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## Big challenges for new super: Budget woes, school critics await Harutunian

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Harry Harutunian wasn't sure he wanted a new job when he was recruited to be the town's new school superintendent.

North Andover was a great opportunity, but as Reading's superintendent, Harutunian had eight years invested in those schools and that community.

The day he dropped off his resume with the School Committee's search consultants, he circled around the parking lot, stopped and sat in his car and finally decided to apply for the job two minutes before the deadline.

"This was the first job I applied for in eight years, and it was the only job I applied for," Harutunian said this week in an interview at his Reading office, which is filled with baseball memorabilia, posters and photographs. "If I wasn't going to North Andover, I wasn't going anywhere."

Harutunian will come to North Andover in July to take over for retiring Superintendent William Allen.

Last week the School Committee chose him from a field of four candidates that also included William Lupini, superintendent of schools in Beverly; Michael Ananis, the superintendent in Amherst, N.H. , and Anthony Serio, the superintendent in Canton, Conn.

"I was very excited and honored to have been chosen," Harutunian said. "I hope that as the superintendent of North Andover I can look back in three to five years and say, 'We're in a better place.'"

School Committee member Bruce Baker described Harutunian as the clear choice for North Andover.

"Not only did he have all the requisite skills, education and experience as a sitting superintendent, the preparation he brought to the interviews was impressive," said Baker. "He had clearly researched the North Andover situation and knew by name the supporters and detractors of the school system."

Allen agreed the Harutunian will make a good leader for the town's schools.

"I think they made a great choice. The process was extremely well done. The committee headed up by Jack

Hawkins did an outstanding job," said Allen.

"I know all four of the final candidates, and have had the pleasure of working with each over the past years in one capacity or another. I am delighted that the committee chose Dr. Harutunian. I think he will do a wonderful job. And I am delighted that the committee's choice was unanimous."

Allen said that he will be talking with Harutunian from now until he leaves in August to help him with his transition into the North Andover school system.

"We have already talked and will continue to converse on a frequent basis," he said.

Harutunian acknowledged that when he arrives in North Andover he will be facing huge budget problems and a rift among school proponents and those who want to limit school spending.

He believes residents will put aside differences to work together with a new superintendent.

"I want to take advantage of that and extend it for as long as I can," Harutunian said, adding he planned to meet regularly with the town manager, selectmen and other town officials.

As for what types of budget and service cuts he might oversee, he would only say that whatever they are, they will be even and across the board.

Harutunian did not want to talk about specifics for North Andover this early for two reasons. He noted the job still belongs to Allen, who still has many challenges to face. He also wants to hear from as many people as possible before he starts forming any type of vision for North Andover.

Harutunian said that when he took over the Reading schools he talked with more than 1,000 people about their views about the schools, what they wanted to preserve, what they were proud of and what they expected of him.

He plans to do the same during his first three months in North Andover.

"I plan to talk to each School Committee member, each Finance Committee member, each selectman, superintendents in the surrounding towns, clergy, business partnerships, principals, teachers and students," he said.

Harutunian believes the interviews are a key piece of the transition and a systematic way for a new leader to enter a new school district.

"It's an attempt to get out there and show people who I am and that I am a good listener," he said. "The interviews afford every stakeholder -- every child, parent and taxpayer -- the opportunity to be heard."

## **Rapport with students**

While Harutunian said he would hold off talking about class size, programs and school buildings until he hears

from the community, he said he would start right away to build a rapport with students.

He plans to use the first two weeks of school to visit every classroom and introduce himself to every student.

"I get into the classroom quite a bit," he said. "I'm only doing it to have a good time and because I enjoy knowing who I am responsible for."

In Reading, Harutunian is known for doling out "Rocket" pins (the name of the schools athletic teams). He also has an ongoing deal with all students that he's had in place since his days as a high school principal: Any student who sees Harutunian outside of school and comes up to say hello will receive one of his business cards that will serve as a negotiable free homework pass.

"I've been as far away as Orlando, Fla. and had two students come over and talk to me to get their homework passes," he said with a smile.

Unlike many superintendents who build careers around degrees in school administration, Harutunian has a doctorate in curriculum instruction and a master of science in reading.

Classrooms are a comfortable place for Harutunian who began his career as a teacher of African-American history in New Britain, Conn. He makes it clear that when he visits schools and classrooms, he is not there to oversee or evaluate.

"I don't get involved in student-teacher interaction," he said. "When I visit, I am there to enjoy the culture of the school and the fragrance of learning."

As a former teacher, Harutunian believes in the need to support and respect good teachers. One of the pivotal moments in his career came when he was an assistant principal in Bridgeport Conn., in 1981.

When the faculty in Harutunian's district decided to go on strike, a judge ordered 100 teachers be incarcerated each day until the issues were resolved. Harutunian remembers watching women teachers behind cyclone fences and barbed wire kissing their kids goodbye as they faced their turn in jail.

It's an image that has stayed with him and led him to a commitment to make sure teachers are always treated with dignity and respect.

Harutunian is eager to bring the experiences of his career to North Andover to see how all he has learned will apply to the community and its schools. He is still negotiating his contract with the School Committee and hopes to have that piece of business finished soon so Reading can begin its search for a new superintendent.

For now, Harutunian lives in Beverly. He has no immediate plans to move to North Andover, but his family has not ruled out a move to North Andover sometime in the future.

His younger son, Brian, is a junior at Beverly High and plans to graduate from that school. His older son, Michael, is studying at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt.

Harutunian's wife, Diane, is a fourth-grade teacher at Spofford Pond Elementary School in Boxford.

"North Andover is a beautiful town," he said. "I am extremely impressed with the quality of the community and the quality of the people."

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