

Chicago Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: 5A

Candidates:

Aaron “Jitu” Brown

LaPamela Williams

Candidate: Aaron “Jitu” Brown

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

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: I am Aaron "Jitu Brown". I am the current school board representative in District 5A. I am the National Director for the Journey for Justice Alliance. I have spent over thirty years doing educational justice work. Educational equity and justice are the core of my reasons for the vision of Sustainable Community Schools. I am running to continue to fight for the ability for all Chicago Public School Students to receive the education they deserve with equitable resources across the entire school system. Education should not be a place where students are given barriers to success. Education should be a place where students are given the tools to excel and the foundation to build on a viable future.

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?

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: Families are frustrated because they haven't received the support and resources they and their students deserve. When the education system doesn't provide the proper support, frustration is reasonable and valid. School should be a safe place for the children experiencing these challenges. It has often shown not to be. The services needed and the personnel needed have not been increased but, in many ways, decreased. Special education students, students with disabilities, and their families should know they are seen, valued, heard, and prioritized. Families who need special education services have had resources stripped, and they deserve to have those resources restored and their needs prioritized. Special education students should have the same access to a well-rounded educational experience as their peers.

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?

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: The district needs to come up with a formal, actionable plan. Accessibility is a duty of the education system and a birthright to students. A current evaluation of what every school is missing to meet the ADA accessible requirements needs to be completed. CPS needs a short- and long-term plan with built-in accountability for when and how the plans will be completed, and it must share and communicate this to parents and students.

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?

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: As a board member, my questions would start with how the district defines “least restrictive environments”. Leaders need to be able to identify and define what qualifies as a least restrictive environment. What is the baseline? What factors are being used to decide what best benefits these children? Are children being moved to other environments for the student’s benefit or for the teachers and/or administrators preference? What have the research and data shown best serve students’ educational and social success and acclimation? I would also ask how classrooms are being structured and designed. Are all classrooms receiving the tools to accommodate students with disabilities or just some rooms throughout the building? Is this a function of poor design or of efficiency? How students are grouped should be about the quality of the full educational experience. Emotional, academic, social, and peer health all matter. Isolating students is not the solution when it strips them of other equitable educational experiences with their peers.

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

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: Cluster programming expansion can serve to be useful or detrimental to families and students. Some pros to expanding the program would be families having more options, students being able to be in environments with more resources and services to help them excel, and having specially trained educators and more one-on-one time with educators. Another huge pro is having an environment that gives them more flexibility and adapts to their needs first and foremost. Cons of expanding the programming are students being pushed to these environments even when they don’t need to be, students being forced away from their peers and potentially feeling ostracized, and families having to place their children in separate schools instead of having all the accommodations in one place.

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?

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: As students approach the transition years, they should be assisted with plans and resources specific to their individual situations. Opportunities to participate in pathways and services for the next stage of life should be provided during this transition. They should be given training and a family support caseworker whose sole priority is making this transition smooth. Partnerships with colleges, living centers, community organizations, government services, and other initiatives should be sought out by educators so they are not pushed out but instead given new additions to their care team. Care doesn’t and shouldn’t stop because someone ages out. Infrastructure can and should be put in place to make that bridge to the next stage of life as seamless and as healthy as possible.

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?

Aaron “Jitu” Brown: My top priority would be implementing systems and methodologies that have shown success in increasing proficiency in math and ELA. There is enough research and case studies for us not to fail students in their education. Taking a serious look at what has worked and what doesn’t will be the first step. Then getting the right support for students and their families. Students have the capacity to learn, and we must make sure that potential is realized. There should be additional training provided to teachers and additional support given to the students. I think mentoring,

tutoring, and even after-school programming aimed at proficiency must all be a part of the plan to close this learning gap.

Candidate: LaPamela Williams

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

LaPamela Williams: My name is LaPamela Williams, and I was born and raised on Chicago's West Side in the Austin community. I'm a proud CPS and Lane Tech graduate, and I come from a family of educators. I'm running for the Chicago Board of Education to help put the trust back in our neighborhood schools, make a positive impact on students academically, and ensure the schools in our communities are truly thriving. I believe every student deserves a quality education, the right support, and the opportunity to succeed.

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?

LaPamela Williams: I think a lot of the frustration comes from families trying to navigate a system that can already be difficult to understand, while schools are also dealing with limited resources, staffing shortages, and funding challenges. Parents want to know that when their child needs additional support, those services will be available. I believe we must make sure special education is properly funded, resources are getting where they are needed most, and families have clear communication throughout the process. At the end of the day, every student should have the support they need to be successful.

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?

LaPamela Willaims: CPS has already taken steps to improve accessibility, and I believe we need to build on that work with a clear, long-term plan. We should prioritize schools with the greatest needs, establish realistic timelines, and dedicate funding to continue making progress. This cannot happen overnight, but we should be accountable for moving the work forward. If neighborhood schools are truly going to serve their communities, every student, parent, educator, and community member should be able to access them.

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?

LaPamela Willaims: I would first want to understand what is driving such a significant increase. Are these placements based on the individual needs of students, staffing or resource limitations, or a broader change in district practice? I would also ask whether families are being fully included in placement decisions, whether schools have the resources and trained staff needed to support students in general education classrooms, and what outcomes we are seeing for students in cluster classrooms. The focus should always be on what setting gives each student the best opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed.

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

LaPamela Willaims: There can be benefits to cluster programming when it provides students with more individualized support, specialized staff, and an environment that meets their specific needs. The concern is when students are placed in separate classrooms because a school lacks the staffing or resources to support them in a general education setting. We must be careful that expanding cluster programs does not unnecessarily separate students from their peers. Placement decisions should be based on the individual needs of each student and where they have the best opportunity to learn and succeed.

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?

LaPamela Willaims: We must start preparing students for life after CPS well before they reach age 22. That means connecting students and families to career training, employment opportunities, independent living skills, and community resources while they are still in school. CPS should also strengthen partnerships with employers and organizations that can continue supporting students after graduation. The goal should be a real transition plan so students and families know what comes next and are prepared for it.

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?

LaPamela Willaims: My top priority would be making sure students with disabilities are receiving the academic support and services they need to make real progress in the classroom. An IEP should not just be a document; it should translate into effective support for that student. That means having qualified staff, providing the right resources, tracking student progress, and adjusting support when something is not working. We must focus on outcomes and make sure every student has a real opportunity to succeed academically.