

# CAG Recommendation

Written by:

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Reviewed and agreed to by:

## Background

Two of the City's oldest schools need new or improved buildings:

Two of the oldest school buildings in Somerville are the Winter Hill (opened in 1976) on Sycamore Street and the Brown School (opened in 1900) on Willow Avenue. Winter Hill had to close in 2023 due to a structural issue and cannot be reused or renovated. Winter Hill students were displaced to the City-owned Edgerly building in East Somerville, which is neither a long-term nor ideal solution. The Brown School building will need major renovation in the future to replace outdated systems and address accessibility needs. Winter Hill currently enrolls around 400 students from Pre-K to grade 8. The Brown School enrolls around 225 students in grades K to 5.

Steps are underway to fund and build a new school:

Somerville has received preliminary approval from the state school funding agency, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA), for the state to pay for part of the cost of a single new facility. The state has authorized a new facility that could be large enough to replace the capacity of both Winter Hill and Brown Schools and also include some space for projected ten-year growth. A school this size – up to approximately 925 students total – could affect which schools families choose and also provide new location options for some education programs.

The City must decide whether to include both Winter Hill & Brown capacity at the new school, or whether to size it to include only Winter Hill, keeping Brown in its current location. Once the amount of state funding is determined, Somerville voters will need to approve a “debt exclusion” (a property tax increase) to fund the City's share. For reference, MSBA provided nearly half of the cost of Somerville High School several years ago. If the Brown School remains at its current location, major renovation/expansion would likely be delayed until after 2031, when a new Winter Hill facility is anticipated to be completed. At that time, the City could apply for future MSBA funding for the Brown School and consider how to fund its own share.

We face a decision for our students, our schools, and our community:

The City of Somerville faces an important choice of how to address the needs of the Winter Hill school, and whether to also offer options that address Brown School enrollment needs at the same time. This decision will also have potential benefits and impacts for all Somerville schools and residents. The Mayor of Somerville has convened a School Construction Advisory Group (CAG) to evaluate options and recommend a preferred option by fall 2025

## Construction Advisory Group

The city of Somerville assembled the Construction Advisory Group (CAG) to provide a recommendation for the size and location of a new school. The CAG is made up of community members representing WHCIS, Brown, the broader SPS parent community, SPS faculty and staff and representatives from community groups such as Padres Latinos

The CAG was tasked with studying three options in detail, and providing an informed recommendation on which option to proceed with in the MSBA process.

- Option 1: Build a new school facility at the Sycamore Street site with capacity for Winter Hill current enrollment, plus some additional growth. Keep the Brown School in its current location on Willow Avenue, and address that school's needs later as part of a future MSBA funding application.
- Option 2: Build a new school facility at the Sycamore Street site with enough capacity to contain the Winter Hill and Brown enrollment numbers, plus some additional capacity, up to approximately 900 students.
- Option 3: Build a new school facility at Trum Field with enough capacity to contain the Winter Hill and Brown enrollment numbers, plus some additional capacity, up to approximately 900 students.

The CAG held its first meeting on DATE, and over a series of [13?] regular meetings, developed the following list of evaluation criteria

- Stakeholder and community sentiment
- Cost/finance implications
- Walkshed impacts
- Educational considerations
- Timeline
- Disruption impacts
- Environmental/health/safety impacts

Summaries of data present to the CAG and utilized in the decision making process can be found as an appendix to this recommendation.

# Executive Summary

The CAG recommends that a school be built to the maximum capacity allowed by MSBA at the Sycamore St site, leading to the closure of Brown. However, this recommendation is contingent on addressing concerns and gaps that the CAG has identified. Should these issues not be addressed, the CAG supports instead leaving Brown open to be resolved later, with a new building focused on the WHCIS community at Sycamore St.

