

NORTH ANDOVER

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School audit hits ex-chief Harutunian cited for district's woes

By Dan Tuohy, Globe Correspondent | January 28, 2007

An audit of the North Andover school district sketches a portrait of the former superintendent as a micro-manager who bullied subordinates and blocked information from the School Committee.

The ensuing management meltdown contributed to a failure to meet state and federal educational standards, the state Office of Educational Quality and Accountability reported last week.

While Harry K. Harutunian was superintendent from 2003 to 2006, the district lacked an improvement plan and a professional development plan, and had incomplete personnel records, according to preliminary findings.

Despite Harutunian's turbulent reign as chief administrator, the School Committee never properly evaluated him and gave him a \$10,000 bonus one year. Harutunian also had a \$50,000 merit pay account he dispensed as he saw fit, without established criteria for performance, according to the audit.

Harutunian resigned last April after reports that he was having an affair with a secretary whom he had given a \$10,000 raise.

Harutunian could not be reached for comment.

Barbara J. Whidden, a School Committee member, said the district has already taken steps to address the issues raised in the audit. The district now has an improvement plan in place and it has developed better curriculum development strategies, she said.

But Alfred M. Perry, chairman of the committee, said the district would look into further improvements as budget deliberations progress. "We've got to get our house in order and start managing things better," he said.

Albert F. Argenziano, a field director for the state accountability office, said he has seen other districts in worse shape, but none with the resources of North Andover. He said that on a scale of 1 to 100 the North Andover district was well below 50 in terms of leadership and communication during Harutunian's tenure.

In an interview after speaking to the School Committee last week, Argenziano, a former assistant superintendent in Lawrence in the early 1990s, raised his eyebrows and shook his head at the dearth of proper reporting in North Andover. He said 90 percent of what he cited in his presentation as lacking was required by either the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 or the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The state audit team, which examined the district last November and will file a final report in February, found no evidence the district used the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests to identify and address strengths and weaknesses. There was also no evidence the district compiled information on how to help those students most in need of help.

Argenziano saved the good news for the end of his presentation: The students are all right.

Despite administrative weaknesses and substandard accountability measures, he said students and teachers deserved credit for a job well done.

The Office of Educational Quality and Accountability is an independent branch of the state Department of Education. Districts are randomly selected for review and participation is mandatory. The office can accept the report of its examination team, place a district on watch, or forward recommendations to the state Board of Education.

Concerns over district leadership, insufficient improvement plans, and inconsistent professional development plans crop up in the audits of many districts. In its latest annual report, the state office notes that districts experiencing turnover in leadership often lack clear records for student improvement.

The audit comes as the School Committee tries to wrap up its search for a new superintendent and begins another

difficult budget season. In his presentation, Argenziano noted that the nearly 2 percent increase in the school budget in each of the three years reviewed failed to keep up with the increase in enrollment of nearly 500 students over that period.

While student performance was a silver lining, the audit gives the district another challenge and additional public pressure.

"It's stunning," said Selectwoman Rosemary Connelly Smedile.

Yet, though the report shows there is much work ahead, she applauded School Committee members for making the preliminary findings public when they knew it would not be a flattering picture. ■

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