

Chicago Board of Education Candidates Disability Questionnaire 2026

District: President

Candidates:

Jessica Biggs
Hilario Dominguez
Sendhil Revuluri
Victor Henderson

Candidate: Jessica Biggs

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

Jessica Biggs: I started my career as a special education teacher, and that experience has informed how I have understood every teacher I have met since. In my schools, I was the person who made sure IEPs were written well and written comprehensively, with a strong team around the table, and then actually followed. I carried that into the principal's office at Burke Elementary in Washington Park, and I carry it now as a CPS parent and as the leader of the Southwest System of Care at the Southwest Organizing Project, where I build partnerships between schools, health providers, and community organizations to support the whole child. For the last two years, I have served on the Board of Education representing District 6. I have voted according to my conscience, including against an amended FY2027 budget built on \$150 million in state funding that was never committed. I am running for President because of the obligation this district owes its students, particularly to students with disabilities. That obligation is nonnegotiable, and it is not simply a line item. A board president's job is to hold everyone in this system accountable for every child.

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?

Jessica Biggs: CPS is a bureaucracy that has too often made families carry a burden that the district is legally required to carry itself.

I have sat at a lot of IEP tables as a special education teacher and later as a principal. I know what it takes to write a plan well and then actually deliver it with the staff and hours a school has. I have also watched families walk into those meetings already exhausted, because they had to fight to get an evaluation, to get services written into the plan, and to get those services delivered. That is simply not a communication problem. That is what happens when a system routinely makes the parent its enforcement mechanism. Understanding eligibility, least restrictive environment, procedural

safeguards, and how to challenge a placement is a full-time job. Families with resources hire advocates and attorneys; families without them get the default. The inequity starts there, before a single service is delivered.

Delay is the most common form of denial in this district. Most of it is not anyone's intent. It is late evaluations, positions that sit unfilled, services that exist on a plan but not on a schedule, placements that are not finalized when the school year starts, and transportation that does not materialize -- a child who has no bus route has no school, if this is what their IEP says. But a year of a child's life is not recoverable, and no compensatory remedy gives it back. Whether the cause was neglect or paperwork makes no difference to that family.

There are good people doing this work inside CPS, including in the Office for Students with Disabilities. I have worked alongside them. The problem is that we ask them to hold together a system serving tens of thousands of students with a level of staffing and support that does not match the obligation, and then we reorganize that office and change the staffing model in ways families and school teams learn about after the fact. The 2018 state public inquiry found that CPS procedures themselves were delaying and denying services, and families remember that. Real improvements have been made since then. But trust does not rebuild on the same timeline as compliance. When the ground keeps moving underneath them, families stop believing what the district tells them.

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?

Jessica Biggs: The district has the facility data. What it does not have is a plan, a target, or a deadline to reach ADA compliance. Until it has all three, accessibility will keep losing to whatever other capital issue is more urgent - or politically expedient - in a given year.

The first step is for the board to adopt an actual accessibility roadmap. The Facilities Master Plan names building accessibility as a priority without committing the district to anything: which buildings, in what order, by when, at what cost. A roadmap to which the public can hold us accountable is also one a future board cannot quietly abandon. That roadmap needs money attached to it in a way that does not fluctuate with political attention, which means setting a protected floor in board policy for the share of the annual capital plan that goes to accessibility, and reporting against it every year.

It also has to aim at the right standard. "First floor usable" is not accessibility. A student who can get through the door but cannot reach the library, the science lab, the gym, or the main office does not have equal access to their school, and neither does a parent, an educator, or an LSC member who

uses a wheelchair. The sequencing should be driven by geography and community need, so that every neighborhood in this city can point to a fully accessible school. Right now, in too many neighborhoods, families cannot.

And the district has to stop treating student transfer as a substitute for compliance. Moving a child out of their neighborhood school because the building will not accommodate them is not an accommodation. A real accommodation would be the district solving its problem with that child's schooling, and their community. All of this should be public: accessibility status building by building, progress against the roadmap, and dollars spent, reviewed by the board on a set schedule. What a board reviews in public gets done.

