

Somerville SEPAC 2025 Candidate Questionnaire on Special Education

Candidate Name: Liz Eldridge, Ward 2 School Committee

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?

I'm a parent of two children with dyslexia and serve as Chair of the Somerville Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC). In this role, I regularly support families navigating special education and advocate for special education voices to consistently be at the table. I am also a participant in the Federation for Children with Special Needs focusing on local and state policy improvements to support students with disabilities. Additionally, through SEPAC I am also completing the Advancing Parent and Professional Leadership in Education program offered by the Federation alongside the Director of Special Education and SEPAC community members to learn and advance the parent impact on improving student outcomes and leveraging the voices of students with disabilities and their families.

This topic isn't a buzz word for me. It is me and my family's reality.

Both within and outside of my role at SEPAC I will continue to consistently learn and grow alongside this community to advocate, collaborate, and educate for families and children with disabilities voices to consistently be at the table through collaboration.

In regard to policy making, right now we've reached a critical tipping point. Just as Somerville Public Schools has mobilized task forces in response to other crises, we

need a dedicated effort focused on addressing the systemic equity issues our historically marginalized students and families are facing.

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?

It's important to recognize the urgency of this issue. Our children do not have any time to wait when a learning gap exists every school day matters. Each day that passes without meaningful action makes that gap wider and harder to close. We can't expect educators to single-handedly reverse years of systemic shortcomings. That's not realistic and not fair.

We need a clear data-driven action plan- with measurable goals, timelines, and regular public updates. Transparency has to be the foundation. Right now, we're missing critical data in several areas, making it impossible to plan or evaluate our progress effectively or efficiently.

Accountability must follow transparency. Oversight designed to support measurable outcomes based on compliance and performance data for all students including our students with disabilities as well as other historically marginalized students. I'm confident when the system is working for our most vulnerable learners, it is working well for every child.

I would advocate for a special education task force charged with addressing DESE's specific areas of concern. This group should combine district leaders, educators, families, and community members to develop actionable solutions and track progress publicly.

Finally, pairing quantitative data with *street data*- the lived experiences of students, families, and educators. These voices are essential for turning numbers into understanding and thus action. Those closest to the challenges are often closest to the solutions.

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?

We need to focus on outcomes and would like to see a weighted rubric that ties to supporting our students with disabilities and other historically marginalized students. Including IEP implementation rates, service delivery fidelity, growth for students with disabilities (MCAS, i-Ready and DIBELS), compliance, staffing, professional

development. Trackable on a public dashboard to closely monitor any compliance indicators falling below a threshold or to celebrate gains.

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?

Beyond high level state data, I strongly believe we need to be tracking MTSS and special education service delivery closely by school to determine where additional support is needed. Tying that data to larger concerns of social and emotional well being, absenteeism, graduation rates, case load management. Each metric clearly defined on a public dashboard is how we address this issue head on and create the improvements our students require to ensure Somerville is the leader in educational equity for all students.

Again, utilizing "street data" to gather the ongoing voices and perspectives of students, families, and educators at the margins of the systems to round out test scores to inform decision-making and increase educational equity by taking into account lived experiences of our community members.

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.

As a whole we need to better understand this system to improve it. We need to know which screeners are used, staffing and case load of interventionists. Child Find is an ongoing process, and consistent implementation is required for success. Understanding and tracking referral protocols, staff training and identification, and regular audits of timelines to ensure compliance. We need to hear and understand our educators' pain points to create a system that works consistently and responds in a timely manner to procedures that are not successful.

Child Find- Early and targeted intervention is essential every time.

IEP Development- Must be built for a child's needs and not district staffing or resource limitations. This practice is illegal. Additionally, ensuring parents, guardians and educators are equal partners in building an IEP to meet a child's needs is essential.

Staffing & Service Delivery- We can't deliver services we don't have. We need to explore both immediate and ongoing staffing challenges ensuring conditions and supports are adequate for our special educators to successfully close gaps and improve student outcomes.

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)?

This is an area that will require wide collaboration with our educators, union, and administration to ensure success. Master schedule sharing and protected time blocks specifically for special education and related service providers would be a great start to begin addressing the issue of non-service hours so that educators have the space to adequately and appropriately support our students.

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?

A special education budget breakdown that goes beyond high level buckets to dives into individual schools, services, staffing, and tracking compliance related areas including minutes to ensure our systems are efficient and effective for our students.

