

Somerville School Construction Advisory Group (CAG)

Synthesis of Initial CAG Recommendation

DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION

Background

The City has been examining the needs for school building development. Among those efforts has been an exploration of the facility challenges at our two oldest schools: the Benjamin G. Brown School and the Winter Hill Community Innovation School (WHCIS). 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 The Brown School building will need major renovation in the future to replace outdated systems and address accessibility needs.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.

To address these challenges, the City filed two Statements of Interest with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to seek state funding for these two buildings. In December 2023, the MSBA notified Somerville that the Winter Hill SOI was invited into the Eligibility phase of the MSBA process. Although the Brown School was not specifically accepted into the program, the MSBA expressed willingness to consider a single project that accommodates both the Winter Hill and Brown school populations at this time, and also includes space for additional projected growth in the City.

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, though such funding may be unlikely.

Because this question has significant implications for the families in those areas, for the Somerville Public Schools, and for the City overall, the City committed to a broad community process to allow Somerville parents / guardians, educators, and community members to meaningfully weigh in on whether the MSBA process to renovate or rebuild the Winter Hill school will also serve the Brown School community, and if not, how the City might address the facility needs for the school. This process has centered on the work of a Construction Advisory Group (Advisory Group), made up of representatives with a range of perspectives across the City, to deliberate and align on a path forward. The group also advised on broad public engagement of the Somerville public through a community survey and set of focus groups.

The CAG held 13 meetings, approximately monthly, from October 2024 through November 2025, where they requested and examined a wide range of information and data to help inform their deliberations. This included the following:

- Student, parent, and educator outreach from the Winter Hill 2024 8th Grade Civic Action Project
- Findings of the City of Somerville K-8 Capacity Study
- Understanding of the MSBA process, tasks, and estimated schedule
- Deep dives into municipal finance, including the relationship between capital and operating budgets, mechanisms of revenue generation, borrowing considerations, the mechanics of overrides and debt exclusions, and capital investment planning and needs
- Somerville School walksheds, including both parcel data and enrolled school proximities as well as survey results on methods for family travel to school
- Historical lottery and enrollment data for 6-8 grade Brown School transitions
- Brown school tour and facility conditions
- Somerville Public Schools historical attending report and attrition data
- Trum Field use and scheduling data
- Historic and comparative data on overrides and Somerville voter demographics
- Updated K-8 Master Plan concepts and general timeline options for Brown and Winter Hill
- Impacts of educational considerations on the different options, including the benefits and costs of diverse specialized programming, distance from school, enrollment size, and large gathering spaces
- Updated estimated construction costs, operation and maintenance costs, school personnel costs, and debt projections for all of the options
- Broad Community Survey results and findings from six Focus Groups

The group developed the following list of evaluation criteria that they used to weigh their recommendation.

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

The CAG was supported by facilitators Stacie Smith and Meira Downie of The Consensus Building Institute. All of the data presented to the CAG and utilized in the decision making process, along with video recordings and summaries from all of the CAG's meetings, can be found at the [CAG website](#).

Majority CAG Recommendations

After careful consideration of the information described above, the CAG recommends that a school be built up to the maximum capacity allowed by MSBA at the Sycamore St site. This would be of a sufficient size to accommodate a school with a population the size of Brown and WHCIS combined, along with space for additional growth and flexibility for the district, and most likely lead to the eventual closure of the Brown school.

Location: The City's analysis showed only two viable options for locating the new school - rebuilding at the Winter Hill School's current location on Sycamore Street or relocating to a portion of Trum Field. If the school were to be built on Trum Field, Article 97 of MA State Law would require the City to replace the lost green space equivalent in size and use to be constructed elsewhere in the city. For cost estimation purposes, the City suggested that the Sycamore Street site was the most likely location to replace the lost softball/baseball fields, resulting in a direct space swap. The CAG's recommendation to rebuild the new school at the Sycamore street location was unanimous, based on the following key factors:

- **Strong Community Opposition to building at Trum Field:** The vast majority of community members in surveys and focus groups across all demographic and stakeholder groups expressed opposition to building the new school at Trum Field. They cited strong attachment to maintaining the historic use of the largest City-owned green space, as well as permitting challenges, timeline and safety concerns, and possible complications related to the field swap. This widespread opposition has a potential to undermine the success of the town override for the project.
- **Cost:** Once the cost of the Article 97 land swap was factored in, the cost estimates presented by the City showed that there were negligible 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.
- **Uncertainties and Challenges of Implementing Article 97:** Implementation of Article 97 is a negotiation with the State, would be a first for Somerville, and would require additional permitting, other procedural hurdles, and uncertainties.

