COAL COALITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS

Chicago Board of Education
Candidate Questionnaire
for the
General Election - November 3, 2026

The purpose of this candidate questionnaire is to ascertain each candidate's qualifications and preparedness for, and commitment to, participating as a member of the Chicago Board of Education and for President of the Board.

The Coalition of African American Leaders (COAL) encourages an informed community towards casting an informed vote. The goal is to seat a professional, qualified, independent and engaged school board, responsible to the community, that has a laser focus on providing the best K - 12 educational experience for all of the children of Chicago, regardless of family income or zip code; the high quality educational system our children deserve.

INSTRUCTIONS

Please complete and return this fillable pdf candidate questionnaire for the position of Chicago Board of Education member and president, responding to all questions. There are a few yes/no questions which include space to expound on your response. Once completed, please return via email to: publicpolicy@coalchicago.com. **This questionnaire should be returned no later than end of day on September 21, 2026.**

We welcome any query regarding this questionnaire or individual question(s) which will help you provide your best response. Please contact Education Committee co-chairs:

Dr. Kimberly Dulaney at 312.287.4571 / readme4000@aol.com
or
Principal Gerald Morrow at 773.593.5428 / gjmorrow86@gmail.com

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Candidate Information

Name on Ballot: Anusha Thotakura

School Board District: 6A

Home Address 859 W. Erie Street, Chicago, IL 60642

Employer/Your Title Citizen Action IL, Executive Director

Phone 847-790-2423 **Email** anushaforboe@gmail.com

Candidate signature attesting to the truthfulness, accuracy, and authorship of this Questionnaire.

9/23/2026	Anusha Thotakura	
Date	**Print**	**Signature**

[Please feel free to attach primary campaign literature, bio or vita]

Campaign Information

Campaign Manager

Phone **Email**

Website

a. Have you held or run for public office before, and if so, what office[s] with what results?

Yes. I ran in the 2024 Board of Education election for District 6 and came in second. I was thereafter appointed to serve as the representative for District 6A.

b. COMMUNITY. In what community roles do you currently serve? Or in what capacity have you served the community in the past? Have you been appointed to any public committees, commissions, task forces?

I have coached the Spanish-language debate team at Columbia Explorers Academy in Brighton Park. I also currently serve as the representative for District 6A on the Chicago Board of Education.

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c. Please list your top three contributors who have donated $1,000 or more, and include the corresponding amounts as reported on your D-3 form (if applicable):

Contributor	Amount
Friends and Family of Nabeela Syed	$2000
Syam Thotakura	$1500
Friends of Ram	$1000

d. Who has endorsed you and what are your political/stakeholder alliances (if any)?

Sunrise Chicago
Asian American Midwest Progressives
SEIU
Chicago Teachers Union

Candidate's Plans and Goals for the School Board

e. Why are you running for *this position*? What expertise do you bring to the board? What makes you the best candidate for *the School Board*?

I am running because every child in Chicago deserves a high-quality public education regardless of their family income or ZIP code. I bring the perspective of a former bilingual middle-school math teacher, a public-policy professional, and a current Board member who has had to make difficult decisions about academics, facilities and CPS finances.

My experience spans classroom teaching, policy advocacy and community organizing. As a teacher, I saw how housing, food insecurity, trauma and inadequate supports affect academic outcomes. As a policy advocate, I have worked on the structural issues that shape families ' access to opportunity. On the Board, I have worked to translate those experiences into concrete investments, including healthier school buildings, clean-energy infrastructure and career pathways.

I also bring a demonstrated commitment to independent decision-making. I do not believe the Board should be a rubber stamp for any stakeholder, whether that is City Hall, a union, a charter organization or any other interest. My responsibility is to students, families and the public.

f. Please describe your Educational agenda.

My educational agenda starts with a simple measure: are students learning and thriving? We need to improve reading and math outcomes beginning in early childhood, while ensuring students have the supports necessary to succeed.

That means investing in high-quality Pre-K, smaller classes where needed, strong intervention and instructional support, bilingual education, special education, mental-health services and meaningful after-school opportunities. We should strengthen neighborhood schools while preserving high-quality specialized programs and meaningful choices for families.

We also need to prepare students for life after graduation through strong CTE, career pathways, dual-credit and work-based learning opportunities. Finally, school buildings themselves matter: safe, healthy, well-maintained facilities are part of educational equity. My Healthy Green Schools work connects facility improvements, student health, fiscal responsibility and career preparation.

