

Candidate for School Committee
Debra J. Coleman

1. Please tell us about yourself and why you are running for office.

My name is Debbie Coleman, and I am running for re-election to the Waltham School Committee. I am completing my first four-year term, during which I've had the privilege of serving the past two years as Vice Chair.

I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and earned my Bachelor's degree from Purdue University before moving to Waltham—my husband's hometown—in 2007. We have two daughters, Paige (5th grade) and Sloane (3rd grade), who attend Northeast Elementary School. My involvement in their education began early through the Waltham YMCA and has continued through PTO leadership and volunteer work in their school library. Running for School Committee was a natural next step, allowing me to contribute to the broader community that supports our learners and works to solve complex challenges together.

Over the past four years, we've made meaningful progress as a district—but there is still more work ahead. I'm seeking re-election to continue advancing the growth and success of Waltham Public Schools. My focus remains on ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality, equitable education and that we plan thoughtfully for the future of our district.

2. What are the two most important education issues in Waltham, and how will you address those issues if you are elected to School Committee?

1) Academic Performance:

One challenge we continue to face as a district is overall academic performance. This does not mean that our students aren't achieving at high levels—many are—but standardized assessments like MCAS don't always capture the full picture of a student's knowledge or potential. That said, it is well known that Waltham High School has been ranked in the bottom 10% statewide, and addressing this remains a priority.

There are meaningful steps already underway, with more planned in the years ahead. While rankings reflect multiple factors—such as MCAS scores, graduation rates, and chronic absenteeism—our Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents have made tremendous progress over the past year and a half in tackling these issues. These challenges cannot be solved overnight, but important progress is being made.

The opening of Waltham Valor High School has been a key part of this effort, providing an alternative pathway that supports students through flexible schedules and individualized learning. The planned expansion of Valor High School will allow even more students to graduate by meeting them where they are and helping them stay engaged.

Our Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum has also begun working closely with educators to evaluate current curriculum, explore new approaches, and strengthen professional development—all focused on improving student outcomes.

The entire leadership team has been deeply engaged in learning walks, classroom visits, and ongoing collaboration with principals across all schools. Continuing this work, together with the School Committee, will ensure Waltham continues to move forward—supporting every student in reaching their full potential.

2) Student Mental Health:

Mental health is a growing challenge in our district, as it is across the country. Providing students with access to mental health services in school creates an essential and accessible entry point for care—reducing barriers like transportation, scheduling conflicts, and stigma. Schools play a vital role in prevention, early intervention, and support, often through a multi-tiered system that includes social-emotional learning, staff training, and direct counseling services.

Our district uses data from screenings and assessments to identify needs, guide interventions, and measure progress. Strong partnerships with community-based providers also help connect students and families to a broader network of care when more intensive support is needed.

This year, the district added a new position—Chief of Family & Community Engagement, held by Dr. Ray Porch—to take a more holistic approach that involves staff, families, and students in building a supportive and connected community.

Student mental health will continue to be a priority for our district. It's an area that requires ongoing attention and adaptation as student needs evolve—and one that impacts learners of every age and background.