School Size: Respondents highlighted a range of factors influencing their support for a larger school at Sycamore Street, including:

- **Maximizes the Use of State Funding:** Maximizing state funding (MSBA reimbursement) and reducing overall cost borne by Somerville taxpayers allows the City to direct capital funds to other city needs. The CAG recognizes the need for future growth city-wide, taking advantage of the opportunity for more capacity. The CAG has significant concerns about the success of a second debt exclusion vote, and see the lower overall costs as raising the potential of freeing resources for other services and programs across SPS, allowing the City to prioritize its resources for a larger number of students.

- **Maximizes Likelihood of a Successful Override:** While community opinions in the survey were split between rebuilding a larger school and maintaining the Brown as a separate school, tightening municipal budgets demonstrate that resources are becoming even more constrained for cities and towns across the Commonwealth. A larger school would provide a direct benefit for more families, allow more community amenities that could increase support, and avoid the potential of a failed second override vote. Given the large percentage of Somerville voters without students in the schools, one larger project seems more likely to succeed than two smaller projects with a larger long-term cost.
- **Builds an Asset for Students and the Community:** A larger state-of-the-art building designed to meet both district and community needs - including more specialized spaces, a focus on Special Education programs like AIM, and other essentials - can allow for innovations in educational programming and more amenities for a safe and quality learning environment for all students, as well as for community purposes.
- **Creates Flexibility for the District:** A larger school building allows SPS and the School Committee to consider and find solutions for a greater variety of educational options for the students of the future. Meanwhile, if the Brown school building is no longer used as a K-5 school, it could provide needed additional flexibility and/or swing space to the district where nearly every other school building is at or near enrollment capacity, with no room for projected student population growth.
- **Minimizes Risk of Building Failure of the Brown School:** Offsetting serious facility deficiencies at the Brown school, such as aging infrastructure, risk of systems failure, accessibility for students and staff with physical disabilities, and lack of a cafeteria or gymnasium, would require a separate MSBA application and, if accepted, another debt exclusion vote by the community. Neither is certain to succeed.
- **Creates Consistency of Educational Model:** This new school would provide an opportunity to bring all schools into alignment with the city's K-8 schooling model, which promotes more educational uniformity across the city. It was also seen by some as an opportunity for greater mixing of racial, socio-economic, and ability levels, which could improve the learning environments and experiences of all students.
- **Efficiency and Other Benefits:** This approach would also save staff time by taking on only one project and reduce carbon emissions and maintenance expenses by avoiding ongoing maintenance of two old buildings.

Additional Recommendations to Ensure Success

While making this recommendation, the CAG acknowledges how painful the displacement and slow rebuilding experience has been for WHCIS families, and how the failure to anticipate catastrophic conditions at Winter Hill and limited communications with the Winter Hill community in the aftermath deepened its mistrust in the City, School Committee, and School District. While the City worked to explore options and design its community process, outreach

to the community felt insufficient, and the conditions and displacement of being at the Edgerly has reduced enrollment at the school in the last few years. Because the initial community survey was criticized and ultimately jettisoned, the formal collection of community sentiment came late in the process.

The CAG is also aware that a larger school at Sycamore Street is not the preferred choice of many of the current families and abutters being served by Winter Hill Community Innovation School and the Brown School. In the community survey, special education majorities, black and Hispanic families also indicated that they would prefer to maintain separate schools. The decision to ultimately close the Brown School will directly affect abutters and potential future families with strong ties to the Brown School. The CAG recommends that the City and SPS acknowledge the disappointment this community will experience, and make particular efforts to understand and ensure that the unique qualities offered by the Brown school are integrated into the new school and SPS writ large.

To maximize the potential success of this project, the CAG recommends the following additional steps:

- **Acknowledge Community Pain and Promote Healing:** Acknowledging and addressing community mistrust is a core part of the CAG's recommendations. The City should take immediate action(s) to restore trust and a sense of goodwill in the SPS community, especially for WHCIS educators and families. Survey and focus group results and public comments throughout the process demonstrated the frustrations of a community that feels excluded and ignored, and the harms of years of displacement have left a wound that will be hard to heal. The first step to rebuilding trust is listening and acknowledgement.
- **Engage in Proactive and Ongoing Community Engagement:** Tied to the recommendation above, the City and SPS then have an opportunity to "reboot" their community relationships. The CAG urges the City to engage closely with the WHCIS community and the Brown community during and beyond the planning phase to demonstrate understanding of their needs and concerns, and provide detailed, clear plans for the future that address their needs and concerns. Engagement with WHCIS educators is also 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 Street site. Further, the City should engage the community proactively before any decisions are made that might reduce open space.
- **Create and Emphasize a Positive Vision for the Future:** Once this decision is made, there is a need for the School Committee and District to develop and share a compelling redistricting/school assignments, program placement and space needs (like AIM), and a district-wide conversation on enrollment equity. Planning should also address safe routes to school and solutions for families without cars left further away from their nearest schools. A positive vision for the district should be shared widely with the public.

