



[Home](#) > [North Shore Sunday](#) > [Local News](#) > [RSS Feed](#)

Super stupor?

By **Barbara Taormina**

Friday, April 14, 2006 - Updated: 06:04 PM EST

Asks kids what they want to be when they grow up, and odds are it won't be a superintendent of schools in a small suburban community.

Sure, the pay's pretty good, but as any 9- or 10-year-old can tell you, the hours are brutal and the politics and public scrutiny are relentless. Throw in the fact that you never have enough money to accomplish everything people are asking for and you have to wonder why anyone would want the job.

Superintendent hunts [And actually, not a lot of people do.](#) At last count there were 45 jobs up for grabs among the state's 277 superintendent positions, according to the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, and they expect to see that number climb to 60.

Peabody is looking. So is Melrose. Marblehead was interviewing candidates, but last week two of the three finalists bailed, and the town has extended its search into the upcoming year.

Tom Scott, the executive director of M.A.S.S., says being a superintendent is not only a high-profile, high-pressure job, but the demand to turn in higher and higher MCAS and SAT scores and the failure of town and city budgets to keep pace with school spending have discouraged candidates from shopping around their resumes.

"When you look at all of that, all of those pressures, it's not really a surprise that there are fewer and fewer people who want the job," says Scott.

And not only do fewer people want the job, the actual number of qualified candidates has declined in recent years as more seasoned superintendents have taken advantage of early retirement options, leaving communities to haggle over a younger, less experienced field of candidates.

With that kind of competition in play, many communities have been turning to professional search firms and consultants to find the best person for their school district. Some people think the firms, which are often staffed by retired superintendents and seem to run off a buddy network, could be contributing to the problem.

But finding a good superintendent is only half the battle. Keeping them on also seems to be harder and harder these days.

Marblehead's former superintendent Ellen Minihan seemed to disappear out the back door, mumbling something about politics and overrides after the School Committee changed its mind last summer about renewing her contract. No one really wanted to talk about why Minihan left, other than to say she and the School Committee had philosophical differences.

Rosemary Leblanc-Considine, the former superintendent in Melrose, was slated to retire at the end of the school year, but the School Committee decided to give her three months of vacation time rather than keep her on until June. Although some say it was the way she handled an assault charge against one of her principals that did her in, School Committee members have said it wasn't just that, it was everything.

And in North Andover, Superintendent Harry Harutunian resigned this week after an investigation into his relationship with a school secretary who happened to get a 29 percent raise last year. The cost to taxpayers who ended up buying out part of his four-year contract: \$187,000.

Some say part of the problem is the 1993 Education Reform Act that redefined the role of a superintendent and made the school chiefs more like CEOs than educators. Others say New England's unique style of small-town politics scares people off.

Whatever's behind the growing superintendent shortage, Massachusetts needs to take a careful look. Otherwise, we could be headed toward a breakdown in leadership in public education - one that could leave both parents and students wondering: Who's in charge here?

Filling the jobs

There's a lot of hand-wringing going on in North Andover over where things went wrong with their superintendent. And one of the things parents and school officials are looking back at is the way the town hired Harutunian.

Back in the winter of 2003, the School Committee signed on with Future Management Systems, a Beverly-based consulting firm that advertised the job, screened the applicants and presented the School Committee with its A-list of candidates.

Herald Interactive Tools



[Recent articles](#)



[E-mail article to a friend](#)



[View graphic version](#)



[Get RSS feed](#)



[Search site](#)



[Sign up for home delivery](#)

It may seem a little detached, particularly since any school superintendent is in charge of any city or town's most important asset - its kids. Still, more and more school committees are relying on consultants to do the legwork in filling a superintendent job.

But some in North Andover are now wondering how carefully Future Management looked at their candidates before turning over a stack of resumes to the town.

"The expectation of the search committee was that the candidates had been scrubbed," says Jack Watkins, who headed up North Andover's search team. "Looking back, I'm not sure that had been done."

Future Management aggressively recruited Harutunian for the North Andover job. But when they presented him as a candidate, they failed to mention that a group of residents from Reading, where Harutunian had been superintendent for eight years, had been keeping an extensive Web page that told a long story of problems with school budgets, building projects and communication between school officials and the public.

Although anyone on North Andover's search committee could have googled Harutunian and found the information for themselves, they didn't. They felt Future Management had their backs.