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ACCOUNTABILITY / TRANSPARENCY

1) We believe that it will be important for you to communicate with District constituents on a monthly basis. Communications should include, but not be limited to, updates to inform and receive feedback on upcoming CPS votes and initiatives, as well as progress monitoring. Will you commit to implementing some form of monthly communications for your constituents?

YES ☑ **NO** ☐ **(Please provide an example)**

Newsletter and social media.

2) What measures do you want to put in place to promote transparency in the school board system?

With a fully-elected Board, we have our first real chance for transparency and accountability in decades. I am dedicated to engaging the community through open dialogue, which will ensure that my decisions are transparent and ethical. This starts with making myself available routinely to community members who wish to meet with me and voice their concerns. This also means regular communication with the community through a newsletter or similar type of monthly communication that will be informative, accessibly-written, and available to all who wish to read it. Finally, I will maintain a regular social media presence to help keep the community informed of what is happening at the Board in real time.

3) What methods will you put in place to understand the interests / positions of your constituents, to ensure your Board votes align with your constituents, and not political funders or special interests? **(Please be specific)**

As I have done throughout my first term on the Board, I will commit to hosting and attending community meetings during the school year and over the summer. I will also maintain and grow relationships across the District beyond those I have already, to ensure that I stay tapped into the needs and concerns of the constituents I am asking to elect me. And I will always continue to make myself available to meet with District educators, parents, and students in District 6A to make sure that their top concerns are heard and are given a voice on the Board.

4) What measures do you suggest the school board implement to ensure that CPS is held accountable and is responsive and transparent to school stakeholders?

The creation of an elected school board was an excellent first step towards doing just this - by electing our representatives to the Board, the People now have a greater opportunity than ever to ensure that CPS is accountable and responsive. If it isn't, Board members can and will be replaced.

Still, there is more work to be done. I support greater efforts to promote attendance at Board meetings and engagement in all aspects of our public school system. I also support requiring CPS to be more clear about its decision-making to those who aren't well-versed in education policy, especially when it comes to the serious decision to fire a principal.

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5) Will you support a third-party independent audit of Chicago Public Schools? **YES** ☑ **NO** ☐ **(and why?)**

Any reasonable and cost-effective opportunity to identify and remove waste in our budget can only make it easier for us to budget for the things we need. I support a reasonable third-party independent audit for this reason.

6) Recognizing that parents of CPS students are a critical portion of your constituency, what will you do to build and nurture a relationship with parents in the District?

As I did during my first term on the Board, I plan to stay in constant contact with parents in the District through the methods noted above, including regular public and one-on-one meetings, newsletters, and generally making myself available to hear, understand, and take action to address parents' concerns.

BUDGET / FINANCE

7) In what ways should the school district engage Springfield for funding? In what ways will you engage external partners to assist with funding CPS initiatives?

CPS should make a sustained, bipartisan case in Springfield for the state to meet its obligations under evidence-based funding, special education, transportation and other mandates. CPS currently receives substantially less than the state's adequacy target, so this cannot be solved through local property taxes and cuts alone.

We should also pursue federal grants, philanthropy, universities, hospitals, employers and community organizations where partnerships directly benefit students and do not compromise public accountability. My Healthy Green Schools work demonstrates how public and private capital, state and federal incentives, and community partnerships can support facility improvements while reducing long-term costs.

8) What are your ideas to address the School District's consistent $500-$700 million budget gap?

I support a hiring freeze and cuts for central office positions; leaning on our city's elected officials with Springfield relationships to advocate for more funding; and prioritizing using school building space efficiently to generate revenue and meet other community needs. I would also consider the possibility of new revenue sources to increase funding, provided that I do not support raising property taxes or implementing regressive taxes that primarily affect lower-income communities. I do not support raising property taxes, but, a tax on the highest income-earners to address the public education funding shortfall would be appropriate.

9) How will you hold CPS accountable for ensuring equitable funding for all schools? And how should the Board / CPS prioritize to ensure funds are allocated where needed?

I support the new equitable funding formula that prioritizes allocations for schools in communities that have been historically underserved. I believe prioritization of funds should be where they have the most impact directly on students in the classroom.

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10) What are your ideas for **funding** the mental health needs of students, faculty, and staff?