The School Committee should also create a phasing/ transition plan for addressing enrollment changes, including how to maintain vibrancy at WHCIS@Edgerly and phase out programming at Brown.

- **Maximize Space and Building Features:** The school should take advantage of this key opportunity to be “a campus for the school of tomorrow.” Its design should ensure that the new building feels small and not overwhelming for young children and those with special needs. Specific design ideas include: separate wings and entry/exit points, effective noise reduction, flow control, in-classroom (for pre-K and K) and private/gender-neutral bathrooms, sustainable design and operation, specialized classrooms, flexible spaces, and safe and efficient internet connectivity. It should be shaped from the outset with the needs of the AIM program in mind. It should also include opportunities to serve the whole community, with features like a gym and auditorium and maximized outdoor/playground space. To convince voters to support the debt exclusion, the CAG recommends that City messaging about this opportunity communicate the positive changes a new facility would bring for the District and the community, and clear vision for the future of SPS and how this larger state-of-the-art school can support SPS’s goals. Such a plan should address staffing, programming, grade spans,
- **Educational Vision and Planning:** Many suggested the need for a compelling and clear vision from the District and School Committee regarding the future of SPS, which would address programming, grade spans, redistricting/school assignments, program placement (like AIM), and a district-wide conversation on enrollment equity. A positive vision for the district should be shared widely with the public. There was also a suggestion for a phasing/transition plan for addressing enrollment changes, including how to maintain vibrancy at WHCIS@Edgerly and phase out programming at Brown - perhaps providing special perks like priority for after-school or summer camp enrollment or first High School course choice. Lastly, there was a suggestion to commit to working with unions to reassign and maintain all staff positions.
- **Planning for the Brown Building:** There must be a clear plan and commitment to appropriate reuse of the Brown building after it is no longer occupied as a K-5 school. The CAG recommends that the building be occupied and beneficially utilized to meet City, SPS, and/or community priorities. A plan for the future of the Brown school building is essential to alleviate concern and demonstrate political commitment, transparency, and creativity in long-term planning.
- **Consider Funding Improvements at all SPS Schools:** While not a consensus recommendation, the CAG discussed the potential for advancing a second simultaneous debt exclusion that would fund ADA, safety, health, and improved building quality needs at all of the SPS schools, in order to benefit families across the district and minimize the likelihood of future unplanned building failures that could displace children and harm the City’s schools. This would include ADA upgrades to the Brown building to support its

future constructive reuse, proactive interventions to preserve facilities, and commitment to fully support maintenance for the new school and other SPS schools.

Dissenting Opinions

Two CAG members disagreed with the recommendation to rebuild a larger school at Sycamore Street, preferring that the City rebuild the Winter Hill School at Sycamore only to accommodate the enrollment and future projections for the current WHCIS community, and to keep the Brown School in its current location on Willow Avenue, and address that school's needs later as part of a future debt exclusion vote, with or without MSBA funding.

These members offered the following reasons for their recommendation:

- **School Size and Concern for Special Education:** One member noted concerns about the large size of the school and fears that it would be overwhelming for students, especially those in the AIM program. They expressed a lack of confidence in the School District to design and program the larger school in a way that would meet the unique needs of the school's special programs.
- **Preservation of Academic Excellence at Brown:** One member highlighted the academic rigor and high test scores of the Brown school, and felt that the cost of maintaining such a high performing school was worth the cost. They expressed concern about the ability to maintain this unique success within such a large school.
- **Support from the Brown School Community:** One member emphasized the longstanding support from people in Ward 6 for maintaining the Brown School, noting the historic advocacy that has prevented any previous plans to close the school. They also expressed concern about transportation and walkable schools for families in the proximity of Brown whose student will no longer be close enough to walk to school, and the resulting increase in traffic and congestion around Sycamore.
- **Lower Perceptions of Facility and Fiscal Risk:** One member expressed that the missing amenities (cafeteria, gym, etc) at the Brown School were not impeding its ability to provide a high quality education, and that the structural issues were well under control. They were undaunted by the need, when the time came, for another override to support repairs and renovation for the Brown, and felt that the City could make the case to the community to support the preservation of the school.

CAG Members

Winter Hill Parent Representatives

- Matthew Daniels

Brown School Parent Representatives

- Marta Guerra Pastrian
- Ryan Williams (PTA)

Somerville Public School District Parent Representatives

- Emily Miyares
- Matthew Roberts

City Council Representative

- Kristen Strezo

School Committee Representative

- Andre Green

Community Group Representatives

- Green New Deal for Somerville Schools: Corey Donahue
- Padres Latinos: Paula Magnelli and Gandhi Aldana

Business Community Representative

- Jack Connolly

Brown School Teacher Representative

- Julia Austein

Somerville School District Representative

- Amara Anosike