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Early News updated at 6 a.m.

Harutunian resigns, accepts \$187,000 buyout

By Davin Wilfrid

Staff writer

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NORTH ANDOVER — The School Committee late last night accepted the resignation of Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian but refused to discuss any incidents on which they based the decision.

As part of a settlement negotiated yesterday, the committee will pay Harutunian \$187,000 and keep secret any information that led to a series of closed-door disciplinary hearings on his behavior since March.

For weeks, Harutunian, 53, has been embroiled in controversy over his romantic relationship with a school employee and the \$10,000 raise she was given last summer.

In a written statement released at the conclusion of a two-hour, closed-door meeting over the resignation at the middle school last night, the School Committee defended its right to keep "personnel matters" secret.

"The committee ... cannot legally discuss any facts on which the committee based its decision. Further, public comment may expose the committee to additional legal claims. Thus, the committee will make no statements about the specific incidents which led to this decision."

The committee began investigating Harutunian in March after allegations surfaced of a romantic relationship he had with special education secretary and gymnastics coach Brenda A. Shea. Last summer, Harutunian sought and received permission to remove Shea from the secretarial union and gave her a 29 percent raise, worth about \$10,000.

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Harutunian later admitted to the affair, but said through his lawyer that Shea was given the raise "well before" the relationship began. On March 24, Harutunian voluntarily went on paid vacation while the School Committee hired a private investigator to look into any wrongdoing.

Harutunian, who was hired in 2003, has been on vacation since March 24. He did not attend last night's meeting.

The \$187,000 settlement represents about 14 1/2 months of Harutunian's salary, said School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry. The committee defended the buyout in the statement, saying that without a settlement the town was vulnerable to "many months of litigation" and a drain on its personnel resources.

Harutunian, who was earning \$163,000 a year, had a contract valid through 2010, meaning he could have argued for a full payout worth more than \$600,000 if he were fired over his recent actions.

Perry told a small crowd of parents and concerned citizens who waited more than two hours for the committee to emerge from the closed-door session that the investigator's findings would remain secret.

"Our position was to protect the town of North Andover," he said. "We spent an awful lot of time on this making sure we did the process right."

Parent Nancy Bolduc said she was disappointed the committee would not make public the critical points of the investigation.

"The only thing that bothers me about how you guys handled this is that he can just move on to the next place with just a resignation," she said. "Does this just free him to move on to his next victims?"

Perry said the \$187,000 payment would come from the current year's School Department budget.

The committee will seek to hire an interim superintendent until it can form a search committee to find a permanent replacement for Harutunian. Until an interim superintendent is hired, acting Superintendent Richard A. Bergeron will continue to lead the schools.

The following is Harutunian's tenure as superintendent of the North Andover school system:

February 2003: Hired to succeed retiring Superintendent William E. Allen. Harutunian, who was superintendent in Reading from 1995 to 2003, beat out finalists William H. Lupini, Michael V. Ananis and Anthony Serio for the job.

July 2004: The School Committee and Harutunian agree on a

four-year contract worth \$150,000 per year. A rollover clause means the contract is extended automatically each year unless Harutunian is notified in advance.

July 2005: Harutunian seeks and receives permission to remove special education secretary Brenda A. Shea from the schools' secretarial union. Her new job came with a 29 percent raise worth about \$10,000.

August 2005: Harutunian begins calling Shea's home and cellular phone numbers from his school-issued cellular phone. In total the two would log 900 calls between August and December, costing the School Department more than \$400 in user fees.

November 2005: Harutunian's wife files for divorce.

March 2006: The School Committee announces it is investigating Harutunian's relationship with Shea and the raise she was given. Harutunian later went on paid vacation and admitted to the affair but defended the raise. The School Committee hired an investigator March 24 to help investigate the matter.

April 11, 2006: Harutunian resigns in exchange for a \$187,000 buyout. The School Committee refuses to discuss details of their investigation into Harutunian's behavior.

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