Mental health support should be treated as part of the educational infrastructure, not an optional add-on. Every CPS school should have access to a full-time counselor and social worker, with additional clinicians and specialized supports based on student need.

CPS should maximize Medicaid reimbursement for eligible behavioral-health services, pursue state and federal mental-health grants, and partner with qualified community mental-health providers. We also need to invest in staff wellness and ensure educators have access to confidential support. Funding should prioritize schools and communities with the greatest unmet need. CPS already identifies Medicaid as an important source of reimbursement for services

EDUCATION / STUDENTS

11) Achievement Gap: The data show persistent disparities in measures of educational performance among subgroups of students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and gender. How do you plan to address/close the intransigent achievement gap for African American students?

No child should suffer academically ased on their zip code, race, or family income. I support investing in neighborhood schools across our District to ensure that African-American students have the opportunity to receive a quality education where they live. Investing in early childhood education and programs such as HIPPY have also demonstrably improved education outcomes among African-American students, and I would support CPS increasing its focus and investment here. I also support wraparound and mental health services that will help our students be better prepared to learn in the classroom environment.

12) Opportunity Gap: The disparities in providing access points and multiple pathways to position students for post-secondary success. How do you plan to address/close the opportunity gap for African American students?

Again, starting earlier is the best way to ensure kids succeed later - we need to make sure that CPS provides for adequate early childhood educational services. Still, closing the opportunity gap for African American students will require more: more investment from the State, more engagement between the Board and parents, and more opportunities for students to have a pathway to a productive life after K-12, whether it be through a traditional college or vocational training.

13) What are your thoughts and/or ideas on **policies** to address the mental health needs of students, faculty, and staff?

CPS should have counselors and social workers at every school. What we shouldn't do is rely on sketchy, unproven resources simply because they appear to be low-cost - that is why, during my first term, I led the successful effort to end CPS' contract with Hazel Health, a for-profit telehealth provider with questionable data privacy practices.

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14) How will you work towards all schools providing recess and physical education equipment, healthy food offerings, and classes in the arts, shop, and technologies, as well as foreign languages?

Yes. One of my core values is that a child's zip code should not determine their access to opportunity and advancement, and that means providing critical opportunities to learn foreign languages, obtain vocational training, learn how to work with new technologies, and eat well. Implementing these programs district-wide will take time and care given the District's funding challenges, but some changes could include streamlining the terms of CPS' Farm to School and Eat What You Grow Programs to make it easier for children to access healthy food and be exposed to potential careers in food safety and agricultural engineering.

15) The elected representative school board legislation includes the establishment of a board-level *Black Student Achievement Committee*, to develop actionable strategies to close the achievement gap for Black students. What actions will you take to ensure that this committee is staffed appropriately to give it its best chance of achieving measurable improvements in the education of Black students, system-wide? And, importantly, will you commit to the African American community having a strong voice / autonomy in the selection of Black Student Achievement committee members? **YES** ☑ **NO** ☐ **(and why?)**

I will continue to hold CPS accountable to developing and meeting appropriate metrics for Black student achievement, which starts by continuing to ensure that the Black Student Achievement Committee is well-staffed by individuals with practical experience. I will seek input on every step of this process to ensure that this committee dedicated to Black achievement is by, for, and driven by the desires of the Black community in Chicago. If the committee is failing, at any point, in terms of transparency, developing reliable metrics of success, or actually working to implement its recommendations, my constituents will be the first to hear about it.

GOVERNANCE

16) What are your thoughts on the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Career and Technical Education (CTE), Computer Science (CS), and other emerging technologies in education for students, faculty, and staff?

Students need both access to emerging technologies and the ability to use them responsibly. AI should supplement—not replace—teachers, relationships and critical thinking. CPS should provide AI literacy for students and professional development for educators, with strong protections for student data, privacy and academic integrity.

CTE and computer science should be treated as core pathways to opportunity, particularly when connected to real employers, credentials, internships and college credit. My Healthy Green Schools work demonstrates one model: using CPS capital projects as hands-on learning opportunities in construction, solar and clean-energy careers.

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17) Do you think the school board should have autonomy to override LSC decisions that are made at the local level? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐ Please explain your answer with an example.

I would have to assess this on a case-by-case basis. LSCs are closest to the communities and the Board has the best bird's eye view of our school system as a whole - both positions come with strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes, an LSC should get to decide matters for itself, and sometimes, decisions will have to be made by the Board that aren't necessarily ideal for one particular school, even if they are ideal for most or all of the others. What's most important is that we have a decision-making process that is fair, transparent, and driven by a good faith desire to do the most good for the most students.

