

Somerville School Construction Advisory Group (CAG) Final Report

Background

The City has been examining the needs for school building development. Among those efforts has been an exploration of the facility challenges at two of Somerville's 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 concrete 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 The Brown School building will need major renovation in the future to replace outdated systems and address accessibility needs.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, any 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 site.

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 enrollment capacity of the Brown School, 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 (CAG), 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 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, as well as representatives of the City Council and the School Committee. 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 a large team of staff from the city and the school department, and 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](#).

After careful consideration of the information described above and drawing on the options available, the members of the CAG divided their recommendation into 3 parts: 1) the location of the new school, 2) the size/capacity of the new school, and 3) a recommendation on the future of the Brown School. Beyond their recommendations on the key issues, CAG members suggested, in their final meeting, the potential of a second debt exclusion to support upgrades in all the City's schools. They also raised significant concerns and frustrations about the overall process and events leading up to it, which are described in the final section of this report.

Please note that the recommendations and findings in this report are the result of a deliberative process informed by extensive technical data, including facility studies, financial projections, and enrollment reports. This document also reflects the qualitative assessments and personal judgments of CAG members. Where the report notes rationale for CAG member perspectives, especially on topics where there are disagreements, these represent the varying interpretations of the members based on their unique values and perspectives.

CAG Recommendations

1) Location: The CAG unanimously agrees that the new school be built on the Sycamore Street site.

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 it 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 debt exclusion vote for the project. As the process continued, CAG members expressed significant frustration about the continued inclusion of Trum as an option given the known and anticipated lack of community support.
- **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, particularly if the rebuilding of the field is not eligible for MSBA cost share .

- **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 that would likely impact both project schedule and cost. There was significant frustration from some CAG members about communications and data related to Article 97. CAG members felt that the city should have produced cost and feasible estimates about this option much earlier, and brought them to the CAG and community sooner, which would have saved time and effort related to the CAG's deliberations and allowed for earlier acknowledgement of community dissatisfaction with this location.

2) Size and capacity: CAG members were divided on the recommended size and capacity for the school.

Of the CAG's 13 members:

- 9 recommend the school be built up to the maximum capacity allowed by MSBA;
- 2 recommend the school be built at a "medium size" with a capacity of 700 or less, or perhaps as a larger building with two co-located schools within the school
- 2 recommends the school only include capacity to replace WHCIS enrollment, plus potentially some space for additional growth and flexibility for the district.

Several CAG members expressed frustration about the lack of vision and educational perspective from the School Committee and SPS on the preferred student population size and alignment of options with long term goals, which should have occurred in advance of this deliberation process. **No matter the size of the school, the group agreed that to succeed, there was a need for the school committee, SPS, and the city to provide robust plans for staffing, management, redistricting, safe routes to school, and programming, and a compelling vision for how this new building will maximize benefits for the district and the community.** This vision must come from elected officials at the city and school committee level if progress is to be made.

Members also noted that the new school, no matter the size, should preserve outdoor play space. 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.

Those CAG members supporting a larger school (or two co-located schools) highlighted a range of factors influencing their recommendation, including:

- **Creates an Opportunity to Add a Community Asset:** As the school building process proceeds, there is an opportunity to provide support not only to these one or two school communities, but also to the broader Somerville population. 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. CAG members encourage the city and School Building Committee to design in spaces such as flexible use rooms, a pool, and community center, even if these are disallowed for MSBA cost-sharing.

- **Maximizes Future 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. A new larger facility provides maximum 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. Innovations in educational programming, such as built-for-purpose spaces for Special Education programs like AIM and other specialized services that do not exist within the current facilities portfolio, can more likely be included with a larger building project. Several CAG members and survey respondents raised hopes that a new larger building might have been considered as a middle school, and saw a missed opportunity by SPS, Superintendent, and School Committee to address what they saw as a longstanding deficiency in its K-8 model. The member suggesting a medium sized school could also support "two co-located schools in a school" such as a smaller elementary school (~3 classes per grade) and a partial middle school consolidation (5-6 classes per grade for grades 6-8 or 7-8) as an effective compromise that justifies a large size up to 925.
- **Makes the Best Use of State Funding:** Maximizing state funding (MSBA reimbursement) and reducing overall cost borne by Somerville taxpayers for this project makes the most fiscal sense and allows the City to direct capital funds to other city and school district needs. Tightening municipal budgets demonstrates that resources are becoming even more constrained for cities and towns across the Commonwealth. The CAG recognizes the need for future growth city-wide, taking advantage of the opportunity for more capacity. For some CAG members, there are real concerns about the success of an additional debt exclusion vote, and meeting district needs with lower overall costs raises 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.
- **Minimizes Impact of Future Building Failure:** 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. This approach addresses the long-term economic and political risks of another catastrophic building failure at another school facility.

