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Opinion

School committees are free with others' money

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It's easy to be generous when you're spending other people's money.

Recent examples from across our region show just how generous school boards like to be.

* In North Andover, the School Committee paid Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian \$187,000 — 14 1/2 months salary — and allowed him to resign when he should have been fired.

* The Greater Lawrence Technical School Committee took a trip to a conference in Chicago. One member who was voted out of office last month tagged along at a cost of \$1,100 in taxpayer money.

* The Manchester-Essex Regional School Committee scrapped the last year of Superintendent Robert Shaps' contract to give him a \$15,000 raise plus an additional \$31,000 for "professional development."

* The Hampstead, N.H., School Board agreed to give a full year of health benefits worth \$17,500 to a middle school principal leaving after less than two years of service.

One can't find a school board anywhere in Massachusetts or New Hampshire that isn't complaining about a lack of money. They threaten taxpayers by holding students, teachers and programs for ransom. If the taxpayers refuse to pay, art and music programs are cut, sports fees are increased, teachers get laid off, and students are packed into ever-larger classes.

But money never seems to be a problem when school boards are giving it away to their friends.

Three current members of the Greater Lawrence Tech School Committee took an all-expenses-paid, five-day trip this week to

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Chicago to attend the National School Board Association's annual conference. These conferences are of questionable value generally. But for what possible reason did Kenneth T. Hamilton of Andover attend? Hamilton was defeated in his bid for re-election March 28.

"I don't have a problem with the school paying it because he was a member in good standing and he served for a good two years," Chairman Leo J. Lamontagne told reporter Shawn Boburg.

So Hamilton got a \$1,100 taxpayer-funded trip because he's basically a good guy. Among the current board members who attended were Hamilton's brother Richard A. Hamilton Jr. of Lawrence and his brother-in-law John M. Driscoll of North Andover.

Manchester-Essex Superintendent Robert Shaps had a year remaining on his contract when the School Committee learned he might be looking for another job. So the committee this week voided his current contract and offered him a better deal. Shaps' salary this year is \$128,000. Beginning July 1, he will make \$143,000 as his base salary and will receive two payments totaling \$31,000 for "professional development."

In offering the deal, committee members told the Gloucester Daily Times they hope Shaps will remain until the end of the 2007 school year. Good luck with that.

In Hampstead, middle school Principal Richard Taft said he will leave his \$84,180-a-year post at the end of the school year, citing unspecified personal reasons. The board agreed to Taft's request for continuation of his health insurance for a year or until he finds another job. The deal could cost the district up to \$17,500.

School Board Chairman Natalie Gallo said the deal was cheap compared to the \$187,000 North Andover Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian will get for resigning his job. She also said it's "normal" to make some kind of financial arrangement with departing high-level administrators.

One of the big problems with school boards is that they consider principals "high-level administrators" instead of the middle managers they are.

There were no accusations of misconduct leveled against Taft as there were with Harutunian. But that still does not mean he should get a year of taxpayer-funded health insurance. Continuation of health insurance is available routinely after leaving a job — at the former employee's expense.

And finally, in the Harutunian matter, North Andover's School Committee paid the departing superintendent \$187,000 in taxpayer money rather than risk a lawsuit.



This happens time and again when superintendents and school systems part company under less than amicable circumstances. School committees believe they are taking the prudent course, insulating the community from potentially greater monetary damages in a lawsuit. But they don't understand that nothing irritates taxpayers more than to see their money given away to someone who deserved to be sent packing without a dime.

School committees make these poor decisions because it's not their money that's being spent. They feel free to be generous to themselves and school officials because no one ever holds them accountable.

Taxpayers need tough, fiscally disciplined managers overseeing their school finances. Instead, they're getting pushovers who want to be seen as everyone's friend — by being generous with other people's money.



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