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Change is in the air for schools: New superintendent talks about his transition to North Andover this summer

By Michael J. Fisher / MJFISHER@CNC.COM

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Dr. Bill Allen has been at the helm of the town's public schools for the past five years and will remain there, helping the School Committee navigate through the budget season, until the end of June.

Meanwhile, his successor, Dr. Harry Harutunian of Reading, is busy acclimating himself to the choppy waters of the North Andover School System so he can be ready to jump right in and start swimming come July 1.

Harutunian will be accepting a substantial pay raise when he comes to North Andover. At his old job in Reading he earned \$118,000. His new contract is for \$145,000 per year. Dr. Allen received \$108,000 per year.

However, according to School Committee Chairman Dan Murphy, who was involved with the contract negotiations, this increase in pay is par for the course.

"It is what the market commands," said Murphy. "We set the salary range to attract a certain type of candidate ... We are talking about a \$30 million budget, and effectively hiring the CEO of a \$30 million organization. It makes sense to set a salary range to attract top quality candidates." And according to Murphy it paid off.

Since the contract was signed the first week in March, Harutunian has already had extensive meetings with each of the five School Committee members, the Town Manager, the Athletic Director and numerous meetings with Allen who he continues to meet with on an almost weekly basis.

The main topic of many of these discussions, said Harutunian, is the budget.

"That certainly is a moving target," said Harutunian who added it is too early to know what sorts of cuts he will face when he takes over. However, he said he has every confidence in Allen and the School Committee to do the best with what they've got when they make those decisions.

"Right now, Bill knows North Andover much better than I do, and the School Committee has the final say" as to where the cuts will be made, he said. "I have total faith that they will make the right decisions ... I think we are very much on the same page ... During the interview process, we really connected, and I think that's why I got the job," he added.

He has also toured the new high school with School Building Oversight Committee Chairman Lou Minicucci, and has plans in the works to meet with each school principal, Assistant Superintendent Bill Binkney, Special Education Director Jackie McVeigh, and members of support services before he even starts as part of what he calls his "entry plan."

But it doesn't stop there. Harutunian said he wants to get on a face to face basis with parents and community leaders as well, and expects to sit down with more than 1,000 residents.

"The town of North Andover is all new to me, and this is part of my attempt to get out there and meet the public," he said.

Meeting with about 20 residents at a time, Harutunian said he will discuss his positions on relevant school issues, listen to concerns and suggestions and get feedback on a four-part questionnaire.

"I will ask them what they like best about North Andover schools, what they like the least, what they are most proud of ... and what they expect with me," he said.

Harutunian also said he is ready to tackle the tough task of managing a school system with bare-bones funding.

"I have worked in a school district that probably had more financial problems than North Andover," said Harutunian of his time in Reading. However, he said, a \$4.5 million dollar tax override lifted the Reading school system up by its boot straps last year, and helped him to avoid layoffs and cuts.

"I expect North Andover will be where Reading is today by next year," he said.

Besides, said Harutunian, money is not the end all solution to a superintendent's problems.

"Even if there is money coming in running a school system is always a challenge. If you've got money, people want to know where you are going to spend it, if you don't they want to know where you are going to get it," he said.

Even with all the behind-the-scenes action going on, Harutunian said he has been very conscious of stepping on Allen's toes as Allen continues to guide the school system from his executive role through the end of his term.

"I have tried to keep my transition low-key so Dr. Allen can continue to run the school system without any distraction or interference ... until June 30, Dr. Allen is superintendent of schools in North Andover."

Murphy said he and his colleagues are very happy with Harutunian, and he anticipates a smooth transition.

"I have had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Harutunian at length, and I am very impressed by the enthusiasm he brings to the job," said Murphy.

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