I will also be straight about the fiscal reality, because you deserve that, rather than just a promise. This district is in a serious financial position and capital dollars are constrained. That is an argument for a disciplined, sequenced, multi-year plan with real funding behind it. We cannot abide another decade of deferral.

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?

Jessica Biggs: The answer is not to blame the educators fighting for our students. It is to blame a board that treats special education quality as a standing governance responsibility rather than an occasional agenda item.

The board already has the instrument for that and has not been using it. The Special Education Advisory Committee was created to bring parents, advocates, educators, and other stakeholders directly into the board's work on special education. Under Mary Fahey Hughes it did exactly that — convening working groups that met to do real work - including helping to select the Chief of the Office of Students with Disabilities. That committee has not played anything close to that role recently, and I consider it one of the clearer failures of this board. It is a missed opportunity. A twenty-person board is difficult for any family to navigate, and nearly impossible for a parent who is already spending their evenings fighting for their own child's services. A functioning special education committee gives them

one door instead of twenty. Making that committee genuinely functional again is something I would take on directly as President.

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

Jessica Biggs: This is a nuanced question, and an important one, because the answer shapes the daily experience of thousands of children and neither a blanket defense of these programs nor a blanket objection to them is honest about what they do. When a cluster program opens in a neighborhood school, a child who needs an intensive setting can receive it close to home rather than being bused across the city or placed outside the district altogether. Transportation has been one of the most serious and persistent sources of harm for students with disabilities in this district.

Roadblocks include routes that do not exist at the start of the year, rides long enough to consume a meaningful part of a child's day, and families who cannot get to a school far from where they live. A program in the neighborhood means a walk to school, a sibling in the same building, a parent who can actually attend an IEP meeting, and a child who stays connected to their own community. Well-run programs can also concentrate specialized staff, training, and equipment in ways that are hard to replicate one classroom at a time.

The cost is that best practice and federal law both point the other way. Students belong in the least restrictive environment in which they can make meaningful progress, and inclusion is not a courtesy — students with disabilities learn more when they are alongside their peers, and their peers learn more too. Separate settings are also easier to enter than to leave. Once a student is in one, the general education classroom stops being the reference point for what they should be able to do. The curriculum gets modified a little further each year, the goals get written against where the student is rather than where they could be, exposure to grade-level content narrows, and the daily contact with peers that builds social skills and friendship thins out. None of that requires anyone to decide a child cannot learn. It happens gradually, in a room where everyone is working hard, which is exactly what makes it so difficult to see and so difficult to reverse. The students who lose the most are the ones who never needed a separate setting at all and ended up there because the general education classroom was not equipped to hold them.

An increase in these classrooms is not automatically evidence of a problem. There may be good reasons for some of it: more children identified and diagnosed, earlier identification, a more efficient IEP process getting students to services faster, and a genuine rise in the intensity of need at certain grade levels. Any of those would be real. But a 250% increase since 2023 is a very large number, and a district serious about its obligations would treat it as a figure to dig into rather than a figure to explain away. I would want that examination done with people who know this work: outside experts, the advocacy community, and parents of students with disabilities themselves — convened through a Special Education Advisory Committee actually functioning as it was designed to, rather than through a one-time presentation the board receives and moves past.

What matters most is whether each placement was driven by that child's needs and their IEP. I want enough intensive programming, close to home, for every student who genuinely needs it, and I take the transportation and community-connection arguments for neighborhood programs seriously. What I want to guard against is expansion becoming a strategy this district drifts into without ever choosing it — where separate classrooms grow because they are the available answer to a capacity problem, rather than because they are what students need. No one sets out to do that. It is precisely the kind of thing that happens when nobody is questioning the dramatic expansion of cluster classrooms, which is why the board should be questioning this.

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?