Plain language also goes a long way in supporting greater understanding of budget discussions, community member accessibility and creative problem solving for pressing issues.

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?

The above noted robust improvements to tracking and thus case load and improvement of student outcomes will undoubtedly affect staffing and retention. It is proven that when students are succeeding in literacy alone there is better social and emotional well being amongst students and decreased teacher turnover.

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?

A strong foundation early before gaps can grow so large they can't be closed with a well resourced MTSS system and curriculum implemented with fidelity by educators that have the professional development necessary to feel confident in supporting their students is essential. It starts with data and is rounded out with street-data to build a plan to target achievement gaps.

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?

Neurodiversity-affirming and trauma-informed approaches begin with understanding that every child's brain and experience are unique. We must build a district culture that celebrates difference and fosters belonging.

I'd advocate for implementing disability education programs like *Understanding Our Differences* across all schools focusing on support for students, staff, and families. Regular, districtwide learning about neurodiversity and trauma helps us grow together and strengthens our community.

Embedding these values in professional development, policies, and daily practice ensures every child is seen, supported, celebrated and valued for who they are.

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?

This issue deeply concerns me. Students with disabilities are statistically more likely to experience bullying, teasing, and harassment. When our systems fail to protect them, we fail all students.

Many families have shared with me that current responses to bullying are often

inconsistent, subjective, and ineffective. We need clear, districtwide protocols that ensure accountability, transparency, and follow through.

A system that supports our most vulnerable learners will inherently support all learners. Students can't learn if they don't feel safe and safety and belonging must be at the center of every school's culture and practice.

I would also like to see public tracking of incidents and community collaboration to address bullying, teasing and harassment incidents.

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?

This goes back to close transparency, data tracking and implementing strategies based on data and lived experiences.

I would support a special education equity audit- led by the special education task force- to evaluate performance at each school. Designed to take a deep dive into exploring special education topics like: service minutes, staffing ratios, proficiency, growth, discipline, attendance, and family satisfaction. Using those findings to set minimum service standards including focusing on staffing, funding and resources targeting schools that have the widest gaps.

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?

We talk a lot about Progressive Stacking- a technique to give marginalized groups a greater change to participate in conversations and resolutions- at the Federation for Children with Special Needs. We need to leverage the voices of those that are most impacted, across the board, every single time. This is how we strengthen our schools and our communities.

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?

Transparency- you can't make a plan for a problem you won't address. Collaboration- we need to commit to doing better together. Trust- delivering on our promise of equity and excellence for all students. I do believe these three pillars will have a ripple effect on how we address the problems at hand and move forward together.

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?

Having a spot held for SEPAC representatives at all discussions from district planning to program development, infrastructure, program development, hiring and budget creation would allow for co-designing a system that works for all students. The Federation for Children with Special Needs says: "families are closest to the problems, so they should be closest to the solutions."

Providing timely data, sharing documents in advance of meetings and incorporating their voices and lived experiences in decision making. Creating a joint SEPAC and School Committee document with questions and responses posted online to encourage participation. I see this as an extension to the Special education Advisory group

The SEPAC has a legally mandated role in advising and partnering with the district, and that role must be fully honored. I would advocate for a permanent seat for SEPAC representatives in all key discussions — from district planning and program development to hiring, infrastructure, and budget creation — so families can help co-design a system that works for every student.

As the Federation for Children with Special Needs reminds us, "families are closest to the problems, so they should be closest to the solutions."

That partnership requires transparency and access: timely data sharing, meeting materials provided in advance, and consistent opportunities for SEPAC input before decisions are made. I would also support creating a joint SEPAC and School Committee

document with shared questions and responses posted publicly to encourage participation and streamline information sharing.

This should build upon, not replace, the existing Special Education Advisory Group-strengthening collaboration and accountability across the board.

- 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?

I would advocate for the creation of a public issues tracking system that ensures concerns raised during School Committee meetings lead to transparent action.

An item would be logged, assigned an owner, specific deadline, and a clear status. The tracker would be published online and updated regularly so families, educators, community members, and school committee members can see progress in real time.

Regular reviews and addressing outstanding items would create a pathway to transparency, accountability, rebuilding trust, and keep everyone focused on the issues and solutions needed to move our students forward.