## Summary of recommendation: School Sizing

As stated above, the MSBA has offered to fund a school larger than the existing WHCIS school. This would ultimately require closure of the Brown School. After careful consideration of the factors noted above, the CAG recommends constructing the largest school allowed under MSBA funding. This would be of a sufficient size to accommodate a school with a population the size of Brown and WHCIS combined, and most likely lead to the closure of Brown. Importantly, this recommendation is contingent on several factors, described further below. Benefits and concerns identified by the CAG include:

### Benefits

- Relieve deferred maintenance and pent-up demand for space in the school district:
  - Nearly every other school building in the district requires major renewal projects requiring capital expenditures, many of which require the building to be unoccupied during the course of construction. The district lacks any swing space for housing students during these projects. A new facility could be used to enable renewal projects district-wide.
  - Nearly every other school building in the district is at or near enrollment capacity, with no room for projected student population growth.
- Maximize future flexibility for educational programming
  - Innovations in educational programming, especially for Special Education students, require larger and more specialized spaces that do not exist within the current facilities portfolio, and could be included in a larger building project.
  - A larger school building allows SPS and the School Committee to provide a greater variety of educational options to students in the future.
- Allows the City to direct capital funds to other facilities in need city-wide
  - By maximizing the funding assistance for this project, City funds can be used for renewal of other assets for which there is no state funding available.
- Minimize risk of another catastrophic school building failure & debt exclusion vote.

- While not an immediate threat, the Brown School is nearing the end of its useful life as a school building. Most other school buildings in the District are over 30 years old and will require significant renewal in the next ten years. Should any one of these buildings experience a catastrophic failure, there is currently no existing facility in the City that can absorb that student population.
- Replacement of the Brown School in the future would require a separate MSBA application and, if accepted, another debt exclusion vote by the community. Neither is certain to succeed.
- Avoid major renewal/renovation project at the Brown School for continued educational use
  - The Brown School requires major investment to become ADA compliant and repair aging building systems, all of which would require capital expenditures by the City with an unclear pathway to state funding.
- Remove an outlier in the district
  - The Brown School is the smallest school in the district and the only school without grades 6-8.

## Concerns

- School Size
  - While the specific enrollment of a future school building is not yet known, the prospect of adding a larger school to the District is in conflict with the City's history of smaller, neighborhood schools.
  - Several CAG members as well as participants in focus groups raised concerns about the impact of school size on educational outcomes, particularly for Special Education students.
  - Somerville Public Schools has not addressed how they would administer an elementary school of this size.
- Preservation of School Communities
  - Both WHCIS and the Brown Schools are supported by strong communities of students, parents and educators, neither of which is interested in what is perceived as "combining" or "losing" their schools.
  - In the community survey, majorities of special education, black and Hispanic students indicated that they would prefer to maintain separate schools.
- Cost Implications
  - Building a larger facility requires a larger debt exclusion, which increases the risk of failure at the polls.
  - While MSBA may cover up to approximately 50% of the cost of a new school, a larger project is not free and may divert resources away from other City priorities.

- Future of Brown School Building
  - With no clear plan for this building beyond its life as a school, many participants in our Survey and Focus group expressed concern the lot would be sold, or left abandoned.

One factor that was identified by many survey respondents as important in their response was walkability. In the CAG's conversation, walkability was generally thought of as neutral on the basis of looking at existing walkshed data. Many students in Somerville already choose to attend a school that is not their closest. However, the CAG recognizes that this is an important factor and urges the city and School Committee to prioritize conversations around mobility to ensure that any new school is accessible to all.

In this evaluation, the CAG noted a few key factors that were missing. Most notably, there was no clear answer from SPS or the School Committee on what size student population was ideal, educationally, and if any particular option fit the School Committee's long-term goals.

Based on this analysis, the CAG recommends constructing a new school building that can accommodate both populations. Although there is strong public sentiment for separate buildings, the opportunity to replace our two oldest buildings at the same time makes the most fiscal sense. In addition, a properly designed larger school could address several key concerns raised by those who favored separate schools, such as a small community feel and adequate outdoor space.

## This recommendation is contingent on several factors:

1. There needs to be a clear plan from the School Committee on how to address concerns from Brown and WHCIS parents around potential loss of community.
2. The School Committee also needs to make clear how they plan to address concerns around special education programming in the new space.
3. New catchments must be redrawn as soon as is feasible so that the community can provide feedback
4. The School Committee needs to affirm that a larger school, and closing Brown, fits with the long-term educational plan envisioned by the School Committee.
5. There must be a clear plan and process in place for appropriate use of the Brown building after it is no longer occupied.

In the absence of these specific actions, the CAG would recommend constructing a building that can only house the WHCIS school and leaving the Brown School for later renovation or rebuild. If there is no plan from the School Committee, in particular, where a larger school fits into our city's educational goals, it can be assumed that the School Committee, as a body, supports the status quo and tacitly recommends not changing the layout of the schools in the city.