Jessica Biggs: It starts with treating transition planning as real work, rather than a compliance exercise. Too often, a transition plan is just a form completed at the required age with goals no one revisits. It should begin well before high school ends, be built around what the student actually wants for their life, and be measured against progress every year. For students between 18 and 22, the program itself should be built around work — paid or credited work-based learning with real Chicago employers, independent living skills, transportation training, and self-advocacy, in integrated and competitive settings wherever possible. Segregated placement is not preparation for an integrated adult life.

The handoff at the end matters as much as the years leading up to it. CPS should have formal, functioning agreements with the state agencies and providers that pick up at 22 — vocational rehabilitation, pre-employment transition services, developmental disability services, workforce partners, City Colleges — so that the adult service connection is made while a student is still enrolled rather than after they have left. No family should learn about a waiting list the month their child ages out. Families also need the roadmap years in advance. They need benefits, guardianship and its alternatives including supported decision-making, waiver waitlists, housing, employment supports. That information currently reaches the families with the resources to go looking for it. It should reach every family, in their language, from the district.

This is also work CPS should not attempt alone. Access Living, the independent living centers, and disability-led organizations know this terrain far better than the district does, and the district should be building on that expertise rather than reinventing it.

And we should measure what happens after students leave. Post-school outcomes — employment, postsecondary enrollment, community participation — reported publicly and disaggregated. Right now, we largely stop counting at the door. If we do not know how our graduates are doing at 23, we cannot honestly claim the program is working.

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?

Jessica Biggs: Instruction. Excellent, consistent, everyday instruction in the modalities and with the accommodations that allow students to succeed.

Special education is complicated, and the issues around it are serious — compliance, placement, staffing, services, legal obligation. All of that is real and I have spent this questionnaire discussing those critical issues. But there is a tendency in this work to let that complexity crowd out something simple, which is that a child with a disability needs the same thing every other child needs, and needs it more: a great teacher, teaching well, every day. We do not talk about students with disabilities that way often enough. We talk about their services and their settings and their paperwork, and somewhere in there the most basic thing a district owes them — outstanding instruction — becomes a secondary consideration rather than the whole point.

That was my mindset as a special education teacher and it was my mindset as a principal. The question I cared most about was not whether the paperwork was in order, though I made sure it was. It was whether the teaching in that classroom was good enough for the child sitting in it. A cluster classroom, a resource setting, a general education classroom with co-teaching — the setting determines what supports a child needs, not whether great instruction is what moves them. It always is. And every system in this district, from central office to the network to the school building, should be organized around making that instruction better. We spend enormous energy arguing about placement and comparatively little asking what is actually being taught once a child gets there.

Those proficiency numbers — roughly one in ten students with IEPs proficient in ELA, fewer in math — are not primarily a compliance failure. We could be fully compliant on paper and still produce those outcomes. They are an instructional failure, and this board has largely not treated them as its business. I would change that: explicit, public board goals for the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, reported at least quarterly, with the CEO evaluated against them. Not buried in an aggregate number where tens of thousands of students disappear.

Two of those numbers deserve to be pulled out and looked at directly, and I would insist the board do it. Black students and English learners are identified for special education at rates that do not match their share of our enrollment, and they are more likely to end up in more restrictive settings once identified. That pattern is not new and it is not unique to Chicago, but we must answer for it. It usually reflects a general education classroom that was not equipped to teach a child well — a student who needed strong early literacy instruction, or language development support, or a teacher trained to tell the difference between a disability and a still-developing English learner, and did not understand, so a

referral becomes the available answer. Every one of those misidentifications is an instructional failure twice over; once for the instruction the child did not receive, and again for the placement that followed.

Getting instruction right starts with talent, which is the central issue in special education right now and the work I know best. We cannot deliver specially designed instruction with vacancies and long-term substitutes. As student needs grow more specialized, the pipeline work matters more, not less, and this is exactly the moment to keep investing in it rather than letting it slip because of the budget. I have championed the district's teacher residency and Teach Chicago Tomorrow, and I want that same approach applied deliberately to special education, starting with our SECAs. The paraprofessionals already in our classrooms have deep experience with our children and a genuine love for them. Many want to become certified special education teachers and cannot afford the pathway. Building that route — tuition support, coursework that fits a working schedule, mentorship, a real career ladder — would give us educators who already know the work and already know our communities. The same is true for clinicians and case managers, where the shortages are just as real.

