

**March 6, 2024, Special Education Advisory Committee Meeting Written Comments
Received between Monday, March 4th and Thursday, March 7th
Submitted via Written Comments Form**

1 My name is Reyna Villegas, my question is, is there anyway for CPS to work with a company that offers ADA therapy with kids with autism. It will be great help cause what they learn during therapy its good to apply it during school hours as well. What can CPS do to help kids with autism. There is more help needed now that is becoming more common and i don't see a lot of school offering them what they need. PS Background Checks department are not following their protocol and causing the Charter Schools students and families to go without school personnel's to help students and families with their IEP's meeting minutes, behavior modification, social emotional learning and life skills. Not only are the students being affected the employee are not able to acquire start dates since October 2023 causing them grave financial insecurities and hardships. The finger print background staff is allowing other third parties to access other people background checks and those potential employees without convictions CPS still won't provide clearance for the charter school so the employees can receive a start date. The Governor passed SB 1480 amendment in 2021 that prohibits Employers such as CPS from making adverse employment decisions from a persons conviction recordThe CPS background check website is contradictory to their current process what should take 10 days have been taking. Over 5 months to clear. Employers are contacting potential employees from CPS Background Check department are using Scam Numbers when they are working from home. FTC has also investigated and made note of the scam calls. Our organization has made CpS Background check department aware of what is going on and to date, nothing is being done and the employees have not started the new job they were hired for. Student Safety has CPS background check number on their site and the background check department don't answer the phone for employers nor return calls. The background check results is supposed to be provided to the employees and the employees haven't been provided access. The employees have been onboarded and provided all their personal and professional information and they have yet to receive a start date. Praying and hoping the employees receive justice and advocates who can help them with the CPS fraudulent background check practices that are violating the potential employees Human Rights.

2 Dear Special Education Committee Members:

Thank you for being so committed to supporting our children. I want to raise three issues.

I would like to bring your attention to the importance of focusing on the individual student because, too often in special education, we focus on remediation to just a limited standard without regard to student functioning in multiple domains. Students without disabilities are frequently told they can achieve anything they are willing to work for, but CPS limits opportunities for enrichment for students with disabilities. Our students face unnecessary bureaucracy and barriers to accessing opportunities for advanced instruction, admission to selective enrollment programs, or CPS competitions. Rather than focusing on the whole child, we often encounter a de minimis standard of educational experiences for our children. This requires a shift in the culture at CPS and greater accountability for harmed students.

Let's explore the problem with the transportation cuts. When CPS cut transportation to selective enrollment and magnet schools, they neglected to realize that many students with disabilities were never properly onboarded, receiving transportation as a "general education" student rather than having it as part of their IEP. Many families were in the dark about requesting transportation, and the Office of Transportation Services needed to be more supportive. CPS would tell families not to worry about transportation because they didn't need it at the moment. However, when the need arose when they transferred schools, they could have to wait a year before being approved because of bureaucratic delays with evaluations and the IEP process. This nonsense hurts our students, and we see it over and over. There are still concerns regarding transportation reimbursement and whether CPS will eliminate this vital support for students with disabilities.

The student-centered approach is important because we often fail to take into account the students current level of functioning and challenges to achieving their potential. This is why having proper evaluations and access to student records is so important. Families need access to all student records when requested to advocate for their children and denying them is a violation of FERPA, ISSRA, and IDEA, plain and simple. The fact that CPS rewards, rather than punish or hold them accountable is a problem. This must stop and I hope your committee puts an end to these violations.

Be well,
Dr. Angel Alvarez

ATTACHMENTS

This past Monday was the one year memorial of Judy Heumann's passing. She advocated her entire life for disabled people's rights and fought against "separate but equal" policies within each system of our society. Chicago Public Schools still uses this inhumane, outdated and deceitful "separate but equal" philosophy through their "cluster programs." The district continually attempts, and often succeeds because they capitalize on their power, to remove disabled children from the general population and neighborhood schools and then place them in their "cluster programs" without any consideration for whether that is an appropriate placement for the child. Last year, CPS identified over one thousand additional students for cluster programs and this year they are set to see the same increase. The LBS1 special education teaching certificate in the state of Illinois is the same for all special education teachers throughout the district, whether they teach in cluster programs or not, yet CPS claims most schools cannot educate all special education students. Chicago Public Schools has created this term, "cluster programs," and its design because it is cheaper and easier for them, not because it is appropriate, or legal, for most disabled students.

