school. If placement decisions track staffing gaps rather than student need, then we are not really talking about a special education question, we are talking about a hiring and retention question wearing a different uniform.

I would also want to know who initiated each change. In what share of cases did the recommendation come from the IEP team, and in what share did it come from a network or central office administrator?

Were parents presented with a cluster placement as one option among several, or as the only option available? I would ask how many students placed in a cluster setting have since returned to general education, because a placement that students never leave is not really a placement, it is a track. I would ask what each setting actually costs per pupil including transportation, so that if a fiscal incentive exists we can say so honestly and build a guardrail against it. I would ask how far these students are traveling from home. And I would ask what the state's independent monitor has said about this trend and what the district has said in response, in the actual correspondence rather than a summary of it.

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

Ellen Sherratt: There are cluster classroom settings that serve some students well. For children with significant medical, behavioral, or communication needs, a small and consistently staffed room with specialized adults, the right equipment, and lower sensory demands can be genuinely better than a general education classroom. Concentrating specialized staff in one place can mean those staff are less thinly stretched. Some families ask for this placement and report that their child is calmer and safer because of it. Federal law contemplates a continuum of placements for exactly these reasons, and pretending that inclusion is always right for every child does not serve anyone. There should also be cluster programming in every community in Chicago, so students do not need to travel across the city for an appropriate placement.

That said, the central risk of expanding this programming is very real and needs to be named, too. Students have a right to be included in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible, and to be educated in their own neighborhood schools whenever that can be done. That is not a preference or a philosophy. It is federal law, and unnecessarily segregating children with disabilities from their classmates is not only heartbreaking for those children and their families, it is illegal.

Students in separate settings are less likely to be taught grade level content, and lowered expectations have a way of becoming self fulfilling. I have spent enough years inside the research on teaching and student expectations to take that risk seriously rather than treat it as a talking point. Very few students move back out, which means a placement made in first grade can shape a child's entire school career. Students are often moved away from their neighborhood and their peers, which carries a social cost we rarely count.

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?

Ellen Sherratt: The disability cliff is a real problem and families are right to fear it. A young person can spend twenty two years inside a system that knows them well, and then on a single day in June that system stops, and nothing on the other side is obligated to pick them up. Most of what goes wrong is a planning and coordination failure rather than a resource failure, and both of those are fixable.

The first piece is the IEP itself. Transition planning is supposed to begin by age fourteen and a half, and too often the transition section of the document reads like boilerplate that was copied forward from the previous year. Written well, it names a specific goal for life after school, identifies the concrete skills that goal requires, assigns responsibility for teaching them, and gets revisited honestly every year rather than restated. That is not an expensive reform. It is a question of whether the district trains and expects its teams to write these plans as though someone will actually rely on them, and whether the board asks to see evidence that they do. I would want CPS to sample transition plans and report on their quality, because right now no one outside the individual school knows whether they are any good.

The second piece is the handoff. The transition out of school should be a coordinated event with a checklist and a named contact, not a graduation ceremony followed by silence. Well before a student's final year, the district should be working alongside the state agencies that will serve that young adult, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, city workforce programs, community providers, and local employers, so that the adult supports are identified and open before the school supports close. Employers in particular are an underused partner. Paid work experience during the transition years is one of the strongest predictors of employment afterward, and CPS should be building standing relationships with employers across the city rather than leaving each school to find its own. I have spent years working with the Illinois State Board of Education and with legislators in Springfield, and I know how to get a district and a set of state agencies into the same room and keep them there, which is most of what this problem actually requires.

The third piece is knowing whether any of it worked. CPS should follow up with students with disabilities in the years after they exit and report publicly on employment, further education, and independent living. Evaluating whether programs actually deliver is the work I have done for my entire career, and I can tell you that a system which does not measure its results will not improve them. At the moment the district largely does not know what happens to these young people after they leave, and that is a choice we could stop making.

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?

Ellen Sherratt: My top priority would be making sure that every student with a disability is taught by a prepared, supported, and stable adult, and then holding the district accountable for whether those students is meeting their IEP goals and making academic progress.

Proficiency of ten and a half percent in English language arts is not a statement about what these children are capable of. The large majority of students with IEPs have disabilities that do not preclude reading at grade level. A number that low is a statement about instruction, about whether the teachers serving these students have been trained in evidence based reading instruction, whether they have the time and materials to deliver it, and whether they stay in the building long enough to know the child in front of them.

That is the work I have done for twenty five years, so I would push on three things. The district should publish monthly vacancy reporting by school for special education teachers, classroom assistants, case managers, and related service providers, fill the highest need schools first, and enforce caseload limits rather than treating them as aspirations. It should invest in structured literacy training with real follow up coaching for every teacher who serves students with IEPs, rather than a single day of professional development in August. Illinois has adopted a statewide literacy plan, and CPS should be the district that implements it most seriously for the students furthest behind instead of the last one to get there. And it should report proficiency and growth for students with IEPs by school every year, presented publicly to the board rather than buried in an appendix.

There is one group that belongs in this answer and is almost always left out of it. Special education classroom assistants spend more direct time with our highest need students than nearly anyone else in the building, and they are frequently left out of the district's professional development entirely. An assistant can be placed with a child who has complex communication, behavioral, or medical needs and be expected to work it out on instinct. I am endorsed by SEIU Local 73, which represents these assistants across CPS, and what I hear from them is not a request for less work. It is a request for real training. That means paid time to attend it, instruction in the specific strategies their students actually need, and coaching that continues across the year rather than a single orientation at the start of it. If we are serious about outcomes for students with disabilities, we cannot keep treating the preparation of the adults closest to those students as an afterthought.