It also means supporting the educators we already have. Special education teachers and SECAs need substantial and ongoing professional development, adequate planning time, manageable caseloads, clinician access, and strong curricular options built for the students in front of them rather than adapted on the fly at ten o'clock at night. General education teachers need co-teaching support and real preparation to serve students with disabilities in their classrooms, because that is where inclusion either works or quietly fails — and it is also where the overidentification problem either gets solved or does not.

This means protecting children in the budget. This district is facing a real deficit, and I have not been shy about the choices it forces. But we cannot balance a budget on the backs of children with disabilities. Their services are a legal obligation and a moral one. When cuts come, they land hardest on the students with the least margin, and the district usually pays for it later anyway, in complaints, due process, and compensatory services.

Candidate Hilario Dominguez

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

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

Question 2: Many families of students with disabilities talk about the challenges they face trying to navigate the special education system in CPS. Why do you think families are so frustrated?

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

And there is no straightforward way to get a problem fixed. A parent who raises something gets routed between the teacher, the case manager, the network, and central office, and the timelines that are supposed to protect them are frequently missed. And we know all of this lands hardest on Black and brown families and families who do not speak English at home. Corey H. was filed almost thirty years ago and we are still having this conversation. Enough is enough.

Background: Currently, over 60% of CPS schools are not fully ADA accessible. In practice, this means that “neighborhood schools” are not an option for many students with physical disabilities, let alone disabled teachers, disabled parents, disabled voters, or other disabled community members visiting our schools. The 2023 CPS Facilities Master Plan identifies building accessibility as an important priority, but the district has not adopted a roadmap or plan to achieve better building accessibility.

Question 3: What steps should the district take to address a lack of accessibility in its buildings?

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

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

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

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

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

Background: A core tenet of The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is “the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.”

Despite this, CPS has a history of separating students with disabilities from their peers instead of including them in general education classrooms. A 1998 court settlement (Corey H.) required CPS to move toward *inclusion*, meaning students with disabilities should be taught alongside their non-disabled peers whenever they can make meaningful progress that way, rather than being placed in separate, more restrictive settings.

Since 2023, the number of "cluster classrooms" (separate, self-contained classrooms specifically for students with disabilities, apart from general education) has increased by over 250%.

Question 4: As a board member, what questions would you ask to understand why the district is placing so many more students in these separate classrooms instead of general education settings?

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

Here is what I would ask:

- Where is the growth concentrated? Which schools, which networks, which neighborhoods, and how does that map against vacancy rates for special education teachers, SECAs, and related service providers?
- Who is actually making these placement decisions? Are IEP teams deciding, or is a placement effectively determined before the meeting by what the district says is available?
- What is the racial and economic breakdown of the students being moved, and how does it compare to the district overall?
- Are these newly identified students or students who were previously in general education and got reclassified. Those are two very different stories?
- What is the district's LRE data trend since 2023, and where does that put us against Corey H. and against the state?
- How many of these placements were requested or agreed to by families, and how many were presented as the only option available?
- What would it cost to serve these same students in general education with the supports they are entitled to, and has anyone actually run that number?
- And who at central office is accountable for the LRE trend line. If nobody owns it, that explains a lot?

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

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

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

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

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

Background: Federal law allows certain students with intellectual disabilities to stay in school until they are 22. Ages 18-22 are known as the *transition years* where students focus on employment and independent living skills. Many students and families fear the “[disability cliff](#),” or lack of resources and career support that comes when students age out of the school system at the age of 22.

Question 6: What can be done to ensure students with disabilities are well equipped for success in their career and lives after graduation?

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

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

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

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

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

Background: According to the 2024-25 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?