# Summary of recommendation: Location

For the location question, many options were initially considered by the city. Ultimately, only two viable options were considered further: The WHCIS site at Sycamore St and Trum Field on Broadway.

Each site has different considerations. It is important to note that should a new school be built on Trum Field, it would trigger a land-swap under Article 97 of MA state law, and require green space equivalent in size and use to be constructed elsewhere in the city.

After all data was in hand, the CAG quickly determined that Trum Field was an inappropriate location for a new school building. Several key factors went into this conclusion.

1. A financial analysis presented by the city showed that there was no cost savings in building on Trum Field. In fact, Trum Field was a more expensive option due to the costs associated with building new green space under Article 97.
2. The city had concluded that due to a lack of other available spaces, any new green space would need to be constructed at the Sycamore St site. Since Trum Field currently is used as softball/baseball fields, this is what would need to go at the Sycamore St site.
3. The city has no experience with Article 97 land swaps, and litigation remained an unaccounted for risk at Trum Field
4. The community survey results indicated a strong preference against Trum Field across all demographics

It is worth noting here that approximately 2 years prior to this discussion, in December 2023, Trum Field as a siting option was presented to the WHCIS community for consideration. This choice was unpopular among this group, though remained a top option for consideration until recently. In addition, cost estimates at this time, and through the middle of 2025, did not take into account any Article 97 costs and considerations. Given that the Trum Field option was seriously considered by the city for at least two years, not to mention previous analyses for other MSBA projects such as Somerville High School, the fact that the city was not able to produce cost and feasibility estimates for Article 97 led to many months of serious consideration of what was ultimately an undesirable, infeasible plan. The CAG encourages the city to take note of this and think carefully about how concepts and estimates are provided to city-run groups like the CAG and to the broader community.

More broadly, the CAG has identified several benefits and concerns for building at Sycamore Street:

## Benefits

- Aligns with public preferences

- In surveys and focus groups, community preference to build on Sycamore Street was clear, and makes passing a debt exclusion more likely.
- Any option proposing new construction on Trum Field was resoundingly rejected in our community outreach efforts.
- Avoids Article 97 “land swap” concerns associated with Trum Field site
  - This process, which would be required for building on Trum, would require additional permitting and construction measures that would impact project schedule and cost.

### Concerns

- Site Suitability, Constructability and Logistics
  - The Sycamore street site sits in a dense residential neighborhood with many abutters and few points of access for construction vehicles.
  - The Sycamore Street site is on a hill, raising concerns about potential feasibility and expense of building a larger facility.
  - The Sycamore Street site likely has contamination issues stemming from the existing building and urban site, which may require special permitting and abatement processes that impact schedule.
  - In concert, the above three issues run the risk of reducing the size of the facility that can be built on this site, undermining the goals outlined earlier in the “size” section of this decision.
- Playspace
  - The Sycamore Street site is compact, limiting the amount of possible play space at ground level that can be constructed.
  - Existing playspace at WHCIS is well-used by the neighborhood community, and a larger building that does not provide a replacement or alternative may be unacceptable from both a school and local community perspective.
- Transportation & School Access
  - Any of the three options considered by the CAG will increase the number of households outside the ideal “walkshed” for a neighborhood school.

Based on the above, the CAG recommends that the new school be constructed at Sycamore St, at the site of the closed WHCIS.

## Additional Recommendations to the City of Somerville and School Committee

Over the course of its process, the CAG identified four key recommendations for the City and School Committee to consider as it moves through the MSBA process:

## Recommendations:

1. Relieve the suffering of the WHCIS community, which has experienced a traumatic loss that has eroded trust with the City.
2. Maximize the amount of MSBA-funded space that can be added to the Somerville Public Schools Facilities portfolio, to accommodate demand for future student capacity, swing space, programming space, and special education facilities.
3. Create a **clear, forward-thinking and appealing vision** for the future of Somerville Public Schools, co-authored by SPS, the School Committee.

### Recommendation 1: Promote healing of WHCIS community

The CAG urges the City of Somerville to engage more closely with the WHCIS community, to demonstrate understanding of their needs and concerns, and provide detailed, clear plans for the future that address them.