Looking back now, with a fresh scandal on its doorstep, it would be hard for anyone in North Andover to say if that Web page would have been enough to tank Harutunian's chances at the job. Maybe not, but as Watkins points out, at least the town would have been aware that its super was moving in with some baggage.

In Marblehead, the problem with the consultants isn't so much how they screen the candidates but how they are recruiting them.

The New England School Development Council, another consulting firm that's a favorite among local School Committees, led the town's now-suspended search for a superintendent. Because their search did not result in a permanent hire, NESDEC, which was selected from a pool of six consultants and hired for \$12,900, will continue to work for the town at no additional cost until someone is found.

But in an interview with the Marblehead Reporter, School Committee vice chairwoman Amy Drinker says she'll be having a "heart to heart" talk with NESDEC about being more aggressive in its recruitment.

Drinker acknowledges other districts might not like Marblehead's "headhunting," but she says such tactics are necessary, given the short supply of qualified candidates.

Richard Feinberg, a former School Committee member in Swampscott who is now running to take back a seat on the board, thinks there are a couple of other drawbacks to using a professional search group rather than a hometown screening committee.

"They don't always understand the culture of a community," he says. "My argument is, money aside, a local screening committee understands more what a town is looking for. They have a sharper eye."

Feinberg also wonders whether the consultants are too close to applicants who show up in search after search.

Peabody had some doubts about the idea of hiring a consultant and decided to find a superintendent on its own.

An 11-member team of School Committee members, parents, principals and teachers have all been to a special workshop sponsored by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees to help them understand what they're up against,

They've been out talking to people about what they want from the schools and from a superintendent. They'll wade through the resumes as they come in and they'll do the screening for the School Committee.

"We stayed away from the consultants," says School Committee member Mike Moutsoulas, who's vice chairman of the search team.

Moutsoulas says the local group knows how important it is to be specific and to really press for answers. And once they find a group of candidates, they'll do the site visits and the chats in barbershops and restaurants to find out all they can about how their candidates run a school system.

"They know how to do the research and they are committed to finding the right person for the job," says Moutsoulas.

Problems and politics

Late last month, a group of about 15 teachers held a protest outside the North Middlesex High School while the School Committee interviewed candidates for their new superintendent.

It probably felt like home to Peabody Superintendent Nadine Binkley, one of the three finalists for the job.

Peabody hired Binkley in January of 2004 after five years of five different superintendents. MCAS scores in some of the city's elementary schools were sinking and the high school's accreditation was being threatened.

"When I came to Peabody, there wasn't a lot of focus, not a lot of systems," says Binkley. "We put a

focus into place."

But 10 months into her job, Binkley made a relatively small change that actually made national headlines. Binkley was asked to do something about lagging student achievement. She decided more classroom time was the first step and she cut a 40-minute period set aside for lunch and recess down to 30 minutes and eliminated a 20-minute reading period kids had each day.

And Peabody wasn't happy. It was the beginning what would be a growing rift between the soft-spoken former math teacher who had been assistant superintendent in Concord and the working-class families and rough-and-tumble politicians of Peabody.

Gradually, there was more and more talk about philosophical differences between Binkley and Peabody. When she announced she wasn't interested in having her contract renewed, city officials balked. Her tenure became an issue in last year's mayoral campaign as the candidates offered different solutions about what to do about a superintendent who didn't appear committed to the Peabody school district.

Moutsoulas, the School Committee member who is now part of Peabody's new superintendent search team, says politics are a reality for superintendents.

"It's part of the territory," he says. "And it's the superintendent who makes the news."

But it's rugged territory. In Peabody, you don't get mad, you get elected. When Edward Nizwantowski lost his job as a football coach, he ran and won a seat on the School Committee. If he brought along an ax to grind, it was nothing out of the ordinary in Peabody.

And it also seems pretty common in Swampscott, where Richard Feinberg is running for School Committee with an eye on his superintendent, Matthew Malone.

Although Feinberg says he'll work with Malone if he's elected, he's also said one of the first things he'll do find out if Malone's contract has a rollover clause.

Since he arrived in Swampscott last June, Malone has stepped from one controversy to another. First the town's athletic director was given a pick slip. Then a controversial "tough-love" interim principal was hired at the high school.

Next Malone churned up some bad blood with the teachers' union by deciding not to rehire curriculum directors. And then, he lost a few more friends when he fired longtime baseball coach Frank DeFelice.