I have a daughter, [REDACTED], with a disability called Williams syndrome. When I inquired for more information about kindergarten at our neighborhood school, I was told they didn't have the resources for her there. We then won a seat at a lottery based selective enrollment school and since this school is ranked fifth out of all CPS elementary schools, I quickly registered her there. Having heard horror stories of special education in CPS and already experiencing being illegally turned away from our neighborhood school, I was ready with three different letters from two reputable doctors at Lurie Childrens Hospital and an educational consultant on Williams syndrome stating [REDACTED] appropriate placement is within the general education setting. However, after attending this highly ranked school for only a couple of months, CPS attempted to kick her out of the school and push her into a cluster program elsewhere and I *still* needed a lawyer to prove to Chicago Public Schools that [REDACTED] deserved—both legally and educationally appropriately—to be a student there. I'm not going to mention the pathetic reason CPS gave me when they attempted to kick out my disabled daughter last year in kindergarten as I'm not here to publicly embarrass individuals. This year in first grade, she received all F's in her core subjects for quarter one which is a tactic CPS often uses when parents refuse cluster program placement. To reiterate: A Chicago Public School, ranked fifth in the district, gave a six-year-old, non-verbal, intellectually disabled child with an IEP all F's in core subjects for the first quarter of her first grade year.

I'm here today because so many CPS parents cannot be here and if this is what one of the best schools in our city has done to a disabled child, I can only imagine the atrocities taking place in our most underserved neighborhoods. Most parents in our city cannot afford to hire lawyers and advocates to prove what their children legally deserve—they cannot afford to financially, or they're not knowledgeable on special education law, or they are too fatigued from constantly having to advocate for their child, just to name a few reasons.

Civil rights laws are constantly violated unless someone complains, and this is absolutely the case throughout CPS. So many parents put their trust into institutions that are there to protect and provide for their children, like Chicago Public Schools, but often CPS perpetuates ableism and tells parents their children don't belong here. Many of our

disabled leaders like Judy Heumann and our very own Commissioner for People with Disabilities, Rachel Arfa, had parents who chose not to listen to these institutions. When I share my story of [REDACTED] at CPS with other parents, they are completely shocked as they believed this kind of discrimination and lawlessness was a thing of the past. I would then ask these parents, "Aren't you wondering why there has never been a student in a wheelchair at our school? And where are all the kids with Down Syndrome or Williams syndrome like [REDACTED]?" Disability discrimination is still very much at play systemically in our country and in our city of Chicago.

Our protest on Monday outside Chicago Public Schools, which also has a growing online petition with over 300 signatures, was for:

- INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
- ACCESSIBLE BUILDINGS
- REGARD TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS
- REQUIRED SECAS FOR EACH SCHOOL
- REQUIRED THERAPISTS FOR EACH SCHOOL
- FOLLOWED IEPs AND 504s
- APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM
- SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES
- DIVERSITY FOR NON-DISABLED STUDENTS
- ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY
- LITERACY INSTRUCTION
- HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS
- TRANSLATION SERVICES FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING PARENTS

In response to a Chicago Sun Times journalist who covered the protest, Chicago Public Schools said, "About a third of CPS campuses are not ADA accessible...another third of schools are considered 'first floor usable,'" meaning the first floor of a school is ADA accessible. As if having the first floor of a school building means anything in terms of accessibility and that Chicago Public Schools is somehow following ADA law because of this. So really, two thirds of CPS buildings are inaccessible to our students in wheelchairs.

All disabled children deserve to be placed at their neighborhood school or selected enrollment school of their choice. It is the responsibility of Chicago Public Schools to ensure the resources, accessibility and appropriate education is brought to each disabled student at each and every school---not forcing the disabled student to attend a separate classroom available in only some of the schools throughout the city. Disabled students have the right to access the same variety of school settings that are available to non-disabled students within the district, including high-quality, portable supports and services at their neighborhood school, as well as magnet or selective enrollment programs. This segregation contributes to isolation, discrimination and underwhelming learning outcomes, some of the many reasons Judy Heumann and her colleagues started the disability revolution a half century ago and is rooted in ableism.

If Chicago wants to be the most accessible city in our country, which I know is a mission of the mayor's office and other disability organizations, we must first have the educational foundation of real accessibility in every school. How else can we expect future generations of non-disabled people to become unbiased and comfortable around disabled people? How else can we expect disability employment and opportunity to increase? As Judy Heumann said, "Distance and segregation are breeding grounds for failures of understanding and empathy and ultimately injustice and the denial of others' rights." Mayor Johnson supports funding neighborhood schools and recently said, "regardless of a child's race, income or zip code, that they deserve a high-quality, fully resourced, equitable, healthy and safe learning environment." Disabled students deserve this too. We simply cannot confront social justice without including disability.

All Chicago Public Schools must be accessible to children in wheelchairs. All Chicago Public Schools must be accessible to children with intellectual disabilities. All Chicago Public Schools must be accessible to any student with any disability—PERIOD.