



State audit: North Andover schools 'achieving below 50 percent' Former superintendent Harutunian's leadership style cited

By Jessica Benson , Staff writer
Eagle-Tribune

NORTH ANDOVER - A lack of leadership, budget cuts, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate curriculum earned the school system a failing grade from a state audit.

Albert Argenziano, from the state Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, explained the initial results of the audit of the district's programs and finances during a presentation to the School Committee last night.

"On a scale of 1 to 100, you're achieving below 50 percent," Argenziano said.

School Committee members said they know they should be doing better but said they need \$3 million to make improvements.

The money would restore services that were cut to make up for a budget deficit last year - services the state criticized the school system for not having in place. Argenziano mentioned in particular the high class sizes and elimination of school librarians and physical education programs.

But there is more to the problems in the North Andover school system than budget woes, according to Argenziano. Much of his criticism lay with the lack of leadership from the former superintendent and the School Committee. Harry Harutunian, who resigned last year after it was revealed he gave a pay raise to a secretary with whom he was having an affair, was a "top-down administrator," Argenziano said.

A team from the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability spent days in North Andover schools and the central office this fall examining documents to evaluate MCAS scores, financial records, leadership, budgeting and curriculum, among other areas.

Over the three years covered by the audit, employees told the state that Harutunian would not allow them to speak to the School Committee. And Harutunian didn't share information with the board. At the same time, committee members overstepped their authority by contacting school employees directly, circumventing the superintendent, Argenziano said.

While the leadership issue is being addressed - the School Committee hopes to hire a new superintendent in the next month or so - there are other problems the schools needs to work on, according to the report. Curriculum should be updated, and more time should be spent analyzing results of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test, Argenziano said.

Job evaluations and professional development programs also were lacking in the system, according to the report.

Yet despite all the obstacles facing them, North Andover students are not underperforming, Argenziano said.

"After all that, the students performed well," he said. "I applaud the students and teachers for a job well done."

His praise for students and teachers earned Argenziano a round of applause from the approximately 80 people in the high school auditorium last night. The audience included teachers, school administrators and parents.

Interim Superintendent Daniel O'Connor had invited Argenziano to give his report on the audit at the public meeting. Usually, the state meets in private with the school superintendent to discuss their results and recommendations.

"It's very unusual for us," Argenziano said of his public appearance.

Though it didn't paint a pretty picture, the report submitted by Argenziano - which is 137 pages - did not contain anything unexpected for members of the School Committee.

"Much of it didn't surprise me, quite frankly," board member Barbara Whidden said. "We're not in a good situation right now."

"It's not a flattering 137 pages," Chairman Al Perry said. "We've got to get our house in order."

But to do that, more money is needed. The School Department needs \$33.7 million for a base budget, a \$1.6 million increase over this year. Yet the town may only be able to give them an additional \$800,000.

However, that figure doesn't include the restoration of services that have been cut to make up for a \$3 million budget deficit discovered last spring. The extra \$3 million would bring the total budget request to \$36.6 million.

School Committee member Charles Ormsby cautioned that a budget plan needs to be put together based on what the town is likely to be able to give them without a Proposition 21/2 override. But others on the board said they want to campaign for the extra funding, using the EQA report to convince residents that the money they are asking for is, indeed, needed.

"The community needs to understand, in a coherent way, what the needs are," committee member William Kelly said. "If we have to go backwards from where we are today, that's unacceptable."

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