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Schools get new leader

By **Andrew Kosow**
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Faced with looming budget troubles, the School Committee has turned to Harry K. Harutunian to lead the district through what one member calls "difficult times ahead."

The committee chose Harutunian to be the next superintendent of schools by a unanimous vote last night. He will replace retiring Superintendent Dr. William Allen.

"I'm excited," said Harutunian, who was busy last night calling people in the Reading school system to give them the news. "I have mixed emotions because of the incredible people in Reading. But I am going to an outstanding school district that wants to get to the next level."

He said he wants to meet with as many people as possible in North Andover to find out exactly what they expect from him and the school district. "I plan to meet with 1,000 to 1,500 people and listen to their comments and use that as a guide," he said.

School Committee Chairman Daniel J. Murphy said that while each candidate was excellent, it was Harutunian's proven record as Reading's superintendent that made him the best choice.

"He has clearly demonstrated success in improving students' scores on MCAS and other standardized tests," Murphy said.

During his public interview before the School Committee Thursday night, Harutunian vowed to raise MCAS scores in North Andover -- which is ranked 57th statewide on the test -- to the level of Reading, which is ranked 24th. He also said he would try to mend the divisions between the schools and selectmen and taxpayers.

"He also has the ability to lead the community through the difficult times ahead," Murphy added, referring to the district's financial difficulties. Murphy said he was most impressed that

Harutunian did not shy away from discussing possible cuts in the school budget during his interview.

Committee member Brice E. Baker opened the meeting by nominating Harutunian, calling him "the real deal." Committee member Alfred Perry seconded it and committee member Donald O. Sternfeld joked, "If I could, I would third it."

After the meeting, Allen said Harutunian is a "great choice and a highly respected superintendent."

The committee was taken by surprise earlier in the day when one of the finalists, Beverly Superintendent William H. Lupini, withdrew his name from consideration hours before it voted.

"The calls and e-mails have been just overwhelmingly touching," Lupini said. "People have been very kind about not wanting me to leave." At Lupini's request, the Beverly School Committee will meet to renegotiate his contract.

People who attended the School Committee vote said the job is going to the right man.

"We look forward to working with him," said Leanna Pristash, the president of the Parent's Advisory Council. "He is a strong educational leader, which is what we were looking for."

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