18) LSCs are responsible for principal selection; should CPS be required to obtain LSC review to remove a principal? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐ **(and why?)**

Again, I would have to assess this on a case-by-case basis. CPS clearly has a problem in this area, but I do not believe that this is the solution in situations where termination is clearly warranted, like when a principal has been found to have engaged in fraud or gross mismanagement or worse. Otherwise, when it comes to the decision to fire a principal, LSC, parent, student, and community input should generally be taken into account first. Transparency is also critical, and CPS should clearly provide its reasons behind a termination decision when allowed by law.

19) What are your thoughts on establishing an independent review board for terminations within CPS?

I support stronger independent review and due-process protections for CPS employees, particularly where a termination involves allegations of misconduct or disputes about whether established procedures were followed. An independent review mechanism could improve fairness, consistency and public confidence.

At the same time, it should not become a process that prevents CPS from promptly addressing serious misconduct or protecting students. The goal should be an independent, timely review with clear standards, appropriate confidentiality and transparent reporting on how the process works.

OPERATIONS / POLICY / PERFORMANCE

20) What is one challenge or area of growth you see within CPS? What are your solutions for addressing this challenge?

One of CPS's biggest challenges is improving student outcomes while enrollment declines and the district faces a structural funding gap. Cutting programs and staff can make that problem worse: weaker schools can drive further enrollment declines, creating another round of financial pressure.

The solution is to protect the services that make schools strong while improving academic performance, investing in early learning and student supports, and making better use of existing facilities. At the same time, CPS must pursue sustainable state funding and identify efficiencies rather than repeatedly balancing the budget through cuts to students.

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21) What are your thoughts on the financial and academic oversight of school choice, and do you believe guardrails should be put in place? If so, why?

Yes. Families should have meaningful educational choices, but every publicly funded school should meet clear academic, financial and operational standards. Public dollars require public accountability.

Guardrails should include transparent financial reporting, strong special-education and student-service requirements, clear academic expectations, enrollment and discipline transparency, and consequences when schools consistently fail to meet those standards. Choice should expand opportunity—not create a system where public dollars can flow without

22) What are your thoughts on school closings and consolidation?

I do not support more school closures unless absolutely necessary and as a last resort, and only after a truly transparent, equitable process.

23) What criteria should be used to identify which schools should be considered for closure/consolidation?

I do not support more school closures, which tend to tear at the fabric of communities in need. If this is necessary as an absolute last resort, the input of families in the community that make up the school, budget analyses, and racial impact analyses should be critical to making these painful decisions.

24) What existing CPS policies would you like to change, or what new policies would you like implement?

I would strengthen policies that connect Board decisions to measurable student outcomes and public accountability. That includes more transparent reporting on academic performance, special-education service delivery, school finances and facility conditions.

I would also strengthen protections for students receiving IEP and 504 services, expand meaningful mental-health access, and build clearer accountability for whether schools have the staffing necessary to deliver required services.

Finally, I would continue strengthening facility policy so that health and environmental conditions—including mold, lead, asbestos and air quality—are treated as educational issues, not simply capital-maintenance issues. The Healthy Green Schools resolution I sponsored was an important step in that direction.

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CHARTER SCHOOLS

25) Funding Equity: Chicago Public Schools provides funding to both district-operated and charter public schools. Do you support funding parity between charter public schools and district-operated schools? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☐ **(and why?)**

Public funding should follow students equitably, but parity should account for meaningful differences in facilities, student needs and the services schools are required to provide. I support transparent, needs-based funding rather than a simplistic one-size-fits-all formula.

CPS has already moved toward funding charter schools through the state-defined per-capita tuition charge, while separately accounting for categorical and specialized services. Any system should ensure that students receive the resources required to meet their needs regardless of the school they attend.

26) Equitable Access to Resources: Do you believe funding for student support services should be allocated equitably to all students, regardless of whether they attend a district operated or charter school? Yes or No If a school accepts public funding for a student should it also be responsible for continuing to serve that student the entirety of the year? **YES** ☑ **NO** ☐ **(Please explain in detail.)**

Yes. A student's access to publicly funded services should not depend on which public school they attend. Funding should follow student need, including special education, bilingual education, mental health and other mandated supports.

