

All-day kindergarten program

gets green light for fall

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A pilot, public, all-day kindergarten program will start in September, at a cost of \$4,000 per student for the paid half of the day.

School Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian proposed the program last Monday to the School Committee to raise money to offset a projected budget shortfall. "I'd love to say this [idea] was generated by a thirst for education," Harutunian said, "but we are doing this to generate money" and because parents want it.

The School Department could realize \$250,000 from the program, according to Karen Callan, Barrows principal and one of six members of an All-Day Kindergarten Committee.

The School Committee agreed with the concept. Two members recommended that the School Department charge more for the program.

The all-day kindergarten classes of 24 students, up to one class at each of the town's

four elementary schools, would be filled by lottery, Harutunian said. The kindergarten classes will have room because of prospective cuts of teachers.

The superintendent said a town-wide orientation and sign-up for the new program is planned for Feb. 13, at 7 p.m., at the Killam School. The next step depends on the number of signups, he said.

Two issues generated the most discussion. One was the cost of the program to parents. Harutunian said he had

received cost figures from three local programs, including the Burbank Y, REAP, the Reading Extended-Day Activities Program and Clock Tower Kids. They charged in the \$5,800-to-\$7,400-a year range, he said. The highest-cost public school program: Andover's at \$3,750, he said.

When he told five callers the then-prospective cost of the Reading program, they said "Fine," Harutunian told the School Committee.

School Committee members Tim Twomey and John F. Russo urged that the fee be higher.

Raising the fee to \$5,000 per student, "We would cost ourselves out" of the market, Harutunian said.

Another topic of discussion is the demand for such a program. Between 80 and 85 percent of Reading parents have showed an interest in all-day kindergarten, Harutunian said.

"I wouldn't pay \$4,000 for 24 students in a class," said audience member Mary Bishop.

With other established kindergarten programs, another member of the audience said he wasn't sure the School Department would fill this program.

Educationally, Reading children do exceedingly well when they start school, Harutunian said. Parents who do not choose an all-day program probably supplement their children's activities, he said. But the new program would put kindergartners in front of a certified teacher, he said.

A member of the audience asked whether Harutunian's time is best spent "chasing" money from a kindergarten program. Along the same lines, "Profits are elusive," warned School Committee member Harvey "Pete" Dahl. On the other hand, "We don't have home runs out there," Dahl said. "We have to hit a lot of singles."

Harutunian urged the School Committee to act on his suggestion so the program could debut before parents enroll their children in other programs.

Callan calculated the program costs this way: Revenue, \$384,000; minus costs \$133,000, for two teachers [\$80,000], two ed assistants [\$23,000] and start-up costs [\$30,000].

The School Department will charge a \$25 processing fee to defray the \$5,200 cost to develop a curriculum, Harutunian said.

Current
Excess K
space
4
classrooms
96 students
max.