Members who supported rebuilding a medium size or smaller school that would include only capacity for the Winter Hill enrollment, with some additional flexibility for future growth, cited the following reasons:

- **Support for Smaller, Neighborhood Schools.** Small schools have social, emotional, and educational advantages, particularly for students in special education. Having fewer students is better for AIM students, who might be overwhelmed by such a large school population, and having administrators who know each student well allows them to better meet individual needs. Neighborhood schools allow more walkability and prevent more traffic congestion.
- **Lack of Confidence in Operations at Such a Large School.** The School Committee and SPS have not offered a plan or vision for how such a large school fits into their educational goals, nor shared a detailed plan for how it will be staffed, managed, and programmed, nor how they will reassign catchments and address enrollment disparities throughout the district. There was therefore 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 and the needs of the school communities.

3) Future of the Brown School: CAG members are most divided on their recommendations for the future of the Brown School.

Of the CAG's 13 members:

- 7 remit the decision about the closure of the Brown to the School Committee
- 3 recommend the eventual closure of the Brown school
- 3 recommend keeping the Brown school open

Members who wish to remit the decision about closure of the Brown school back to the School Committee shared the following reasons:

- **Using Existing Decisionmaking Forums:** A policy (FCB - Retirement of Facilities) exists for closing schools, which requires a decision by the School Committee. The officials elected to make decisions need to be the ones accountable for these decisions. The CAG members are not elected officials and it would be inappropriate for a group of citizens to make this decision. Remanding this decision back to the School Committee also ensures that they have flexibility and the ability to make a plan that addresses concerns from the Brown Community and meets the needs of the city as a whole, and undertakes an appropriate process that includes direct engagement and community meetings with both the Brown and WHCIS communities as part of their decisionmaking process.
- **Strong Opposition from the Brown School Community:** Community input has shown that there is strong support among the parents and neighbors of the Brown school, as well as others in the broader community, to keeping the Brown school open. Asking the CAG members to take the political blame for upsetting this community is inappropriate.

- **Concern about Pitting School Communities Against Each Other:** A framing that requires the closing of the Brown in order for the Winter Hill to get a new school inappropriately pits the communities of the two schools against each other, and should be avoided. Several members also noted that there have been serious misstatements of fact about the Brown school population and demographics in the public discourse which do not reflect the complex diversity of the district.

Members who support the eventual closure of the Brown school offered the following reasons:

- **Maximizes Financial Benefits of State and Taxpayer Funds:** Entering into a funding agreement with the MSBA for a larger school will effectively eliminate the possibility that a future renovation of the Brown will receive MSBA funding. Therefore, the decision to fund a larger school means that either the Brown will need to close eventually, or that the taxpayers will need to support an additional tax override covering the entire cost of the renovation. The eventual closing of the Brown school will allow the City to allocate resources for the improvement of all other schools in the district, freeing up city funds (in the capital investment plan or through an additional debt exclusion vote) to invest proactively in other school and city properties. Even were such an override to pass, this increased tax burden disproportionately harms lower income residents, who might be pushed out of Somerville as costs rise.
- **Creates Opportunity for Consistency of Educational Model:** Eventually eliminating the only remaining K-5 school would provide an opportunity in the future to bring all schools into alignment with the city's K-8 schooling model, which would create more educational uniformity across the city. It also creates opportunity for greater mixing of racial, socio-economic, and ability levels, which could improve equity and the learning environments and experiences of all students.

Throughout the process CAG members noted strong concerns about the School Committee's track record of constructive community reuse of closed school buildings. Members supporting either of these first two options agreed that when or if the Brown school is no longer used as a K-5 school, its future should be planned for well in advance and recommend that it be used as an occupied, publicly valuable asset. Members did not support selling the site to a private developer, and several members noted the importance of ensuring that it will be a community asset for the neighborhood.

