Somerville SEPAC 2025 Candidate Questionnaire on Special Education

Candidate Name:

Section 1: Legal Compliance and Systemic Accountability

According to the official 2024-25 determination letter from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Somerville Public Schools has been designated as "Needs Assistance" under IDEA Part B. This determination was driven by poor results on student performance metrics and five official findings of noncompliance from the Problem Resolution System, which investigates parent complaints. As a result, the district is now required to conduct a formal root cause analysis. It is prohibited from utilizing certain budget flexibility, signaling the state's significant concern with the district's ability to meet its legal obligations to students with disabilities.

While this section didn't include questions for City Council, I cannot stay silent. As a mother of two children with special needs in Somerville Public Schools, I've lived the consequences of systemic noncompliance—missed services, delayed evaluations, and inaccessible programming. I've listened to countless families share similar stories. Fighting for special education families isn't optional for me—it's non-negotiable.

That's why I fought to bring SEPAC to the table at a City Council meeting to publicly present their powerful report to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in September 2025. Compiled through parent surveys and public testimony, the report exposed widespread delays in evaluations, chronic understaffing, and deep inequities across Somerville schools. Nearly 20% of our students—those receiving special education services—are being underserved, with some schools designated as "Requiring Assistance" and others still lacking ADA compliance. These issues must be brought into the public eye. Transparency is the first step toward accountability, and I will continue working to ensure that every voice is heard and every need addressed.

Section 2: Capital Planning and Facility Equity

The sudden closure of the Winter Hill Community Innovation School in 2023 due to structural failure exposed a crisis in the city's management of school infrastructure. This event magnifies the city's stark inequities. According to the 2024 DESE accountability report, the Brown School—which is not fully ADA accessible—is in the **90th accountability percentile**. In contrast, the Winter Hill School—which serves a community with a significantly higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students and houses the district's AIM program for autistic learners—is in the **9th accountability percentile** and is designated as "Requiring Assistance."

For City Council Candidates:

1. **Oversight and Accountability: How will you use your budgetary and oversight authority to hold the administration accountable for a transparent and urgent**

process for the Winter Hill School project that prioritizes the needs of its diverse, high-need community?

ANSWER:

As a City Councilor and the City Council Liaison to the Winter Hill School Construction Advisory Group (CAG), I've utilized my role to ensure that the rebuilding process reflects the needs of our diverse, high-needs community.

When the city's initial survey failed to include meaningful community input, I co-sponsored a Resolution to withdraw it and demanded a transparent, inclusive process. I was very vocal in giving suggestions alongside other Construction Advisory Group (CAG) members to ensure that the second survey prioritized accessibility, walkability, and programming flexibility for high-need students. In September 2025, I presented a City Council Resolution that discussed the building design of the future Winter Hill School.

2. **Budgeting for Equity: What specific mechanisms would you support to ensure that future city budgets and capital improvement plans make proactive and systemic investments to ensure that all schools are safe, accessible, and equipped for 21st-century learning?**

ANSWER:

I absolutely support embedding equity metrics into our capital improvement plans and budget reviews. This includes prioritizing ADA compliance, universal design, and proactive maintenance for schools serving high-need populations. I've advocated for and will continue to advocate for transparency in school infrastructure spending and pushed for community-led oversight to ensure that future investments are not just reactive, but strategic and just.

I'm the City Council representative on the ADA Transition Plan Task Force, which is currently revising and refining the city's ADA Transition Plan to ensure Somerville's in compliance. There's a lot of work to do, and unfortunately, ADA accessibility needs have been underprioritized for over a decade. It will take a lot of planning and funding to get us back on the path to more inclusive plans and implementation. I'm committed to this work and I'm committed to a just system that ensures our residents with ADA needs are considered in city plans and Capital Improvement plans.

Section 3: Budget, Staffing, and Resources

Systemic understaffing has led to students not receiving legally mandated services.

For City Council Candidates:

1. **Advocacy for Full Budgeting: As a City Councilor, how would you use your position to advocate for a school budget that moves beyond the status quo and directly addresses the systemic non-compliance and understaffing that lead to missed services?**

ANSWER: I'm doing this and I'll continue to do this. I will continue to consistently advocate for budgets that reflect the real needs of our students—not just the minimum required. I've supported SEPAC's efforts to bring issues such as systemic understaffing and non-compliance to light and will continue to do so. SEPAC's advocacy and presence is so needed in Somerville, and I admire the work SEPAC is doing.

Section 4: Inclusion, Equity, and Student Experience

SEPAC acknowledges the district's progress in certain areas. For instance, according to the 2024-25 DESE determination data, the four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities was 78.5%. However, the same state data reveals deep and persistent challenges. Academic proficiency remains critically low, with data indicating that only 8.75% of 4th-grade students with disabilities and 12% of 8th-grade students with disabilities are proficient in reading, and only 8.11% of 8th-grade students with disabilities are proficient in math. These statistics, combined with significant inequities among schools, underscore the urgency of the questions that follow.

