

**CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

Monday, August 17, 2025 – Special Meeting of the Whole

7:00 p.m. – Zoom Webinar

I. Call to Order

The Special Meeting of the Somerville School Committee was called to order on August 17, 2026.

Members present: President Davis, SC Rep Pitone, SC Rep Lippens, SC Rep Eldridge, SC Rep Green, Dr. Stellman, Mayor Wilson, Vice Chair Biton, and Chair Ackman

II. MSBA

Chair Ackman; The meeting was convened for the purpose of considering the School Committee's vote regarding the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) process and the Preferred Schematic Report and Grade Reconfiguration Letter for the proposed school project at **115 Sycamore Street**.

MOTION: There was a motion by Rep Lippens, seconded by Rep Green to authorize the School Committee Chair and Superintendent to sign the Preferred Schematic Report and Grade Reconfiguration Letter.

Prior to the vote, the Committee received a presentation from the Perkins Eastman design team addressing questions raised during the previous School Committee meeting regarding the proposed school's cafetorium, sensory spaces, breakout spaces, and classroom learning environments.

The design team presented examples from other schools to illustrate potential approaches to:

- Cafetorium design and acoustics
- Flexible and adaptable dining spaces
- Different seating configurations for students
- Sensory-sensitive and respite spaces
- Small-group and breakout learning areas
- Student collaboration spaces
- Bringing natural daylight into interior areas
- Creating smaller, more intimate "neighborhood" spaces within a larger school

The design team emphasized that the current feasibility phase is conceptual and that significant additional design work would be undertaken to develop spaces specifically for Somerville.

Comments/ Questions

Rep. Pitone thanked the design team for sharing the examples, noting that the Committee had raised questions about supporting sensory-sensitive students, creating an inclusive environment, and providing a variety of spaces to meet different student needs.

President Davis expressed appreciation for the design examples but raised concerns regarding the proposed school's acoustics, scale, and ability to provide an inclusive environment for younger students and students with sensory sensitivities. He noted that while some of the cafeteria designs appeared effective,

he remained concerned about the practicality of sensory and breakout spaces within a large, highly structured school environment. He also questioned whether examples from other communities adequately reflected the conditions and scale of the proposed Somerville school and stated that the presentation did not sufficiently address his concerns regarding the overall size, layout, lighting, and six-story design of the building.

Dan: the images represented schools of various sizes and were based on feedback from different communities. He emphasized that the design would incorporate the Committee's input and priorities to create an effective learning environment for all students.

Dr. Stelman: Asked for clarification on the size and grade levels of the schools shown in the examples to better understand their scale. She noted that parents and community members have expressed concerns about the intimacy and overall feel of larger schools, explaining that hearing a school has 1,000 students can be difficult to visualize. She asked how the images could help the School Committee better understand what that scale looks and feels like, particularly in a K–8 setting where middle school and younger students may have separate spaces. She also asked whether one of the images shown was the new Tobin School in Cambridge and how examples from other communities could be applied to Somerville's specific circumstances.

Lisa Pecora: The examples included a PK–8 school serving more than 900 students, as well as middle and high school spaces featuring various seating options and acoustic features. The team noted that these examples could continue to serve as precedents throughout the design process, allowing the Committee to compare and evaluate potential solutions through drawings and photographs. They also suggested visiting similar schools and speaking with teachers and principals to better understand what works, what does not, and why. Additionally, the team offered to visit Somerville's existing K–8 schools with the Committee to learn from the district's current experiences and help inform future design decisions.

Vice Chair Biton: Thanked the design team for sharing the images and expressed appreciation for the visual examples. He shared her optimism about the space being developed and stated that he looks forward to continued engagement throughout the process.

Rep. Lippens: Echoed the comments regarding the design team's work and emphasized the importance of creating a space that responds to the needs of the Somerville community. She noted the many opportunities presented by the proposed design and shared her experience visiting a PK–8 school in Cambridge that serves a large number of students, including students with significant challenges and needs. She described the space as beautiful and well-equipped to meet the needs of its students. Rep. Lippens encouraged fellow School Committee members and others to consider visiting the school to gather ideas and engage more deeply in the design process.

Rep. Eldridge: Thanked the design team for their work and acknowledged the extensive materials prepared for the Committee. She referenced the National School Boards Association article *Schools as Critical Community Infrastructure* and asked the design team to speak about how school design can support students' academic, social-emotional, and basic needs.

The design team highlighted the importance of flexible breakout spaces that support different learning styles, encourage collaboration, and create smaller, connected communities within a larger school. They explained that these spaces can serve as a "front porch" for grade-level neighborhoods and provide students with a sense of community and belonging. The team agreed to share the article with the Committee.

President Davis: Thanked the Chair and reiterated his concern that, while the design team has done an excellent job with the assignment, he believes the underlying proposal is misguided. He expressed concern that the nearly 1,000-seat school is too large and does not align with Somerville's tradition of offering a range of school sizes and environments to meet different student needs. He questioned whether a school of this size, with five classes per grade in a multi-story building, could provide the intimate, small-school environment discussed throughout the presentation. He also raised concerns about the potential increase in traffic and its impact on the City's recent progress in reducing traffic fatalities. He emphasized that the vote is not about specific design features, but rather whether to submit a nearly 1,000-seat building to the MSBA as the district's preferred approach. He urged the Committee to revise the submission to the smaller, approximately 600-seat option and, after rebuilding Winter Hill, turn its attention to addressing the long-term needs of the district's other smaller schools.