And yes: if a public school accepts public funding for a student, it has a responsibility to educate and serve that student throughout the school year. Schools should not be able to shift students elsewhere simply because their needs become more complex or costly.

27) Parent Choice and Educational Options: Well-to-do families have the resources to afford the type of education they want for their children. Many Black and Brown families who may be unable to afford private or parochial schools, choose charter schools because they believe those schools best meet the educational, social, emotional, or cultural needs of their children. What role do you believe charter schools should play within the Chicago Public Schools system, and how would you ensure families continue to have meaningful educational choices?

Charter schools should remain one option within Chicago's public-school system for families who believe a particular school best meets their child's academic, social, emotional or cultural needs. I have supported preserving charter schools as an option while also prioritizing strong neighborhood schools, and I would work to ensure that these are the primary option for all CPS students through continued reasonable allocation of resources and long-term planning.

The goal should not be to force families into a particular school model. It should be to make every school—including neighborhood, selective enrollment, magnet and charter schools—strong enough that families have meaningful choices. Those choices must be paired with transparent academic, financial and operational accountability.

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28) Charter Renewal Stability: School board meetings can involve lengthy discussions on charter renewals. What are your thoughts on charter school renewals, including multi-year renewals?

Charter renewals should be based on demonstrated academic, financial and operational performance, not politics or ideology. Schools that consistently meet their obligations and demonstrate strong outcomes should have stability and should not face unnecessary uncertainty every year.

I support multi-year renewals when a school has demonstrated sustained success and financial and operational health. Conversely, serious academic, financial or compliance problems should result in a corrective plan, shortened renewal or non-renewal. CPS already evaluates charter schools across these areas, and renewal decisions should consistently apply those standards.

29) Accountability and Student Outcomes: Should charter schools and district-operated schools be evaluated using the same academic, financial, operational, and student-outcome standards?
YES ☑ **NO** ☐ Where might they differ?

Yes, but with appropriate recognition of differences in governance and school models. Every public school should be held to rigorous standards for academic outcomes, financial management, operational compliance and student services.

The standards should be transparent and comparable, while accountability measures should account for student needs and the context in which schools operate. Public funding requires public accountability regardless of who operates the school. CPS already evaluates charter schools across academic, financial and operational dimensions; that principle should apply consistently across the public system.

30) Long-Term Vision: What is your vision for the relationship between Chicago Public Schools and public charter schools over the next five years, and how would your policies support improved outcomes for all Chicago public school students?

Over the next five years, I want Chicago to move beyond an ideological debate over school type and focus on what actually improves outcomes for students. District-operated and charter schools should have meaningful autonomy to serve their communities, but all public schools should meet high academic, financial, operational and student-service standards.

Families should have meaningful choices, while neighborhood schools receive the investment necessary to make quality education available in every ZIP code. We should also share successful practices across school models rather than operating in silos.

The measure of success is not whether district or charter schools grow. It is whether more Chicago students are reading, learning, graduating and prepared for college, careers and life.

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Thank You

for your response

COAL COALITION
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERS

About COAL
COAL is an umbrella organization founded by 13 of Chicago's historic African American mens clubs. COAL's overarching mission is to identify, examine, illuminate and find resolution to issues impacting the greater community. We strive to use our collective experience, expertise and resources to improve the quality of opportunity, quality of preparedness and the quality of outcomes (expressed as 'quality of life') for our community.

What We Believe
The Coalition of African American Leaders believes that it is important to examine the critical issues confronting the African American community where injustice, inequality and the absence of access and opportunity continue to prevail, thereby negatively impacting us as a people. COAL is an assemblage that advocates and organizes for appropriate and responsible public policy change, system behavior change and equality of opportunity. We aim to achieve for all of our people the fullness of the life experience without any form of racism or exclusion as a deterrent. We believe we must prepare ourselves for the opportunity of this full participation, thereby achieving the necessary education and training to participate.

Founding Member Organizations
100 Black Men Of Chicago ■ Chicago Assembly ■ Chicago Connection ■ Druids Club ■ Frogs Club ■ Lunch Bunch ■ New Committee ■ Original 40 Club Of Chicago ■ Rat Pack ■ Royal Coterie Of Snakes ■ Saints ■ Sigma Pi Phi Beta-Boule ■ UIC Male Forum / Chicago Good Health Group

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