Along the way teachers and parents have complained about Malone's communication skills and his take-no-prisoners approach to leading the district.

But Malone, an ex-Marine, isn't about to apologize.

"My problem here is that I inherited a broken system," he says. "What was here wasn't a system set up to support the needs of students."

Although Malone says you've got to be "bold and brave" as a superintendent, he admits the public criticism has been hard.

"I've never been in a place where people address their problems in the media," he says. "I'm a face-to-face guy. There have been a lot of personal and professional attacks. I know they come with the job, but everything is public. This is a very political job and I'm not a politician."

Even in Saugus, where Keith Manville has been superintendent for seven years and where things seem to be running well - although the notoriously prickly teachers-without-a-contract there might disagree - local politics is a backdrop that colors decisions.

Manville says the hardest part of his job is when he makes compromises that he feels aren't always in the best interest of kids. He says that high-stakes testing like MCAS forces cuts in programs like shop, music and arts.

"I think everyone in my position makes compromises on things they believe are really important," he says.

And Manville knows the risks of not pleasing all the different constituents and interest groups in his district. "We all run the risk of having people elected to the School Committee who say, 'We're not going to renew your contract,'" he says.

On-the-job training

Although superintendents seem to burn out fast, most seem to have a genuine commitment to public education.

"You like the little victories," says Manville, who adds that, even if it sounds cliché, his job really is all about kids.

Although Binkley says she loved her years in a classroom, she made the jump to administration because she thought it would be a way to change things.

"I wanted to affect things on a broader scale," she says. "I like to look at broader issues and figure out what we can do better."

But no one is sure, at this point, what can be done to make a superintendent's job more

manageable. More than a decade ago, the Education Reform Act moved many of the responsibilities that used to fall to school committees over to the superintendents' desks. In addition to creating a vision for a district and writing a budget, superintendents had to take on the responsibility of hiring and firing school employees.

Manville says no matter what decisions he makes, someone will be upset. But he tries to head off those conflicts with a style of leadership that includes a lot of talks with the public.

"That way, no matter what, at least the public knows they have been heard," he says.

Scott, the head of M.A.S.S., says being a superintendent is all about building relationships.

"You work so closely with so many different groups," says Scott. "It's important to know how to supervise and how to hand out responsibility."

And for Scott, one of the best ways to become a good leader is to watch another good leader in action. But with a superintendent shortage looming, school districts may no longer have the option of hiring someone who already has had years of that on-the-job training.

Arthur Bettencourt of the New England School Development Council says his firm isn't just waiting for a new crop of superintendents to show up with their resumes.

"We reach out to aspiring administrators and assistant superintendents," he says. "We work with those people and have them understand what the job is really like."






But it may be that you can't understand how hard the job is till you get there. Malone was a principal in the Boston school system, which you might think would have prepared him for anything he might face in Swampscott. But he still finds the suburbs tough.

"This is a hard, demanding job. You're under a microscope, you have a tremendous amount of pressure on you from all sides," he says. But he also adds quickly that he's in for the long haul.

"Some people say these jobs are impossible, but there are a lot of good people in Swampscott. I love this job and I'll be staying no matter the problems and the politics."

E-mail Barbara Taormina at btaormin@cnc.com.

Recent articles

-  [Courting Lucretia](#)
-  [Heady, set, go](#)
-  [Passover perfect](#)
-  [Staying power of Red Sauce](#)
-  [Home-grown funk](#)

Today's most read Town Online articles Updated 10:30 AM ET

1. [Danvers man arrested on child pornography charges](#)(417)
2. [Local events](#)(246)
3. [Local events](#)(231)
4. [Regional events](#)(229)
5. [Arts calendar](#)(227)

Search the site

all relevance



Enterprise-level broadband service provided by [Expedient: America's Largest All-Ethernet Network](#)

Wireless broadband service provided by [Towerstream](#)

[[contact us](#)] :: [[print advertising](#)] :: [[online advertising](#)] :: [[Browser Upgrade](#)] :: [[Jobs](#)]

Order Home Delivery Online: [Weekly papers](#) [Daily papers](#) or call **1.800.982.4023**

© Copyright of CNC and Herald Interactive Advertising Systems, Inc.

No portion of townonline.com or its content may be reproduced without the owner's written permission. [Privacy Commitment](#)

bh.heraldinteractive.com: 0.00966:Fri, 14 Apr 2006 22:04:26 GMT cached