President Davis: concluded by stating that he believes moving forward with the current proposal would be a mistake and expressed his hope that the Committee would reconsider the approach.

Rep. Pitone: Provided context on the multi-year process leading to the current proposal and noted that the Construction Advisory Group, School Committee, and Mayor had previously supported the larger 925-seat school option. She identified accessibility and cost as key factors, emphasizing that fully addressing accessibility needs requires appropriate spaces and services beyond basic features such as elevators. She noted that making the Brown School fully accessible was estimated to cost approximately \$94 million while significantly reducing outdoor space. She acknowledged concerns about the school's size but stated that, given the decisions already made and the lack of a cost-effective alternative addressing the district's accessibility needs, she supports moving forward with the proposal. She also noted that a larger school could provide greater opportunities for inclusion, particularly for students with special needs.

Rep. Green: Thanked everyone involved and noted that concerns about the Brown School's long-term sustainability have been discussed for many years. She emphasized that the district has a rare opportunity through the MSBA process to address several systemic issues at once. He also stated that he believes the Brown School's strong academic performance should not be attributed solely to its small size and noted that Winter Hill is also a small school. He argued that the district must address longstanding patterns of segregation and create more equitable educational opportunities for all students. He highlighted the extensive community and professional input that has supported the current proposal, including previous unanimous votes by the School Building Committee and prior School Committee votes.

Rep. Green expressed strong support for moving forward and committed to helping ensure the new school meets the needs of every student.

Dr. Stellman: Asked President Davis whether he intended to make a different motion proposing the approximately 600-seat school option. She sought clarification on the procedural implications of his comments and whether he was simply expressing opposition to the current proposal or advocating for an alternative that would require a separate vote.

President Davis: Clarified that the current motion would need to be tabled before a separate motion could be considered. He stated that he would be willing to propose revising the MSBA submission to recommend the approximately 600-seat option if there was interest from other Committee members.

He reiterated that the future of the Brown School should be addressed separately from the Winter Hill project and clarified that he supports ultimately renovating or replacing the Brown School. He also noted that the School Committee previously voted on a draft based on the Construction Advisory Group's work, rather than directly on a CAG recommendation, and expressed concerns about the process.

President Davis concluded by stating that he would support revisiting the MSBA submission if other Committee members were open to considering the smaller option.

Mayor Wilson: Thanked the Committee and members of the public for their engagement and noted the strong community support for the schools. He emphasized that each advisory or decision-making body that has considered the 690-seat versus 925-seat options has supported the larger school by a substantial majority, including the CAG, School Building Committee, and School Committee.

Mayor Wilson stated that while reasonable differences of opinion remain, there is a clear and consistent preference for the 925-seat option at Sycamore. He expressed his support for moving forward with the preferred schematic report as an important step toward building the school the city needs.

Rep. Biton: Thanked colleagues for their thoughtful comments and acknowledged the differing perspectives on the school size. He stated that, despite some reservations, he will support the Committee's consensus to move forward with the larger school option and focus on creating the best possible school at the selected site. He expressed enthusiasm about the proposed design elements and the future of the project.

Rep. Green: Responded to comments regarding the Committee's previous votes and emphasized that those decisions were made with full consideration of the Brown School's future and the concerns of the Brown community. She acknowledged that school closures can bring grief and frustration but stated that the Committee has consciously considered the implications of its decisions.

Rep. Green: clarified that the 925-seat figure represents the potential capacity of the building and does not necessarily mean that 925 students would be enrolled there. He emphasized that a larger building provides greater flexibility to meet different student needs and accommodate programs, services, and spaces that are difficult to provide within the district's existing facilities. He also noted that space is a significant limitation in Somerville and stated that the MSBA opportunity provides the district with an important chance to expand its capacity.

Rep. Green concluded that the district should take advantage of the opportunity and be responsible stewards of its resources.

Dr. Stellman: Reinforced the importance of addressing inequities and segregation within Somerville's schools and ensuring that schools better reflect the diversity of the community. She acknowledged the strong emotional connection families have to their schools and recognized that changes to a school can bring a genuine sense of grief and loss.

Dr. Stellman emphasized that, as a School Committee member, she has a responsibility to consider the needs of the entire city while also listening to constituents and families. She acknowledged the disruption facing Winter Hill families and expressed concern that the district has not addressed the situation more quickly. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of listening to voices from across the city and working toward a more equitable school system.

Rep. Eldridge: Encouraged members of the community to review the National School Boards Association article, noting its research on trauma-informed and dignity-centered school design. She emphasized the importance of intentionally designing a school that meets the needs of all students and provides supportive spaces for everyone. Rep. Eldridge thanked the design team and Committee members for their work and thoughtful discussions and expressed enthusiasm about continuing the process to ensure the district's schools meet the needs of all learners.

Dr. Ackman: There being no further discussion, the Committee returned to the motion made by Rep. Lippens and seconded by Rep. Green:

Motion: To authorize the School Committee Chair and Superintendent to sign the Preferred Schematic Report and Grade Reconfiguration Letter.

Roll call vote: – President Council Davis- N, Member Lippens- Y, Member Eldridge-Y, Mayor Wilson-Y, Member Biton-Y and Dr. Ackman-Y, Dr. Stellman Member Green, Member Pitone, Motion passed Yes: 8 No: 1, unanimously.

III. ADJOURNMENT

Meeting was adjourned 7:00 p.m.

Related documents:

[Perkin Eastman Presentation](#)

Submitted by: E. Garcia

Attach Documents Starting on the next page