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

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

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

Candidate: Sendhil Revuluri

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

Sendhil Revuluri: I'm Sendhil Revuluri, a CPS parent, former public-school teacher, former VP of the Chicago Board of Education (where I chaired the Finance & Audit Committee), and school board coach. My career has been about making sure every child gets a great education, from founding a public school and teaching math, to leading instructional improvement for tens of thousands of students. I'm running for Board President because our schools exist to help every student learn and thrive, including our nearly 60,000 students with disabilities, who are too often underserved. When schools work for the students who face the greatest barriers, they work better for everyone. I want a board that sets clear goals, insists the district actually delivers the services students are owed, and holds itself accountable for results, especially for the students furthest from opportunity.

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?

Sendhil Revuluri: Because the system is opaque, often asks families to fight for what their children are legally entitled to, and far too often doesn't deliver the learning all students are entitled to. Parents are told their child qualifies for services, then those services come late (or never) due to staffing vacancies or delays (a budgeted position that is never filled), or a process that can feel adversarial rather than supportive. Families feel like they must be experts in IEPs and due process just to secure the basics, a burden that falls hardest on those with the least time, resources, or familiarity with the system. When communication is poor, evaluations are slow, and no one is clearly accountable for delivering what was promised, frustration is the rational result. Students with disabilities, like all of our students, have a right to a free and appropriate education; not just services, but belonging, learning, thriving, and success. Families shouldn't have to litigate for this.

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?

Sendhil Revuluri: As in too many domains, the district's delivery is constrained by a board that won't name genuine priorities or monitor results. And a district that won't align its schools with the needs of students puts itself in a position where progress is made even more challenging. Addressing these issues would enable CPS to turn this stated priority into an actual, public roadmap (with a phased timeline, cost estimates, and clear milestones), not just an aspiration without a plan. By ensuring that we have the schools our children need, we can make them truly accessible so they include students, teachers, families, and community members with physical disabilities. Like each of our core commitments, the board I lead would hold the district accountable to inventory accessibility gaps, prioritize by need and impact, and track progress so future capital and facilities decisions deliver the progress that was promised and avoid creating new gaps. Honest, long-term capital planning, just like budget and learning strategies, are crucial to ensure accessibility becomes a reality.

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?

Sendhil Revuluri: Putting students in more restrictive environments than they need isn't right, isn't legal, and deprives them of educational opportunity. The variation of practice across networks and across schools (even in the same disability categories) strongly indicates that this isn't about differences in student need, but in the approaches of adults within the district. So I'd ask for the honest data (not just anecdote), an analysis of what's driving them, and an accounting of the reasons for the decisions that are being made. Specifically: is this growth driven by genuine academic need identified through the IEP process, or by behavior that overwhelms a general-education classroom and leads teams to want a student placed elsewhere? (That distinction is decisive, because moving students out for behavior rather than need runs directly counter to least-restrictive-environment and to the district's own 2018 corrective action after years of "delay and deny.") How much is driven by staff

vacancies (where unfilled positions lead to students in more restrictive settings)? For students already placed, could they succeed in general education with the right support? Were they succeeding in inclusion before? I'd also compare academic, social, and post-secondary outcomes for similar students in inclusive versus separate settings, and watch closely whether this falls hardest on students of color with disabilities. Underneath all of this is the question that's too often skipped: not just how we're doing it, but what we're going for. Do these placements genuinely serve each student's success, honestly measured, or simply make things easier for the adults?

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

Sendhil Revuluri: The real question isn't about more services or less; it's about moving our focus from inputs and compliance to student success. For some students, a smaller, specialized, well-staffed setting genuinely provides the intensive support they need to make progress. For those settings to be excellent, we must align them with the needs of the students they serve and ensure they are properly resourced. But what serves most students best (and is the law of the land), is inclusion in the least restrictive environment, as long as we ask the central question: were these students successful in inclusion? Expanding cluster programming beyond the students who truly need it has serious drawbacks: separation can bring lower expectations, fewer opportunities, and weaker academic and social outcomes. At scale, it risks a drift back toward the very segregation the Corey H. settlement was meant to end. A 250% increase in cluster programming, with the variation across the system, is concerning; it suggests placement may be driven by system constraints, not student need. In my opinion, cluster settings should be used only when they're genuinely right for the individual student. This way, it's more likely that the students in those settings get the strong staffing and support they deserve, not a lesser education.

