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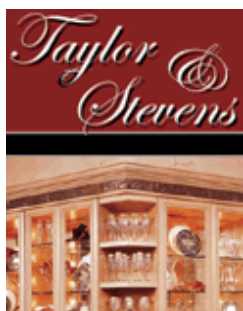
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## Opinion

# School Committee sold out on Harutunian

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The North Andover School Committee says its deal with Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian protects the town and its taxpayers. The deal does no such thing. The committee's agreement to pay off Harutunian betrays the community.

Faced with a controversy that required a display of moral courage, the School Committee rolled over like a capsized turtle. The committee agreed to accept Harutunian's resignation and pay him 14 1/2 months salary — \$187,000. The committee further refused to release any details of what its investigation into Harutunian's behavior found.

So thanks to the School Committee's spinelessness, North Andover is left \$187,000 poorer and no wiser about its school superintendent's misdeeds. The town also faces the hiring of an interim superintendent at great expense and a costly search for a new superintendent.

The School Committee's weak-kneed defense is that, had it fired Harutunian and refused to pay him anything, the superintendent would have sued. Defending a lawsuit would indeed have been expensive. But the School Committee failed to understand there is a difference between spending money to make a principled stand and handing out a large cash reward to a man who deserved to be fired.

Let there be no doubt: Harutunian deserved to be fired simply on the basis of what he has admitted doing, without relying on anything the investigation may have found. Harutunian carried on an affair with a subordinate directly under his control. He failed to disclose his personal relationship with a subordinate to the School Committee until confronted with the evidence. And he spent hours of school and private time conversing with this

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woman on a school-issued cellular telephone.

When, in Victorian England, the mistress of the Duke of Wellington threatened to make public his love letters unless he paid her, the duke famously replied, "Publish and be damned!"

The School Committee should have fired Harutunian and taken a similar stand on his threat. The perils of litigation in open court cut both ways. The committee could have put Harutunian on the witness stand and forced him defend his behavior to the public. Whatever the investigation may have found would also be part of the public record.

And if the committee lost the case, fine. At least it would have lost doing the right thing. Instead, it caved in to a threat and paid a man who betrayed the community's trust \$187,000 of its money.

Having failed so spectacularly to protect the public interest, the School Committee now asks the town to trust it to do a better job the next time. The committee hasn't the right to expect that trust.

The public should follow closely the hiring of the next superintendent and demand the candidates undergo thorough background checks. The public should demand the School Committee insist on a contract giving it a tighter rein over the new superintendent's behavior — no more rolling four-year deals that give away all the town's leverage over its employee.

The School Committee sold out the town's interests in the Harutunian deal. The public must refuse to let the committee do so again.

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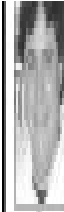
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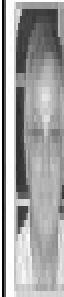
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