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Schools face sharp criticism from state

By Sarah Wolfe/swolfe@cnc.com
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Overcrowded classrooms and program cuts. No district-wide improvement plan. Mismanagement by the former leadership and School Committee.

These were some the preliminary findings of an audit by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), covering the past three school years in North Andover. At the request of Interim Superintendent Dan O'Connor, the government agency presented a draft of results to both the School Committee and the public Tuesday evening at the high school. Under normal circumstances it would be done with the superintendent in private. The move added to the school system's efforts for transparency.

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Left Behind data should be used to update a professional development plan, as well as to design a curriculum and budget, based on how students are doing.

The School Committee has said it would take funds to restore staff and programs, which would then help address these goals.

"The state has issued efforts that have to be met," said Interim Superintendent Dan O'Connor. "It's going to take money, effort and personnel to meet them."

The EQA found even more serious problems with the leadership by former Superintendent Harry Harutunian.

"The superintendent in place was a top-down administrator who did not share information with School Committee members," Argenziano said.

School employees told the state Harutunian also advised staff members not to speak with the School Committee directly — to instead communicate through him. He threatened to fire them if they didn't do this, Argenziano said.

During Harutunian's three years as superintendent, the School Committee failed to carry out the full evaluation process of the superintendent annually in public, as statute requires. The EQA found in school years 2003-04 and 2004-05, performance evaluations were done in private.

"We did extensive evaluation individually and then submitted it to the Chairman, who is supposed to distill it into a summary and present the evaluation to the superintendent in public," said committee member Chuck Ormsby. "Chairman [Dan] Murphy never summarized. The second year [of Harutunian's term] it was an oral evaluation."

Ormsby said that information wasn't summarized either, therefore the process again wasn't completed.

Harutunian was not evaluated in 2005-06, the year he resigned following an investigation into whether he gave a 29 percent raise to a school secretary while having an extramarital affair with her.

As of press time, the superintendent search committee planned to select a new superintendent this week.

Feedback to the EQA also indicated the School Committee also overstepped its duties in the past three years, which are hiring and firing a superintendent, setting policy and determining a budget, which is then given to the superintendent.

Auditors were told the committee "had gone far beyond the requirements of a school committee," Argenziano said. The actions tied into Harutunian's stonewalling communication between the committee and staff.

As a result of not having a district-wide plan in place, Argenziano said, evaluations, salary raises and merit pay in the past three years weren't tied to any concrete indications of meeting district initiatives.

"If you were a principal or administrator, you got a raise no matter what because there were no district goals," Argenziano said.

A total of \$50,000 was also set aside as an administrative pay item, Argenziano said, to be given however Harutunian wanted, without criteria for meeting any goals.

Since 1996 the Department of Education has required K-12 curriculum needs be aligned with state standards and updated. The EQA found no indication that was happening from 2003-06 in the North Andover school district.

"School improvement plans were simply produced to meet the [standards]," he said.

Argenziano said data from MCAS tests also were not properly used. In the last three years, each principal was given the results and the superintendent presented an overview to the School Committee. However, he said, there was no system in place to study this data to mark overall progress on an annual basis, which in turn should be contributed to a district-wide improvement plan.

The closest thing to an improvement plan at the time involving MCAS data was the five-year initiative to improve MCAS scores, which aims to have the schools ranked 15th in the state.

Praise for students, teachers

School Committee Chairman Al Perry said the audit results within the 130-plus-page report weren't flattering.

"We've got to get our house in order," he said.

Committee member Bill Kelly called it "a wake-up call" for the schools and administration.

"I wish they would've come two years ago," he said.

In the face of these obstacles, however, Argenziano said the students were still succeeding academically.

"The students are performing extremely well despite the lack of management, the lack of curriculum...and insufficient funding. After all that I applaud the students and teachers," he said, which brought applause from the Tuesday's audience, including parents, teachers and town officials.

"This is a professional group of teachers," said Margo Perriello afterwards. She is a teacher and assistant vice principal at Atkinson School. "They've stepped up and have done what they can with what we have."

As for the audit's sobering results, Selectman and parent Rosemary Smedile said the information can only help fix problems now.

"I have to commend the School Committee and acting superintendent for having the courage to hear that report," she said. "For the honesty to be honest with themselves."

For the next 10 days the district will review the 130-plus pages. The final report will be released Feb. 23. From there, it will be decided if the state will take over the school district to put it back on track.

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