

Somerville SEPAC 2025 Candidate Questionnaire on Special Education

Candidate Name: [Emily Hardt](#)

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.

For School Committee Candidates:

1. **Experience and Parent Partnership:** Please describe your prior experience with special education, either personally or professionally. What specific steps will you take to ensure parents, guardians, and individuals with disabilities are active partners in district and school-based policy-making?
2. **Addressing Non-Compliance:** What is your actionable plan to address the systemic issues that led to the DESE's "Needs Assistance" determination? How will you use your oversight role to ensure the district moves swiftly toward full compliance with federal and state law?
3. **Superintendent Evaluation:** Given that the Superintendent's recent evaluation was "Proficient" while outcomes for students with disabilities declined in multiple areas, what specific changes would you advocate for in the evaluation process to ensure it is directly tied to measurable improvements for students with disabilities?
4. **Measuring Effectiveness:** Beyond state accountability data, what specific metrics would you use to measure the effectiveness of the district's special education programs and ensure they are responsive to family concerns *before* they escalate to state complaints?

For Mayoral Candidates:

1. **Data-Driven Change:** Student data shows persistent achievement and opportunity gaps for students with disabilities. As mayor, how will you ensure that data is used proactively to drive systemic change and resource allocation, rather than merely to identify problems?

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 Mayoral Candidates:

1. **Rebuilding Winter Hill & Addressing Inequity:** What is your specific plan to ensure the Winter Hill school community—which serves a high-need population and the district's AIM program—are central partners in the planning process? How will the new facility serve as a model of accessibility, and how will you ensure that its resources and staffing address historical inequities?
2. **A Proactive Plan for All Schools:** How will you use the city's capital improvement plan to ensure that *all* schools, from the inaccessible Brown School to the structurally failing Winter Hill, are made safe, fully accessible, and able to support modern inclusive education?

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?

The families and students at the Winter Hill School have already endured so much disruption and have had to adapt to many challenges in the Edgerly Building. These families and students, many of whom are already more vulnerable, never should have been put in this position in the first place. Going forward, we need to ensure that the city has swing space and contingency plans. We need to continue to support Winter Hill families and students in the present and also ensure that the process of building a new building is moving forward as efficiently as possible. I will push for a realistic but urgent specific timeline that is clearly defined, communicated and followed.

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?

As a City Councilor, my role would include oversight over school facilities. I will focus on safety and work to ensure that our buildings are maintained in a state of good repair to prevent other critical failures. I will also request the updated ADA transition plan and assessment of facilities. I

will seek out information from facilities management staff and the superintendent about their assessments and needs and advocate for the budget needed to meet these needs. The City Council also reviews the Mayor's budget proposal and this would provide another opportunity to ask questions and identify gaps in funding to meet needs. The joint School Committee/City Council committee on School Buildings and Maintenance is another place where as a City Councilor I would be able to advocate for safe and accessible buildings.

Section 3: Budget, Staffing, and Resources

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

For School Committee Candidates:

1. **Upholding IDEA Mandates:** How will you address the systemic failures that prevent the district from meeting its core legal obligations under IDEA? Please include your plan to:
 - Improve "Child Find" processes to ensure all students who may need services are identified equitably.
 - Guarantee that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are developed based solely on the unique needs of each student, and not influenced by budget limitations or staffing availability.
 - Resolve the staffing crisis to ensure all legally mandated services are delivered as written in students' IEPs.
2. **Budgeting for All Hours:** How will you ensure the special education budget and staffing models are reformed to adequately account for essential, non-service hours (e.g., evaluations, IEP meetings, collaboration, crisis management)?
3. **Budget Transparency:** What specific measures will you implement to make the special education budget transparent and ensure funds are verifiably allocated to direct student services?
4. **Recruitment and Retention:** What is your plan to improve the recruitment and retention of high-quality, certified special education teachers and para-educators in the current competitive landscape?

For Mayoral Candidates:

1. **Full Funding:** Families and educators have raised concerns that a "level service" budget is, in effect, a cut to special education services. As mayor, how will you ensure the school budget is fully funded to meet the district's legal and ethical obligations to students with disabilities?

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?

