

NORTH ANDOVER

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## School chief's deal assailed Harutunian got \$187,000 buyout

By Dan Tuohy, Globe Correspondent | April 16, 2006

As soon as Harry K. Harutunian struck a deal to resign as North Andover's superintendent of schools in return for \$187,000, his page and presence were erased from the district's website.

If only the School Committee could quash the criticism as easily.

Concerned parents said the committee let Harutunian off easy last week for having an affair with a subordinate, secretary Brenda Shea, after giving her a \$10,000 raise last summer.

"I don't have a whole lot of confidence in the committee," said Diana Headrick, the mother of two students. In an interview Wednesday, she said parents have raised questions about Harutunian's management and personal behavior for years, "and it's fallen on deaf ears."

The School Committee's agreement to buy out 14.5 months of Harutunian's contract was announced when the chairman, Alfred M. Perry, emerged from a private meeting Tuesday night and said the committee hoped to resolve the controversy once and for all. He was immediately grilled by a group of parents and forced to defend the settlement.

"We spent an awful lot of time on this process making sure we did this step by step so we wouldn't have a liability problem," he said.

Perry defended the committee's search for the superintendent, who was hired in 2003 after serving as Reading's top school administrator. Perry said he personally visited Reading and that 24 of 25 interviews produced "glowing reviews."

The committee's statement on the settlement frames the action as a personnel matter protected by privacy rights. Thus, Perry said the other night, "the committee cannot legally discuss any facts on which the committee based its decision."

But keeping secret the specifics that led to the decision prompted critics to view the settlement along the lines of "Peyton Place" meets "Let's Make a Deal."

Headrick contends that the private investigator hired to look into the Shea case did not interview everyone in the administration. And she questioned whether there were other clandestine actions with financial implications that could hurt the School Department as it confronts a \$2.7 million cut in its proposed budget for the fiscal year starting July 1.

"We'll never know," she said.

The \$187,000 settlement will come out of the department's budget, officials said. All five members of the committee supported the settlement. The final language in the settlement has yet to be approved, and Michael Long, an attorney representing Harutunian, could not be reached for a comment on the agreement.

While parents expressed disappointment Harutunian is to receive \$187,000, others in town said the committee may have gotten off cheap.

"I find it hard to second-guess the committee," Mark DiSalvo, a former School Committee member, said Wednesday. "They didn't have to pay off a four-year contract."

Harutunian, whose salary was \$160,000 a year, might have fought for some or all of the \$640,000, DiSalvo said. He said the settlement could have been close to legal expenses alone had the case gone to court.

Harutunian, of Beverly, and his wife filed for divorce in November. He had been on paid vacation since the School Committee hired the investigator March 24. On that day, he issued a statement apologizing that he "did not foresee the consequences of my personal decisions and did not foresee the public's perception of a personal relationship I began with a School Department co-worker."

That admission sealed his fate, said John Tocio, a father of two students. "If a dishonest leader is still on top, you're going to lose everybody below," he said Tuesday night before the settlement announcement. "That is a cancer hanging over the school."

Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, offered a similar assessment. "The guy acknowledged an affair," said Koocher, whose association advised the North Andover committee. "That is de facto good cause for termination."

Koocher noted that School Committee members face difficult decisions in such cases and great public scrutiny because most people do not get the benefit of being able to negotiate their severance package.

Harutunian's actions aside, other superintendents have walked away with much bigger checks. The Randolph School Committee, displeased with the performance of students and the superintendent, bought out Arthur J. Melia's contract for \$579,882 in 2004. And just down the road from North Andover, James F. Scully, the former Lawrence superintendent of schools, received \$650,000 after contesting his dismissal in 1997.

Perry said the search for a new superintendent is just starting and that assistant superintendent Richard Bergeron will serve as acting superintendent. ■