

Chicago Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: 7A

Candidates:

Jesus Ayala, Jr.

Emma Lozano

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

Jesus Ayala, Jr: I'm a proud Chicago native, son of Mexican immigrants, CPS graduate, education advocate, and nonprofit leader who has dedicated my career to expanding opportunity for Chicago students. After learning English in CPS and benefiting from the mentorship, resources, and opportunities available through public education, I went on to college and built a career helping young people access those same kinds of supports. At City Year Chicago, I worked with 9th-grade students at Gage Park High School to help them stay on track academically; at One Million Degrees, I helped City Colleges of Chicago students connect with scholarships, tutoring, mentorship, and other resources to persist and succeed; and at MetroSquash, I helped lead programs combining academics, athletics, mentorship, and college and career preparation to help students reach their potential. I have also served CPS as a Community Representative on a Local School Council. I'm running for the Chicago Board of Education to ensure every student, regardless of neighborhood, income, language, or disability, has meaningful access to the opportunities, services, and support they need to thrive.

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?

Jesus Ayala, Jr: Families are frustrated because too often they are required to become experts and advocates in a complicated system simply to secure services their children are already entitled to receive.

An IEP may promise services, but staffing vacancies, delayed evaluations, transportation problems, inconsistent communication, confusion, or administrative barriers can mean those services are not actually delivered.

Families may also have to navigate multiple departments and repeatedly advocate for information or follow-through with varying levels of support and success. That burden is especially inequitable for families facing language, time, financial, or other barriers.

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?

Jesus Ayala, Jr: CPS should adopt a transparent, multi-year accessibility plan with clear priorities, timelines, estimated costs, and regular public reporting. Accessibility also needs to be a core pillar for any long-term planning at CPS and should be incorporated into every major capital project or planning rather than a separate priority.

The district should maintain a comprehensive accessibility assessment of every facility and prioritize improvements based on student and community need. There should be a shared understanding of the state of accessibility at our facilities including entrances, bathrooms, classrooms, elevators, common spaces, and emergency procedures.

The Board should also engage the community directly in establishing priorities. Ultimately, a community school cannot truly serve its community if students, parents, staff, or community members with disabilities cannot fully access it.

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?

Jesus Ayala, Jr: I would want to know:

- Where are cluster classrooms expanding?
- Which students are being placed in cluster classrooms?
- Are there any trends in terms of demographics or geography in the above data?
- How are these decisions being made? and documented?
- What do supports look like in cluster classrooms? How is it better than non-cluster classrooms? What are the gaps?
- What does the data say about the student experience, growth, and outcomes?
- And, how are students experiencing their education? What is their experience? How are families involved and experiencing this?

The Board should understand whether this growth reflects student need or whether the system is adapting students to available programs instead of providing the supports students need, and what these tradeoffs ultimately mean for our students.

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

Jesus Ayala, Jr: Cluster programming can provide smaller settings, more individualized and specialized supports, concentrated expertise, and productive environments that some students may need to make meaningful academic and developmental progress.

For an individual student, that may be the appropriate placement identified through the IEP process. The concern is when separate programming becomes a system-wide solution to staffing, capacity, or resource problems. Over-expansion can unnecessarily separate students from their peers, limit access to general education coursework and activities, create lower expectations, and make a student's neighborhood school unavailable to them. I would not begin with the assumption that either inclusion or a cluster classroom is appropriate for every student; placement should reflect each student's individual needs and the least restrictive environment in which they can meaningfully succeed, not what is most administratively convenient for CPS.

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?

Jesus Ayala, Jr: Having worked directly with young people at One Million Degrees and MetroSquash, I have seen firsthand the difference between strong transition planning and what happens when that planning falls short.

CPS should begin meaningful transition planning, in partnership with students' support networks, well before a student reaches the end of their eligibility, building an individualized pathway around their goals for employment, continued education or training, independent living, and community participation.

We also need to recognize that success after high school does not look the same for every student. For some students, an affordable and accessible pathway through our community colleges may be the right next step provided they have the supports to succeed. For others, programs like National Louis University's P.A.C.E. program, which combines employment preparation, independent-living skills, academics, and community-based experiences for young adults with intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities, demonstrate what a more comprehensive transition model can look like.

CPS should build stronger partnerships with these kinds of institutions, employers, workforce programs, and adult-service providers before a student exits the district, so families are not handed a list of resources at age 22 and students are handed off to the next system while they are expected to navigate that next system.

I would also want CPS to track what happens after students leave, employment, education and training, independent living, and successful connections to adult services, so we know whether our transition planning is actually preparing students for the lives they want to lead. And, so that we can strengthen and inform our work moving 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?

Jesus Ayala, Jr: My platform starts with centering students: their experience in our schools, their growth, and ultimately their outcomes.

Next, I want to ensure that we have an honest assessment on whether our students are receiving the baseline educational services they are entitled to. For students with disabilities, that means looking beyond whether an IEP exists on paper and asking whether students are actually receiving the instruction, services, accommodations, and support they need to make meaningful progress.

My top priority would be closing the gap between what students are promised and what they experience day to day. As a Board member, I would push for clear reporting on special education staffing, delivery of IEP services, evaluation timelines, student growth, and access to the least restrictive environment appropriate to each student. I want to partner with families and organizations like yours to ensure that we are collecting the right information and looking at it with shared goals.

