

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mayor's Commission Invites Community to Imagine "The Future of Somersworth Schools"

Kickoff community forum set for Sept. 16th at Idlehurst Elementary School; series continues with hands-on brainstorming sessions Sept. 23rd, and wrap-up event Oct. 7th.

SOMERSWORTH, N.H. — Somersworth residents are being asked to set aside old and current assumptions about what a public school can look like and help design what comes next. Regardless of you or your family's own personal experience with public education, or attendance in public schools, the Commission invites all community members to join the discussion around the future of our schools.

The Mayor's Commission to Redesign and Reimagine the Somersworth School District – a group of city, school, and community leaders chaired by Somersworth Superintendent John Shea – will kick off a three-part community engagement series on Wednesday, September 16th, from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. at Idlehurst Elementary School. The event, titled "The Future of Somersworth Schools: Permission to Think Outside the Box", is open to the public and requires no RSVP; all are encouraged to attend and engage in this exciting process. Childcare and light refreshments to participants will also be provided. The September 16th event will also be recorded and posted on the city's website and youtube page for residents who can't attend in person.

The September 16th gathering is intended as an introductory night – a first look at the Commission's work and an invitation for residents to take part in shaping what comes next for the district, which serves students from preschool through graduation under SAU 56. The evening will open with remarks from Superintendent John Shea, Mayor Matt Gerding, and Commission members, and provide background on the state of public schools in Somersworth and New Hampshire, as well as a brief history about how education has evolved, and what the future of education may look like. The event will conclude with a preview and invitation to the Commission's second community event, scheduled to be held on September 23rd. The preview will introduce the four break-out groups participants are encouraged to attend, hosted by the Commission's planning teams.

"This isn't a meeting about budgets or buildings – it's a chance for this community to dream boldly about what our kids' schools could become," said Mayor Matt Gerding. "Somersworth has always found a way to punch above its weight, and I want residents in the room helping us build that future, not just hearing about it after the fact."

The Commission grew out of a budget-season workshop this year between Superintendent Shea and the City Council, in which Shea laid out a set of district priorities and asked city leaders to think more broadly about how Somersworth might need to adapt if external pressures – from proposed statewide open enrollment, school voucher policies, state imposed school tax caps, or continued state underfunding – force more dramatic change. Gerding committed to

forming a commission to take on that work, and the group has been organizing since the spring. The Commission is aiming to bring a set of proposals forward in time for the 2027 budget season.

Two more nights of hands-on brainstorming

The kickoff event is the first of three planned sessions. Though the community is invited and encouraged to attend all three nights, the commission emphasizes that any level of engagement is transformative and helpful. After the kick-off meeting on September 16th, the forums reconvene again to return to Idlehurst School on Wednesday, September 23rd, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. for an evening built around small-group brainstorming. Residents are encouraged to register for break-out groups in advance (though not required) and rank their top two picks from four topics; the event on the 23rd will run as two 45-minute break-out blocks separated by a short break. The four topic areas are:

- **Facilities, Land, Space, Community-Wide** — A conversation about the Somersworth School District's aging and uneven building stock, declining enrollment, and the hard questions that come with them, including whether a school might close or be repurposed, and what the community's non-negotiables are for its land and facilities.
- **How Do We Build a Stronger Community Through Better Partnerships?** — A look at how deeper partnerships with local businesses, city departments, and organizations – building on existing collaborations, and community members' own ideas – could strengthen both the schools and the broader community.
- **What if We Redesigned the K-8 Blueprint?** — A session asking participants to rethink the traditional K-8 "blueprint," including but not limited to grade-level groupings, the school calendar, and the start and end of the school day, in favor of a more personalized, flexible approach to learning.
- **Reimagine High School** — A discussion of what a more flexible, less "seat-time"-driven high school experience could look like, including alternatives to the traditional four-year, grade-locked structure.

A third and final session is planned for Wednesday, October 7th, where the Commission will report back on what it heard from the community and outline important next steps.

Why now?

Superintendent Shea has described the Commission's task as fundamentally different from the district's ongoing improvement work and strategic planning; rather than incremental fixes, the group is charged with considering a significant redesign of how Somersworth delivers public education – from the school calendar and daily schedule, to how grades and credits work – all within the district's existing budget. The work runs alongside the district's existing "[Hilltopper Promise](#)" and related improvement plans rather than replacing them.

"We essentially have three fundamental priorities," Superintendent John Shea says, "First – and most sacred – is the here and now. Providing a good education and taking care of our kids, the

very best we can, right now, today. Secondly, we are urgently, through our five year strategic plan, working to significantly improve our school system – for the short term future. Thirdly – and just as urgently – we have the work of this commission. Because significant improvements to the system may not be enough.” Shea notes that while the pressures are acute in Somersworth, they reflect challenges facing schools statewide and beyond. “We are in a crisis – which is much bigger than Somersworth – and it is very likely time to reimagine and redesign the system, not just improve it. It may be the only path forward.” Rather than debate those pressures in the abstract, the Commission says it wants residents' ideas to help shape the district's direction from the start.

Organizers say every idea is welcome and that the sessions are designed to be judgment-free spaces for residents to think creatively about the future of public education in Somersworth.

Event Details

The Future of Somersworth Schools: Permission to Think Outside the Box

Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2026 | 6:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Idlehurst School, Somersworth, N.H.

Free and open to the public — no RSVP required

Childcare and light refreshments provided

Follow-up sessions: Wednesday, Sept. 23 and Wednesday, Oct. 7

For more on the Commission's launch this spring, see Foster's Daily Democrat's May 1, 2026 coverage: fosters.com

For more information on the Mayor's Commission to Redesign and Reimagine the Somersworth School District please contact Mayor Matt Gerding at mgerding@somersworthnh.gov or Superintendent John Shea at jshea@sau56.org, or visit [\[website/link\]](#).