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?

Sendhil Revuluri: We owe these students a bridge to a life of opportunity and choice, not a drop-off. Advocates, the public, and the board must clarify the desired post-school outcomes for these students to hold the district accountable for achieving them: are they actually employed, in further education, and living independently? Then transition must start early, and be real (not a checkbox). That means individualized transition planning well before age 18, with genuine focus on the goals that matter: employment skills, independent living, and self-advocacy. By ensuring these students have meaningful work experiences and community partnerships, and strong "warm handoffs" to adult services (coordinating with vocational rehabilitation, employers, community colleges, and disability service organizations in advance), we make it more likely that they succeed.

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?

Sendhil Revuluri: My top priority is to change what the system is actually aiming at: from inputs, activities, and compliance to student success itself. These proficiency rates reflect a system that too often measures whether a box was checked, not whether a child is learning. So we must define what success looks like for these students, measure it honestly, and report it publicly and clearly. Then this focus can reach into practice: IEP decisions should turn on what supports and modifications will actually help a student succeed, not on what's easier for the adults in the room. And it has to be backed by delivering what students genuinely need, which means confronting staff vacancies head-on. The board I lead will own its responsibilities: set those clear expectations, monitor progress (disaggregated so we can't hide behind averages), and hold leadership accountable for results. When we get clear about what we're going for, and honest about how we're doing so far, we create the conditions for these students to achieve far more than the system currently delivers for them, and have brighter futures as a result.

Candidate: Victor P. Henderson

Question 1:

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

Victor P. Henderson: I am a Chicago attorney, former Certified Public Accountant, product of public schools, and father who has sent my children to CPS. I am running for President of the Chicago Board of Education because education can transform a child's life, and I strongly believe that CPS needs serious, independent, accountable leadership focused on student outcomes. My legal and financial background has taught me the importance of accountability, sound management, and respect for professional expertise. My governing philosophy is straightforward: the Board serves students and taxpayers and works collaboratively with families, educators, school leaders, employees, unions, Local School Councils, advocates, and community partners to strengthen Chicago Public 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?

Victor P. Henderson: Families are frustrated because too often they must become experts in a complicated system simply to obtain services their children are entitled to receive. An IEP should be a plan for educating a child, not the beginning of a struggle over staffing, services, placement, transportation, or implementation.

CPS also carries a history of special-education compliance problems that has damaged trust. Rebuilding that trust requires more than policies on paper. Families need timely evaluations, understandable information, meaningful participation in IEP decisions, reliable delivery of services, qualified staff, and a clear place to turn when something is not working.

Just as important, families need to be talked to and heard. Communication should be regular, respectful, and understandable, and parents should not have to fight simply to get answers about their child's education.

We should measure our success by whether students actually receive the education and services their IEPs require, not simply whether the paperwork was completed.

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?

Victor P. Henderson: Accessibility cannot be addressed through isolated projects or one building at a time without a clear strategy.

I would support a public, multi-year accessibility plan tied to CPS's capital budget, with specific priorities, timelines, and regular reporting to the Board. I would also support public hearings and a standing working group that includes parents, students, disability advocates, school leaders, facilities staff, and accessibility experts so the people directly affected have a meaningful role in setting priorities.

The district should begin by identifying the most serious barriers to access and establishing a transparent process for determining which improvements move first. Accessibility must mean more than getting through the front door; students should be able to fully participate in classrooms, restrooms, cafeterias, libraries, gyms, auditoriums, playgrounds, and emergency procedures.

I acknowledge that CPS has limited resources, and improvements must be sequenced responsibly. But limited resources cannot become an excuse for the absence of a plan. Families and school communities should know what CPS intends to fix, when it intends to fix it, and how those decisions are being made.

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?

Victor P. Henderson: My first question would be: "What is driving the increase?"