To that end, the CAG recommends the new school building to be located on the Sycamore St site, which aligns with options 1 and 2. While this move alone will not repair the damage, it is an important restorative action for a community that has felt neglected for years. Additional outreach, conversation and sensitivity can provide an opportunity for WHCIS students, families staff and educators to begin to rebuild that trust and start the process of healing. Some of the most prominent voices in the next phases of construction will be from the WHCIS community, as WHCIS remains the only school in the district currently displaced from a permanent building.

Engagement with WHCIS educators is critical. No WHCIS educator applied to join the CAG, and thus this important voice was missing from the CAG process. The city must find a way to engage WHCIS educators without providing burdens beyond what they have already endured through the closure of the Sycamore St site.

### Recommendation 2: Maximize MSBA investment

In general, the CAG recommends the City pursue an MSBA option that maximizes the amount of space that can be added to the Somerville Public Schools facilities portfolio. This aligns with options 2 or 3, which provide capacity for both the student populations of WHCIS and the Brown School. Ultimately option 2 is preferred, which puts a very large school in the middle of a residential neighborhood.



As the school building process proceeds, there is an opportunity to provide support not only to the school communities, but also to the broader Somerville community. New facilities offer the opportunity for new community spaces, amenities, recreational facilities, playgrounds and other features that can help build community support. If a larger school is pursued under the MSBA process, the more the city and School Building Committee can do to provide benefits to the non-school community, the more support this project will receive in the long term.

### Recommendation 3: Provide a Vision for the Future

The CAG recommends the City, SPS and the School Committee co-author a plan or series of communications that provides a clear, forward-thinking and appealing vision for the future of Somerville Public Schools. It should include detailed measures that address concerns arising from the CAG process, including:

- School Size
- Services to Special Education Students
- How the new school will impact existing enrollment policies, or what the new policy will be when the new school opens.
- Longer commutes to school for some SPS families
- Impacts on existing green space
- Disruption impacts to abutters and students
- Impacts of a larger building on existing roads and infrastructure
- The future of the Brown School Building, preferably as an occupied, publicly accessible community asset.

More broadly, the CAG recommends that the City take a strategic approach to SPS Facilities planning, and weigh the long-term economic and political risks of another catastrophic building failure at another school facility against the near-term community resistance to closing the Brown and incorporating its enrollment capacity in a new school facility. The lack of a long-range plan by either School Committee or the city leaves the CAG lacking appropriate guidance to feel fully confident in a recommendation independent of contingencies and additional recommendations.

It is imperative that the City take immediate action(s) to restore trust and goodwill in the SPS community, especially WHCIS educators and families. Much of the CAGs time was spent listening to the frustrations of a community that feels excluded and ignored, and it is clear from our survey and focus group that the success of any debt exclusion will rely on convincing voters that the new building will be a transformative agent of positive change.

In addition, attitudes towards the construction of any new school building are currently very negative, and City messaging about the issue has so far failed to communicate the positive community changes a new facility would bring.

There is a clear gap between the needs of the school district, the needs of the city, and the needs of the community. This gap arises due to a lack of a clear vision that unites these stakeholders. This vision must come from elected officials at the city and school committee level if progress is to be made.

## Recommendations to the city for future community engagement

As the city will soon have a new mayor, there is an opportunity to learn from the CAG process and consider how best to engage the community going forward. While this does not directly bear on the siting and scope recommendation of the CAG, it is worth mentioning for future projects where community input may be requested.

Consultation with groups not included in the CAG, in particular SEPAC, SEU, etc. is critical to ensure that school building process is equitable and produces results that are of benefit to the whole community. Several key voices were missing from this process, and additional outreach from the city, the School Committee and the School Building Committee are critical moving forward. No WHCIS educators were willing to participate in the CAG. SEPAC and SEU were not approached to provide representation.

During the CAG process, the city initiated a survey that was poorly received by the initial community. Although close collaboration with the CAG ultimately led to the creation and deployment of an improved survey that generated a large number of engaged responses, this was an issue that may have further damaged trust between groups impacted by the school building process and the city.

Repairing this trust is not the purview of only the city. As stated above, the School Committee needs to provide bold, clear leadership to ensure that school families and staff are engaged and feel like there is a path forward. There is an opportunity to rebuild trust, and that opportunity must be taken seriously by all parties.

## Additional Comments from Individual CAG Members