



2025 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate's Name _____Zehra Abid-Wood_____ Office _____Sought _____School _____
Committee_____

Home Address _____306 Pleasant St, Belmont, MA 02478_____ Telephone _____617.800.3768_____

Email _____zabidwoodbelmont@gmail.com_____

The Belmont Education Association (BEA) represents approximately 525+ educators, administrators, administrative assistants, and education support personnel who work in the Belmont Public Schools. In addition, there are approximately 500 Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) members who work in other districts or are retired public school employees who live in Belmont. Our goal with this questionnaire is to educate BEA and MTA members and ensure the election of candidates who share our vision for great public schools in Belmont. As we have done in previous years, the information will be shared with members by mail and on [social media](#). Please email (belmonteducationassociation@gmail.com) this questionnaire with a high-resolution headshot before February 6th.

Thank you.

Trish Ball
Unit C VP
(617) 905-9551

Bethany Fitzsimmons
Unit D VP
(781) 316-6242

Denise LaPolla
Unit A VP
(617)851-9196

John Sullivan
BEA President
(617) 365-1073

[MTA wrote to Governor Maura Healy](#) to ask for her to utilize the significant increase in Fair Share funds to invest in public education. In addition to asking for budgetary support for the various fiscal challenges including Mental Health, Chapter 70 Inflation Glitch, and the Education funding crisis we also asked for support on three fundamental issues of economic justice for educators. Please indicate if you agree or disagree with:

Allowing municipal educators to participate in Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML). Public school educators, a workforce that is primarily women, are among the only workers in the Commonwealth not included in our state PFML law. We ask that you support incorporating educators into the law and, in order to avoid an unfunded mandate, have the state pay the employer share. This is an essential benefit that should be available to all workers.

- Agree with MTA/BEA's position x
- Disagree with MTA/BEA's position

I support expanding Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) to include educators, as I strongly believe access to paid leave is essential for workforce stability and well-being. However, I also believe it is important to ensure a sustainable funding model that does not create financial strain on school districts. Given how new I am to this process, before committing to specific implementation details, I would want to fully understand the fiscal impact, the role of state funding, and any unintended consequences for staffing and operations. If elected, I would advocate for a well-structured approach that prioritizes both educator needs and financial responsibility.

Ensuring a living wage for all educators. All educators deserve a true living wage that allows them to support themselves and their families and fair pay is critical to recruiting and retaining a high-quality and diverse workforce. Yet many educators, particularly our Education Support Professionals, earn far less than a living wage and their wages can vary dramatically from district to district. We propose increasing the statewide minimum salary for teachers, which has not been updated in decades, and creating a statewide minimum wage for Education Support Professionals. Under our proposal, the state would commit to providing reimbursements to school districts for the increases over several years.

- Agree with MTA/BEA's position
- Disagree with MTA/BEA's position x

Ensuring a fair, livable wage for all educators is essential to recruiting and retaining a high-quality, diverse workforce. Belmont's academic excellence depends on investing in the people who make our schools strong. I support increasing educator wages and ensuring state reimbursement to prevent financial strain on local districts.

At the same time, any statewide wage increase must be implemented responsibly. If elected, I would advocate for a funding structure that protects essential student services, ensures equity across districts, and provides long-term financial sustainability for Belmont's schools.

Adjusting the pension COLA base so that it is no longer paid on only the first \$13,000 of pension earnings. We thank you for recognizing the inadequacy of the current COLA system through the creation of a special commission to evaluate it. As we await that report, it is nevertheless clear that an increase in the COLA base is long overdue after more than a decade at its current level. We urge action in the FY26 budget to immediately increase the COLA base to better ensure that retired public employees can live with dignity and economic security.