For City Council Candidates:

1. **Supporting True Inclusion: How will you ensure that inclusion is an effective and fully supported practice, providing students with the resources they need to succeed in the Least Restrictive Environment?**

   ANSWER:

   Inclusion must be more than a placement—it must be a practice. I've worked to ensure that our school buildings, staffing plans, and extracurricular programs reflect this. We've made some steps, also with credit to SEPAC, that more inclusive and adaptive sports programs have been introduced, such as the summer's "I Can Bike" program partnership, led by Somerville's own fierce mama, Shu Talun. I heard incredible things about the program from parents and I heard that it was the difference between several children being able to ride a bike!

   We need to expand extracurricular programs that support Somerville children with special needs and accessibility needs in the Recreation Department and I want to ensure continuity with adaptive and inclusive programs. But, we also need to expand this approach with Out of School Time, Afterschool and with SPS field trips. I've put forward initiatives to make this happen and I will continue to.

   Additionally, I've supported gender equity in sports and advocated for inclusive play spaces and programming. Proud to say our Girls Learn to Play Hockey program was a success and we're working on expanding to an intramural Somerville Hockey team.
   I will also continue to push for professional development, co-teaching models, and classroom supports that allow students with disabilities to thrive in the Least Restrictive Environment within my role as a City Councilor.

0. **Equitable Access: How will you ensure that students with disabilities have equitable access to extracurricular activities, athletics, field trips, and school events?**

   ANSWER:

   In my first term of office, I partnered with Somerville mom Lt. Danielle Hearn to introduce and implement Communication Boards in all city-owned

playgrounds—ensuring that non-verbal children, autistic children, and those with emerging communication skills could play without barriers. This initiative was rooted in a simple but powerful belief: every child deserves access to connection, expression, and inclusion.

That same commitment to communication equity drove my fight to improve Wi-Fi accessibility at the Winter Hill School when it was located on Sycamore Street. Students and educators in the AIM program—many of whom rely on iPads and assistive technology to communicate—were often left without a stable internet connection. For non-verbal children, that connection isn't a luxury—it's a lifeline. Just as we made our playgrounds more inclusive, I pushed to ensure our classrooms were equipped with the digital infrastructure needed to support every learner's voice.

I currently serve on the ADA Transition Task Force which is currently rewriting and reevaluating Somerville's ADA Accessibility Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Transition Plan.

I am currently working with Somerville families and the Parks and Urban Forestry Division to ensure inclusive playground design is guaranteed in any upcoming parks projects. This work is currently being addressed in the Housing and Community Development Committee. As Chair of this committee, I invited families of children with disabilities to the table to gather input on appropriate accessible swings for city playgrounds in March, 2025. I will continue to work with families to identify barriers to participation and advocate for accommodations and inclusive design.

For All Candidates:

1. **Disability Justice as a Core Value: Disability Justice teaches that we must fight ableism by also fighting racism, classism, and all other forms of oppression. A core principle of this framework is ensuring that leadership is led by the most impacted. This means moving beyond simply asking for feedback and instead centering the voices and decision-making power of the most marginalized members of our community—including disabled students of color, immigrant families, and multilingual families. In your respective role, what specific, concrete actions will you take to shift power and ensure that these communities are not just consulted, but are empowered as leaders and co-designers of the district's policies, practices, and budgets?**

   ANSWER:

   I believe true leadership must be shaped by those most impacted. In my roles, I've prioritized elevating marginalized voices—not by speaking for them, but by ensuring they have a seat at the table to share their lived experiences. This includes disabled students of color, immigrant families, and multilingual households, whose layered barriers must inform our policies.

   I've championed community-led surveys, bilingual outreach, and inclusive advisory groups to ensure families are not just consulted, but actively shaping decisions. I will continue to advocate for participatory budgeting, multilingual engagement, and

leadership pipelines that center these voices—not as a gesture, but as the foundation of equity-driven governance.

Section 5: Communication, Trust, and Family Partnership

Many families feel forced to pursue out-of-district placements or private services because the district has not provided adequate support and interventions for their children. These gaps—compounded by a lack of accountability, transparency, and collaboration —have weakened trust and made genuine partnership with families far more difficult.

For City Council Candidates:

1. **Fostering Communication and Transparency:** While the SEPAC advises the School Committee, the City Council plays a crucial role in overseeing budget and capital projects. How will you use your position to ensure clear, accessible, and proactive communication is maintained between the city and the special education community regarding key decisions, particularly on budget matters and major facility projects like the Winter Hill School?

   ANSWER:

   I've made it a priority to ensure families are informed and empowered. By introducing SEPAC's report to the Council, I ensured that the voices of families navigating special education were not just heard, but centered in our city's decision-making. I will continue to advocate for inclusive infrastructure, teaching models, and professional development that support students in the Least Restrictive Environment. Inclusion must be intentional, resourced, and shaped by those most impacted—and I will keep fighting to make that a reality.