We should use that information to identify where students are being underserved and collaborate on how to best deploy resources accordingly. If we are serious about improving outcomes, we have to measure success by whether students with disabilities are learning, growing, and thriving, not simply whether the system is technically or legally compliant.

Candidate: Emma Lozano

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

Emma Lozano: I have spent my life fighting for Chicago families, immigrant communities, and neighborhood public schools. I am a longtime education and immigrant rights organizer, pastor, former Local School Council leader, and current member of the Chicago Board of Education. I am running because the transition to a fully elected Board is an opportunity to put students, parents, educators, and communities at the center of decisions about our schools. Every child, including students with disabilities, deserves a high-quality education in a safe, welcoming, and fully supported neighborhood school. We must build a system that respects the rights of students and families and provides the resources they need to thrive.

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?

Emma Lozano: Families are frustrated because the system too often places the burden of navigating complicated processes on parents rather than making CPS responsible for ensuring that students receive the services and supports to which they are entitled. Families can encounter delays in evaluations and services, difficulty accessing appropriate placements and resources, inconsistent communication, and a lack of transparency about decisions affecting their children. Parents should not have to become experts in special education law simply to ensure their child receives a Free and Appropriate Public Education.

CPS needs to treat families as partners rather than obstacles. That means transparent processes, timely services, adequate staffing, clear accountability, and meaningful parent participation in decisions. It also means listening directly to students with disabilities and their families about what is and is not working.

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?

Emma Lozano: CPS should develop and publicly adopt a comprehensive, funded accessibility roadmap with clear timelines and accountability for bringing schools into compliance and making them genuinely accessible to students, families, educators, and community members with disabilities. Accessibility cannot be treated as an occasional capital improvement; it must be incorporated into long-term facilities planning and annual budgeting.

The district should conduct comprehensive accessibility assessments of every school, prioritize schools where students currently face the greatest barriers, and establish public benchmarks for progress. Capital planning should include accessible entrances, elevators, bathrooms, classrooms, playgrounds, and other necessary infrastructure. CPS should also meaningfully involve disabled students, parents, educators, and community members in identifying barriers and evaluating proposed solutions. A neighborhood school is not truly a neighborhood school if a student with a physical disability cannot attend it.

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?

Emma Lozano: I would want the district to provide transparent, school-by-school data showing who is being placed in cluster classrooms, why those placements are being made, and whether those placements are consistent with each student’s IEP and the requirement to educate students in the least restrictive environment.

I would ask:

- What factors are driving the dramatic increase in cluster classrooms?
- Are staffing shortages, lack of appropriate supports, or insufficient training contributing to these placements?
- Are students being placed in more restrictive settings because the general education classroom lacks the staff and resources to support them?
- How often are IEP teams considering and documenting less restrictive options?
- What opportunities exist for students in cluster classrooms to participate meaningfully with their general education peers?
- Are there racial, geographic, or other disparities in placement?
- What are families and students reporting about these placements?
- What is CPS doing to ensure that inclusion is actually possible rather than simply a policy on paper?

The goal should not be to eliminate specialized programming when it is genuinely appropriate for a student. The goal should be to ensure that placement decisions are individualized, legally compliant, based on student needs, and not driven by staffing shortages or inadequate resources.

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

Emma Lozano: Specialized classrooms can provide important benefits for students who need a level of individualized instruction, staffing, therapeutic support, or structure that may not be available in a general education classroom. We should not deny students services they genuinely need in the name of inclusion.

However, expanding separate programming also carries significant risks. Overreliance on cluster classrooms can unnecessarily segregate students with disabilities from their peers, reduce access to the broader curriculum and school community, and conflict with the principle of educating students in the least restrictive environment. It can also become a substitute for investing in inclusive classrooms, special education staff, related services, and appropriate accommodations.

The answer is not one model for every student. CPS needs to build the capacity to provide meaningful inclusion while maintaining high-quality specialized programs when an individualized education plan determines that they are appropriate.

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?

Emma Lozano: Transition planning needs to begin early and be treated as a central part of a student's education rather than something that happens shortly before graduation. CPS should ensure that students with disabilities have individualized transition plans that connect them to employment, vocational training, higher education, independent living resources, transportation, healthcare, and community services.

Schools should build stronger partnerships with employers, unions, community organizations, colleges, vocational programs, and agencies that support people with disabilities. Students should have access to internships, career exploration, job training, and paid work experiences while they are still in school. This should include pathways into green careers and other growing industries.

We also need to address the "disability cliff" by strengthening the connections between CPS and post-secondary services so families are not left to navigate a completely different system alone when a student ages out of CPS. Students and families should be given clear information and support well before the transition occurs.

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?

Emma Lozano: My top priority would be ensuring that every student with a disability actually receives the individualized services, qualified staff, instructional support, and accommodations guaranteed by their IEP or 504 plan. Academic outcomes cannot improve if students are waiting for evaluations, missing related services, or sitting in classrooms without the support they need.

CPS must invest in the people who serve students—special education teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, social workers, clinicians, and other specialists—and establish transparent workload and staffing formulas so schools have the capacity to meet student needs. I support full-time case managers, social workers, nurses, and appropriate clinician-to-student ratios, as well as transparent workload formulas aligned with state guidance.

We also need to measure success beyond test scores. Students with disabilities deserve rigorous academics, meaningful inclusion, social-emotional support, and preparation for life after graduation. Families must have a real voice in evaluating whether the system is working. Our responsibility as a Board is to make sure disability is never treated as a reason to lower expectations or deny a child the opportunities available to their peers.