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Wednesday, February 5, 2003

Town picks four finalists for leader of schools

By Grace Rubenstein

Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Four men who want to be the next school superintendent will take the hot seat in interviews with the School Committee tonight and tomorrow.

Search Committee Chairman Jack A. Watkins unveiled the finalists last night. They are all superintendents in other districts -- one locally in Reading.

They are Harry K. Harutunian of Reading; Michael V. Ananis of Amherst, N.H.; William H. Lupini of Beverly; and Anthony Serio of Canton, Conn. The new school chief will replace retiring Superintendent William E. Allen in the fall.

The committee will publicly interview the finalists tonight at 7 and tomorrow at 5 p.m. in the middle school's Blaisdell Performance Center.

Although the School Committee originally wanted to announce its choice Feb. 14, Chairman Daniel J. Murphy said the selection could come sooner to keep candidates from getting lured by other districts.

Lyle J. Kirtman of Future Management Systems, the consulting firm that guided the search, said the fast pace is essential for attracting top candidates who will be sought by many districts in the coming months.

"This group ... is probably the strongest pool of candidates in the state in about 10 years," he said.

Leaders of the North Andover Taxpayers Association and School Committee candidates Charles C. Ormsby and William W. Kelly have questioned the wisdom of a hurried search process. The town should allow time to weigh such a big decision and wait to appoint a new school chief until after the March election determines the School Committee makeup, they said.

Watkins said the diversity of interests represented on the search committee helped make the process fair.

"We come from all sides of the political spectrum," he said.

The 13-member group -- including teachers, parents and other residents appointed by Murphy -- began work just over two weeks ago on Jan. 17. They examined resumes to narrow the field of 38 applicants to nine, then interviewed the semifinalists to decide on the four finalists.

Future Management Systems created a "leadership profile" of criteria for the new superintendent based on priorities voiced by residents at a series of focus groups in December. Search committee members said in a letter to school officials they used the profile as a guide so that "individual biases were replaced by the big picture."

School Committeeman Alfred M. Perry, who served on the search committee, said he "can't be more pleased" with the quality of the applicant pool.

"North Andover is going to have one heck of a superintendent of schools," he said.

Kirtman called on the community to set aside differences and help win the finalists over with a positive, professional hiring process.

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