Candidate: Karen Zuccor

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

Karen Zucco: It's critical to have a team (11 or more board members) that is unified behind fighting to transform CPS into a system that embraces equity in actions, not just words. That includes working to make CPS a Sustainable Community Schools district according to the true vision of SCS. It includes implementing the Black Student Achievement Plan and the Whole School Safety Policy with fidelity. It includes ensuring that our most vulnerable students have the supports they need to succeed and are not treated as second class citizens, as has so often been the case. It includes a continuous fight for progressive revenue and rejection of austerity practices. I bring 40 years of experience fighting for education justice, 29 years of teaching, 15 years of being a CPS parent, and 2 years of behind the scenes leadership on the board to building an effective team.

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?

Karen Zucco: It's frustrating on many levels: getting your child assessed, understanding what their IEP or 504 plan provides for them, communicating with relevant staff about progress and making sure your child has everything they are entitled to in order to progress, feeling like a full participant in IEP meetings, getting concerns addressed, ensuring transition plans–the list goes on. Parents can end up feeling like if they don't advocate, their child might lose out because everybody's eyes are not always on the prize. And that's not a burden parents should have to bear. I'll give just one small example from my school. My school held quarterly meetings for parents whose children were in the cluster program. They did not investigate when was the best time and held the meetings at 3 in the afternoon. Very few parents were able to attend then, so they lost out on the opportunity to get information and to meet other parents whose children were in the program. It ensured less discussion about problems, less opportunity for collective advocacy and contributed to parents feeling like their children and their voices didn't matter.

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?

Karen Zucco: As little money as CPS has for capital development, making buildings accessible for those with physical disabilities will be a slow process, so step one is definitely to demand the funding to which CPS is entitled. But it also goes without saying that the district needs to immediately develop a plan, and it is my general belief that whenever major plans are created, there should be participation of the stakeholders involved. So students and staff with disabilities and their families should be involved in crafting this roadmap. Not all schools are taking actions to maximize accessibility in how they use school spaces. In my school, we had a number of students in wheelchairs. We had only one

first floor classroom so that was put to use. One possible action is to use dividers or repurpose first floor rooms that weren't originally meant to be classrooms to create more classroom spaces that are accessible. In schools that already have first floor classrooms, instead of automatically having the youngest children on the first floor, schedule room use from the point of view of providing accessibility. A second thing my school did was to make some modifications to the freight elevator so that students accompanied by teachers could use it. That helped not only the students in wheelchairs, but students and teachers with injuries that prevented them from using the stairs. Some schools have elevators that are not currently usable but could be made usable, so that is something that could increase accessibility. It's not only getting upstairs to the classrooms, it's also redesigning bathrooms to be accessible. The district has a plan through which it rehabs a girls bathroom, a boys bathroom, and a teacher bathroom in an admittedly small number of schools per year. They should ensure they are prioritizing schools with a population of people with disabilities and also ensure that part of the rehab involves making the bathrooms accessible. The failure to develop a plan illustrates how often the needs of students with disabilities are not at the forefront of CPS's agenda. So once we have a plan, we will need to take action to make that a priority for capital development.

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?

Karen Zucco: This year we were told that 60 new cluster classes were added. That seems like a very high number, and in truth I did not ask questions about that, so I will need to go back and ask these for real. (1) Are the cluster classes being added concentrated in a particular grade level?
2) If cluster classes for older students are increasing, why weren't the students assessed at a younger age? Or is the increase because we are lowering class size for cluster classes?
3) If students are younger, what is the difference in criteria that has led to the increase this year?
4) Especially for the very youngest students, have we tried a more inclusive model first? If not, why not?

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

Karen Zucco: My high school had a large cluster program. I was a gen ed teacher, but twice I taught a science class to cluster students, including a group that needed AAC devices to communicate. It would have been extremely challenging to teach my cluster students and gen ed students in the same classroom. I would essentially have been teaching two different classes at the same time. So I do think there is a need for cluster classrooms. But in terms of expansion, only once did I have a student that I thought maybe needed to be in a cluster setting, and twice at my school students were transferred out of the cluster program. That leads me to think that expansion is due to a higher percentage of students being designated as needing a cluster program at the youngest ages. I know that students are being diagnosed with autism at a higher rate due to better methods, but it does make me wonder why we were able to include a higher percentage of students in the regular classroom previously and whether there are other things we could be trying and learning about how to better support more students in an inclusive setting.

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?

Karen Zucco: I have visited a school where students were regularly going out to sites where they could authentically practice job skills in addition to having those skills be part of their class work. But that kind of programming is not universal and it needs to be. It's very important that we have opportunities for young people after they age out that fit their abilities. That requires not only that schools themselves work intentionally on job skills, but that CPS finds partners in the larger community that can benefit by having employees with cognitive disabilities and are willing to be part of a hands-on training process. It's not realistic to think that those students will be able to navigate the world of work on their own. It should be a higher priority for CPS to ensure that our students with intellectual disabilities have a pathway to employment just like planning for the future is a priority for our gen ed students.

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?

Karen Zucco: By definition, students with learning disabilities have normal intelligence. So the evidence suggests that we are not adequately providing the tools to learn the material in different

ways that work with students' disabilities. We might also need to consider the particular method of assessment as well. Just as we know that standardized tests tend to reflect socioeconomic status, it is possible that pen and paper or computer based tests reflect more standard ways of processing information. I had students that I used to test orally–same test, but the student was able to talk to me about the particular concept instead of writing it all–and they were able to show proficiency. So I would say there's a variety of things we need to address, from better teaching methods to normalizing alternative assessments.