

Somerville SEPAC 2025 Candidate Questionnaire on Special Education

Candidate Name: *Holly Simiione*

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.

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?

As your At-Large City Councilor, and former student of the Winter Hill Community School I will work with our City Council President to ensure a fully transparent process that involves, our community members, parents, teachers and students. This project needs clear timelines, accountability checkpoints, and public reporting. Events and materials must be translated in multiple languages, meetings held at different times of the day to ensure people who work and have other obligations can attend and be heard. This high-need community does not need another community survey or working group, it needs action.

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?

I will make education and building safety a priority in Somerville. I will ensure that the Mayor's Office provides the public with access to real information, not talking points or boiled down data. I will not standby and allow our municipal buildings to fall apart for lack of maintenance. Requests for repairs to schools and public buildings must be prioritized. We need to rebuild the trust of the community as well as the school. I will keep the pressure on, ensure openness, and deliver results that students' parents, and the whole community can see.

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?

The School Committee and Mayor need to ensure the budget can provide the services and the staffing needed for all our children and families. I will work collaboratively with our City Council President, to ensure the IEP process is followed, Special Education staff receives regular training, mentorship and support. We need to closely monitor service delivery for all students and have plans in place to allocate more resources as needed.

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?

To fully support inclusion in a "LRE" we must have classrooms that are staffed with enough resources for all students to learn together. This includes specialists and 1:1 support, and in

some cases, teachers working in teams to support the needs of the students. It also requires enough physical space to provide inclusion. Fire safety, first floor classrooms, indoor and outdoor learning, tables that are height adjustable, technology and investments.

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

Inclusion only happens when it is the top priority in everything we do. That means leaning on people who have lived experience to help design the framework and tools we use in all aspects of learning. Field trips, school events, activities and sports must be offered for all abilities.

3. **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?

Justice starts with knowing how to communicate with each individual family. We cannot use push marketing to engage with a diverse working-class community. Most families work, some have more than one job, multiple children or other family members to care for. We must contact all families and have a conversation to understand how to communicate with them. We need to offer resources and plan events and trainings that work for all families, at different days and times and for all languages. Meetings need to be accessible, with parking and transportation options for all.

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?

I will work with the City Council President to ensure the needs of our students are being met, and the new Mayoral administration is working to bring transparency and all voices forward. I will attend School Committee meetings as a resident and advocate and share my views and lived experience. If we follow disability justice as a core value, we will have more voices at the table and more stories to understand what is working and where we have room to improve.

My personal experience as a parent of a medically complex child who needed outplacement over 20 years ago to ensure she had the education she needed, as well as my current employment as a Case Manager helping families find healthcare, housing, education, recreation and joy for their medically complex children has been shared as part of this questionnaire. I would like to add that budget constraints will likely continue, and we need to find grants, partnerships and other resources to ensure all children and adults in Somerville receive the education and after school programming they deserve.