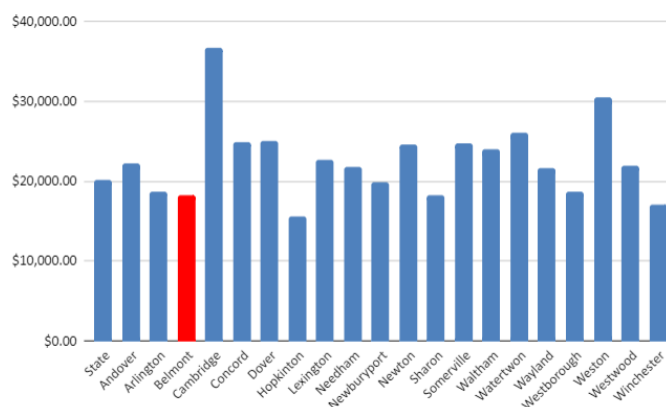
- Agree with MTA/BEA's position
- Disagree with MTA/BEA's position x

Educators dedicate their lives to public service and deserve economic security in retirement. The current COLA base has not kept pace with inflation and I fully support efforts to ensure that retired educators can maintain their financial stability while balancing the need for fiscal sustainability.

The state's special commission on the COLA system is an important step, and I would advocate for a careful analysis of funding impacts before committing to a specific adjustment. Any changes must be both equitable for retirees and financially responsible for the long-term health of our schools and communities.

LOCAL ISSUES

Funding the Schools Belmont Students Deserve



Belmont's per pupil expenditure is lower than 18 comparable districts and the state average.

If Belmont allocated school funding at the state average there in 2022, we would have been able to spend \$6,613,192 more on Belmont Students.

Teaching and learning have become more complex and additional support is needed to ensure student learning. The results of underfunding impact our most vulnerable students and has led to an increase in out-of-district placements. The hyper-focus on "headcount" and not students is not an effective approach.

How will you advocate for adequate school funding, minimally at the state average, that meets the needs of all Belmont Students?

Advocating for strong schools starts with understanding the full picture—both in terms of student needs and the financial realities of our district. Belmont’s per-pupil spending is lower than many comparable districts, and I recognize the concerns about ensuring adequate resources for all students. At the same time, funding decisions must be made with a long-term, sustainable approach.

As I engage more deeply in this process, my advocacy would be rooted in:

- Gaining a full understanding of the budget landscape—asking the right questions about priorities, trade-offs, and opportunities for better alignment with student needs.
- Exploring additional funding sources—advocating for increased state aid, grants, and partnerships to relieve the local taxpayer burden.
- Prioritizing student-centered investments—ensuring that funding decisions directly support student learning, mental health, and educator resources.
- Collaborating with town leadership, educators, and families—bringing multiple perspectives to the table to make informed, strategic decisions that reflect community values.

Strong schools are a community priority, and I will approach funding decisions with a commitment to transparency, responsible advocacy, and ensuring that every dollar spent has a meaningful impact on students and educators.

Confronting Racism & Privilege

The union has placed a priority on confronting racism and white privilege in our schools, union, and community. Our union created Belmont Educators of Color and Accomplices, with a mission to Educate, Advocate, and Eliminate Racism. The group aims to educate themselves and others about the history of racism, advocate to create

supportive relationships and dismantle racism in our schools. We also partner with the BPS to establish school and district Equity Teams that meet once a month to discuss issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.

How have you supported diversity within BPS or elsewhere and if elected how would you work to eliminate racism in our schools?

As an immigrant and a parent of biracial children in Belmont schools, I understand firsthand how race, privilege, and systemic barriers shape opportunities and experiences. My career has been dedicated to fostering inclusive communities, and I believe that addressing racism in our schools requires both cultural and structural change. It's not just about individual awareness—it's about dismantling the systemic factors that reinforce inequities in education.

Belmont's strategic plan already prioritizes inclusivity and reaching every student. My commitment is to ensure that these values are not just aspirational but actively implemented in ways that create meaningful change. If elected, I would advocate for a multi-layered approach that tackles racism at both the institutional and community levels:

- Recruiting & Retaining Educators of Color – A diverse teaching staff benefits all students, yet systemic barriers—from pipeline issues to workplace climate—often hinder progress. I support expanding recruitment efforts, exploring “Grow Your Own” teacher pathways, and strengthening mentorship and leadership opportunities for educators of color.
- Empowering Equity Teams & Affinity Groups – These groups should not just exist but have meaningful influence on school policies, curriculum, and hiring practices to ensure their work drives real change.
- Embedding Anti-Racism in Education – Professional development should equip educators to recognize implicit bias, incorporate culturally responsive teaching, and foster truly inclusive classrooms.