I would want data showing who is being placed in cluster classrooms, broken down by disability, race, school, geography, grade level, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and year. I would ask whether these placements are the result of individualized IEP team decisions or whether staffing shortages, program availability, space, budgeting, or administrative practices are influencing placement.

Chicago has confronted this issue before. In Corey H., concerns were raised that placement decisions were being driven too heavily by disability classifications and systemic factors rather than the individual needs of students. I would want to know whether any of the current increase reflects a return to system-driven rather than student-driven placement.

I would also ask:

- What supplementary aids and services were considered before a more restrictive placement?
- Are parents meaningfully participating in placement decisions?
- What percentage of students move from cluster classrooms into less restrictive settings?
- How do academic, behavioral, attendance, and postsecondary outcomes compare?
- Are students able to participate with non-disabled peers in electives, activities, meals, and other parts of school life?
- Are particular schools, neighborhoods, socioeconomic groups, racial groups, or disability populations disproportionately represented?
- Does CPS have sufficient special-education teachers, paraprofessionals, related-service providers, and supports to make inclusion successful?

- Are funding or staffing structures unintentionally creating incentives toward more restrictive placements?

Federal law requires placement decisions to be individualized and based upon the student's IEP and educational needs. We should make certain that a student's placement is determined by what that child needs, not simply by what is easiest for the system to provide.

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

Victor P. Henderson: There can be an appropriate role for cluster programming. Some students may need a more specialized setting, intensive supports, smaller instructional environments, or services that cannot be provided effectively in a general education classroom. The starting point, however, must always be the individual student and what setting best supports that student's learning and progress.

The concern is when a specialized placement becomes the default because of staffing, funding, space, or program availability. That can unnecessarily separate students from their nondisabled peers and limit access to the broader school experience.

I would not begin with a policy of either expanding or eliminating cluster classrooms. I would begin with the student. CPS should maintain a continuum of appropriate placements while ensuring that each decision is individualized, educationally justified, made with meaningful parent participation, and consistent with the requirement to educate students in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs.

The question should be: What does this child need to succeed—not what is easiest for the system to provide?

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?

Victor P. Henderson: Transition planning cannot begin when a student is preparing to leave CPS. Illinois law requires it to begin by age 14½, and those years should be used to build a real pathway to education, employment, independence, and adult services.

We should make much greater use of our partnership with the City Colleges of Chicago. Many CPS students already earn college credit while still in high school through dual credit and dual enrollment.

Students with disabilities who are able to participate should have equitable access to those same opportunities, with the supports necessary to succeed. We should also strengthen connections to programs such as City Colleges' After 22 program, which combines education, life skills, internships, and employment support for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Transition plans should also connect students to career and technical education, apprenticeships, employers, organized labor, state agencies, disability organizations, transportation training, and independent-living resources.

The goal should be a genuine handoff, not a cliff. Before a student leaves CPS, the student and family should know what comes next, be connected to the appropriate programs and agencies, and have a clear path 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?

Victor P. Henderson: My top priority would be ensuring that every student's IEP translates into effective instruction, appropriate supports, and measurable academic progress.

An IEP cannot simply be a compliance document. CPS must have the qualified teachers, paraprofessionals, clinicians, related-service providers, instructional supports, and interventions necessary to meet students' needs.

The Board's role is not to dictate classroom methodology. It is to establish clear expectations, provide appropriate resources, and demand evidence of what is working. I would want educators, Principals, families, students, disability advocates, and special-education professionals at the table as CPS evaluates and strengthens approaches such as co-teaching, inclusive instruction, targeted academic interventions, assistive technology, and professional development.

We also need better accountability. The Board should regularly examine whether IEP services are actually being delivered and whether students are progressing. not only on proficiency measures, but through academic growth, attendance, graduation, inclusion, and postsecondary outcomes. Where disparities exist by disability, race, socioeconomic status, school, or neighborhood, we should understand why and respond.

The numbers cited in this questionnaire demonstrate a serious achievement gap. Our obligation is not simply to provide students with disabilities access to school. It is to give each student the instruction, support, and opportunity necessary to learn, grow, and succeed.