Members who support keeping the Brown school open offered the following reasons:

- **Support from the Brown School and Winter Hill Community:** There is current and longstanding support from the local community for keeping the Brown School open, including historic advocacy that has prevented any previous plans to close the school. Many from the Winter Hill community also prefer to maintain their existing school community. Members noted a preference for the Brown to be remodeled, or to find a space so it can continue operating.

- **Preservation of a Strong Local School:** The Brown school's MCAS scores are higher than the district average, despite the age of the structure and missing a cafeteria, gymnasium and disability access equipment. These members request that elected officials make preserving the Brown a priority, and pledge to make improvements/additions to the existing structure to maintain the positive Brown school experience for future generations.
- **Lower Perceptions of Facility and Fiscal Risk:** The missing amenities (cafeteria, gym, etc) at the Brown School do not impede its ability to provide a high quality education, and the structural issues were considered well-managed and non-critical at the time of CAG assessment. When the time comes for another override to support repairs and renovation for the Brown, the City can make the case to the community to support the preservation of the school.

4) Simultaneously fund improvements to all SPS schools.

In its final meetings, CAG members offered an additional recommendation to include 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, decarbonization and energy efficiency efforts for school buildings, proactive interventions to preserve facilities, and commitment to fully support maintenance for the new school and other SPS schools. Members emphasized the critical importance of prioritizing the needs of school buildings, increasing their available budget to ensure proper follow-up to the facility needs of every school.

This recommendation was supported by at least 9 CAG members, with one supporting but stressing that the CAG did not have sufficient time to study this in detail, one noting a need for more information of the viability and cost to tax payers before issuing support, and at least one not in support. Two members did not register their votes on this proposal.

Important Acknowledgements and Considerations:

The above recommendations respond to the scope and charge given to the CAG to address. However, it is important to name the significant limitations and frustrations the CAG has felt and identified within the process itself.

During the course of this process, the CAG repeated, heard from, and voiced 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. The emergency failure of the Winter Hill School came after many years of warning. Faculty, staff, parents and the PTA have all expressed concern about the state of school facilities for years, pushing for more dialogue, action, and funding. 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.

The CAG also wishes to call out deficiencies in their process. Many CAG members were frustrated with their task to make recommendations that would determine and constrain critical educational conditions without clear guidance from SPS or the School Committee on their long-term educational vision and goals, including what size student population was ideal, educationally, and if any particular option fit the School Committee's long-term goals. These members felt disappointed by the lack of vision for creating something transformative for the district. Further, 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. SEPAC and SEU were not represented. Consultation with groups not included in the CAG, in particular SEPAC, SEU, etc. is critical to ensure that the school building process is equitable and produces results that are of benefit to the whole community.

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 survey and focus group responses that the success of any debt exclusion will rely on convincing voters that the new building will be a transformative agent of positive change.

The CAG is also aware that a larger school at Sycamore Street is not the preferred choice of many of Winter Hill Community Innovation School and the Brown School community members or abutters to these sites. In the community survey, special education majorities, black and Hispanic families also indicated that they would prefer to maintain separate schools. The CAG recommends that the City and SPS acknowledge the disappointment this community has experienced, and make particular efforts to ensure that their voices are included. 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 must 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. The School Committee should also create a phasing/ transition plan for addressing enrollment changes, including how to maintain vibrancy at WHCIS@Edgerly while the rebuilding process is underway.

The CAG sees the potential for a new building that benefits educational and community goals for the City, and implores the City to do this right. The School Committee and District must develop and share a compelling and forward-thinking vision for the future of Somerville Public Schools, including plans for 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 if they are left further away from their nearest schools. This positive vision for the district should be developed in dialogue with the community and shared widely with the public.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect the CAG’s deliberations within a constrained and imperfect process, with recommendations that seek to serve the best interests of the City of Somerville while still elevating the concerns most consistently raised by the community. The group recognizes that no option fully resolves the impacts of displacement, enrollment pressures, or long-standing facility challenges, and that significant decisions remain with the City, School Committee, and District. For this project to succeed—both at the ballot box and in the classroom—the City and School Committee must now provide the positive leadership, educational vision, and sustained engagement with affected communities, particularly WHCIS families and educators. If the next phases are approached with realism about costs, timelines, and trade-offs—and with a commitment to inclusion and follow-through—the City can move toward a school facilities plan that is fiscally responsible, educationally sound, and more responsive to community needs over time.

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