As a City Councilor, I would use my position to advocate for additional funding, support

contracts that pay well enough to attract and retain quality staff, and ask questions about how we are meeting legal requirements. I have heard far too many stories of students not getting the supports and education that they deserve and caregivers having to fight for basic services. I will advocate for our schools to have the resources they need to provide all students with the appropriate supports. For example, we need to ensure that we have staffing levels, including for substitute teachers, that are sufficient to allow for specialists and resource specialists to be able to fulfill their primary responsibilities (rather than, as has happened, being pulled from their regular work to act as a substitute teacher). I will also work with our State Representatives to keep attention on these issues.

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 School Committee Candidates:

1. **Closing the Proficiency Gap:** What is your concrete, evidence-based plan to close this achievement gap?
2. **District Culture and Practices:** Neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-informed approaches are essential frameworks for supporting all students. What is your understanding of these principles, and what concrete steps would you take to embed them into the district's culture, professional development, policies, and practices?
3. **Bullying and Safety:** What is your plan for proactively addressing issues of bullying and safety to create a genuinely inclusive and safe environment for students with disabilities?
4. **Intra-District Disparities:** What is your plan to identify and rectify intra-district disparities to ensure a consistent, high-quality education for all students with disabilities, regardless of their school placement?

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

I will work to make sure that SPS funding decisions take into account student needs and are addressing proficiency gaps. I will also work to ensure that the district has the staff in place to be able to provide the support that each student needs and that the city budget includes transportation for special ed students. I will advocate for the new school building to go beyond

ADA minimum requirements and be truly welcoming to all. It should be a building that can house appropriate out of school time activities and help fill the need in the city for more accessible spaces. We need to be continually asking how we are addressing accessibility needs in school events, field trips, athletics and extracurricular activities.

For Mayoral Candidates:

1. **Ensuring Equity:** How will you use your authority to ensure equitable resource allocation across all school buildings and special education programs?

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?

I am firmly committed to disability justice and support centering the voices and decision-making power of the most marginalized members of our community. We need to do a better job of ensuring that our policies are crafted from an intersectional perspective so that they work for *everyone*. I think the work that SEPAC is doing is critical and I would love to keep learning from and partnering with SEPAC and other organizations who are furthering this work. I have been involved for the past two years in the [Healey Families Initiative](#), started and led by Alzimara Oliviera. It is another example of an important effort towards making our schools more inclusive. I will work closely with the School Committee and continually seek ways to support these efforts, raise questions and advocate for centering the voices and leadership of marginalized members of the community.

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 School Committee Candidates:

1. **Rebuilding In-District Trust:** What is your plan to build a system of robust, high-quality programs that fully meet the needs of students with disabilities, thereby reducing the number of families who feel compelled to seek supplemental private services or out-of-district placements?

2. **SEPAC Partnership:** The SEPAC has a legally mandated advisory and participatory role. What specific, ongoing actions will you take to ensure the SEPAC is fully included in district planning, program development, and budget creation?
3. **Public Accountability and Follow-Through:** Concerns raised by families and even by School Committee members themselves during public meetings often lack a clear pathway to resolution. There is no formal system for creating measurable goals with deadlines, assigning responsibility to specific individuals or departments, or publicly tracking progress. What specific system would you champion to ensure that all substantive issues raised at School Committee meetings are formally documented, assigned clear and measurable action items with deadlines and owners, and tracked publicly until they are verifiably resolved?

For Mayoral Candidates:

1. **Building Trust:** What concrete steps will you take to improve communication, transparency, and trust with the special education community?
2. **Accessible Communication:** How will you ensure that all families, including those who are multilingual or new to the special education process, are effectively informed, supported, and empowered to participate in their child's education?

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 understand the imperative of communication and transparency from the City when it comes to decisions that affect our schools and students' education. I will advocate for clear and well-defined processes and guidelines to disseminate relevant information and decisions in a timely way. I will hold the City accountable to the communication guidelines established. I will also seek out updates from the Mayor and City Council President regarding key decisions and information from the School Committee. I will work closely with my colleagues on the School Committee.

In all of my work as a City Councilor I will strive to support families and young people in Somerville, including through attention to our school buildings, recreation facilities, out of school time opportunities and more. I appreciate the work of SEPAC and would love to meet regularly with you to learn about emergent needs and goals and how I can support them.