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Harutunian gets warm send off

By Nadine Wandzilak / Staff Writer

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The tone was as much roast as toast at the farewell party last Wednesday for school Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian, who will leave Reading on June 30 for the superintendent's seat in North Andover.

Harutunian received two chairs, one a rocker, an RMHS athletic tee shirt, red shorts emblazoned with the words, "Safety First" and words of high praise Wednesday from speakers at the Coolidge Middle School library.

Harutunian took what School Committee Chairman Harvey "Pete" Dahl described as a "solid" school system and "made it better." In industry, you generally don't do this sort of thing for someone who is leaving, Dahl said of the reception. But Harutunian's tenure has been "anything but ordinary, Dahl said.

"You have taken the schools a far piece," agreed Camille Anthony, chairman of the Board of Selectmen.

If we were to vote on the most popular person in town, Harutunian probably would not win, said speaker Russ Graham, chairman of the former School Building Committee. "But that's appropriate." When Harutunian came to Reading, the town's school system were, in Graham's words, "in a benign state" that called for an "assertive, dynamic superintendent." Harutunian wasn't hired to be popular, but, rather, to do a job, Graham said.

Since then, Graham said he began to see a "more effective, better-managed system" in which "the children are well-served." Without Harutunian, the town's school building projects wouldn't have happened, Graham said. During Harutunian's tenure, the town renovated its two middle schools and two of four elementary schools, plans to renovate a fourth elementary school and the high school and started to build a fifth elementary school. Said Graham, "I hope what he has built here will stand for decades to come."

Phil Vaccaro provided some of the levity. He presented Harutunian with an RMHS athletic tee shirt and, as a prelude to a Boston rocker, a disassembled, child-size rocker.

Then custodian John Davis approached Harutunian carrying a silver pail. Wrapped inside the bucket were the red shorts. At issue is a policy requiring long pants instead of shorts in the summer, for safety.

State representatives sent a resolution commended Harutunian for his dedication to the town's public schools.

The School Committee gifted him with a chair inscribed with the dates of his superintendency here, from 1995-

2003 and "Thank you on behalf of Reading children."

Harutunian received a standing ovation after he spoke briefly. "This is my first superintendency," he said. For that reason, he thanked the town. "You took a chance with me," he said.

He commended the caliber of the principals in town schools as "A's and A-pluses."

Harutunian introduced his wife, Diane, and two sons, Brian and Kevin, and described them as "the three people most important to me."

In his new job in North Andover, "I'll have to start all over again," he said, to applause and the standing ovation.

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