- Examining Structural Inequities – Policies on discipline, access to advanced coursework, and resource distribution must be regularly reviewed to ensure they do not unintentionally perpetuate racial disparities.
- Engaging the Community – Anti-racism efforts should extend beyond schools, creating opportunities for families, educators, and students to engage in meaningful dialogue and collaborative solutions.

Racism is often sustained not just by individual actions, but by unexamined systems. Belmont has made a commitment to inclusivity—I am committed to ensuring that this vision is fully realized, so that every student, regardless of background, has an equal opportunity to thrive.

Group Insurance Commission

According to the March 2022 Structural Change Impact Group report moving to the GIC “will result in cost savings through economies of scale, while providing employees with quality benefits.” Our conservative estimates from the same time indicate moving to the GIC would be a \$2.4 million savings for the town. This does not include substantial one time funds of drawing down the health insurance trust or reduction to Other Post Employment Benefits (OPEB) savings from moving to GIC.

Do you support changing health insurance benefits by moving employees to the GIC?

At this stage, I do not have enough information to take a definitive position on transitioning to the Group Insurance Commission (GIC). While the potential cost savings are significant, any decision involving healthcare must be approached with caution, transparency, and a full understanding of the impact on employees.

If elected, my priority would be to:

- Engage in open conversations with educators, town leadership, and impacted employees to fully assess both the benefits and potential drawbacks.
- Examine the long-term financial and healthcare implications beyond just the projected savings.

- Ensure that any transition prioritizes employee well-being and healthcare quality, not just cost efficiency.

Healthcare decisions affect lives, not just budgets. Before taking a position, I would want to carefully evaluate all factors to ensure that any change serves both fiscal responsibility and employee security.

Engaging Educators

What have you done or what will you do to engage and partner with BPS educators to address the concerns associated with public education in Belmont?

Educators are the backbone of our schools, shaping the daily experiences and long-term success of students. Their insights are not just valuable—they are essential. While I have not yet had the opportunity to engage directly with BPS educators in this capacity, I am committed to doing so with openness, respect, and a focus on action. If elected, my role is not to assume I have the answers, but to create meaningful opportunities for educators to share their perspectives and actively shape decisions.

I will:

- Engage in ongoing, intentional dialogue with educators and BEA representatives, ensuring that their expertise informs policy and practice.
- Advocate for educators to have a real seat at the table—not just in implementation but in shaping the decisions that impact their classrooms.
- Strengthen partnerships between educators, families, and the broader community to align resources and support systems for student well-being and success.

True engagement is not just about listening—it's about acting on what is heard. I am committed to ensuring that educator voices are not only valued but reflected in the direction of Belmont's schools.

YOUR PRIORITIES

What are the main reasons you are running for office/re-election?

I am running for the Belmont School Committee because strong schools create strong communities, and I want to ensure Belmont schools enable every student to thrive and reach their potential.

Belmont's strategic plan lays out a strong vision—but delivering on it requires leadership that can balance priorities and make sustainable, forward-thinking decisions. My experience in building consensus, driving strategic change, and guiding communities through transformation has prepared me to contribute in this moment.

I have spent my career helping organizations and communities navigate change with clarity and purpose, and I want to continue that work here. Belmont faces critical choices in the coming years, from financial sustainability to student well-being to ensuring every child feels a sense of belonging. I am running to help guide those decisions collaboratively and responsibly, always with students, educators, and the future of our town at the center.

Please specify the top three priorities you plan to address.

1. **Sustainable and Equitable School Funding** – Advocating for responsible but ambitious investments in education that meet student needs while ensuring fiscal sustainability.

2. **Mental Health & Student Well-Being** – Expanding resources and support systems for students, recognizing the growing need for accessible mental health services.

3. **Inclusive & Community-Connected Schools** – Advancing diversity, equity, and meaningful community partnerships to strengthen student learning and belonging.

Additional Information

Please provide any additional relevant information about your candidacy that you believe the BEA should consider.

As a Belmont resident, parent, and advocate for community-driven education, I am committed to ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive. My experience in strategic leadership, governance, and inclusion, along with managing complex budgets and resources, equips me to contribute meaningfully to the School Committee. I bring a practical, fiscally responsible approach to decision-making, ensuring that policies reflect Belmont's values while meeting the evolving needs of students and educators.

The BEA is considering publicly endorsing a candidate. Are you interested in an endorsement?

- Yes
- No x