

'); //-->



Click: **comcast-ne.com**

THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

---

## Hot market for superintendents

### School panels offering CEO perks to chiefs

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff, 12/21/2003

Harry K. Harutunian, a veteran school superintendent, is not one to peruse the want ads for a new job, make overtures about one, or send out a resume on the fly. So when a private consultant called him on a Saturday about a year ago at his Beverly home with an unsolicited invitation to apply for the superintendency in North Andover, Harutunian flatly refused. He was happy as superintendent of Reading schools.

But the private consultant, Lyle Kirtman, president of Future Management Systems Inc. in Danvers, would not relent. He kept peppering Harutunian with phone calls, flattery, and promises of a much higher salary and the exciting challenges of a new job.

The persistence paid off. Harutunian applied for and got the job.

Compensation for area superintendents. Page 8

The aggressive recruitment of Harutunian, along with the resulting compensation package of \$150,500, epitomizes the growing competition in the job market for school superintendents, as a wave of retirements and a dwindling pool of qualified candidates pit school districts against one another to win their top choices or to prevent a proven leader from leaving. In this academic year alone, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents anticipates at least 40 openings for superintendents in a state with 278 positions.

Consequently, at a time when the state is slashing public school funding, several school committees are approving dramatic increases in pay and compensation for school superintendents, in an effort to ensure they have the best leaders guiding their districts during an era of high-stakes accountability by state and

federal governments.

Take the salary jumps in North Andover and Reading, for instance. Harutunian's base salary of \$145,000 is 36 percent higher than the former superintendent's was at the time he retired. Similarly, Reading, in hiring Harutunian's replacement, bumped up its base salary by 14 percent from \$118,000 to \$135,000 when finalizing a contract with Patrick J. Schettini Jr., who was an assistant superintendent in Natick before taking the Reading job.

Jack Watkins, the Finance Committee chairman in North Andover, who headed the superintendent search committee, said the committee felt it needed to offer "top compensation" to get the superintendent it wanted.

"If you want a good job done, you need to provide a good compensation package and an enriched work environment," Watkins said. "Money is just one piece."

The average base salary for school superintendents has risen by 31 percent over the past six years, from \$85,200 in fiscal year 1997 to \$111,536 last year, according to the most recent information available from the state superintendents association. Those amounts do not include compensation for any perks -- travel allowances, cars, tax-sheltered annuities, and the like -- which can boost overall compensation packages by thousands of dollars.

In the suburbs northwest of Boston, the average base salary for this fiscal year is \$125,858, according to a Globe review of 37 superintendent contracts and compensation packages. Throw in all the perks, and the average compensation climbs to \$132,297.

Lawrence schools Superintendent Wilfredo T. Laboy tops the list with a compensation package of \$173,584. Among the perks: \$1,705 in annual premiums for life and long-term disability, \$9,000 for a tax-sheltered annuity, and use of a 2000 Chevrolet F-10 Blazer, which carries an annual value of \$6,264.

Rounding out the top five are Lexington schools Superintendent Joanne Benton, who has served in that position for less than two years, with a compensation package valued at \$156,950; longtime Belmont schools Superintendent Peter Holland at \$153,000; Brenda Finn, the new superintendent of the Concord and Concord-Carlisle Regional school districts, at \$152,500; and Harutunian at \$150,500.

The Globe review of compensation also confirmed a popular perception: Newly hired superintendents on average make more than veterans. Superintendents who have been in their positions for less than five years make an average of \$135,000, or nearly 6 percent more than those who have served more than five years, according to the Globe review. The average compensation package for the latter group is \$127,615.

The growing compensation packages have not come without controversy in some communities northwest of Boston. Laboy, in Lawrence, recently withdrew a request to extend his contract by two years before the composition of the School Committee changes next month. The Dracut School Committee came under fire last fall for upping the salary and compensation package for Elaine A. Espindle during these tough

economic times. And the Groton Dunstable School Committee removed a lucrative buyout clause from Mary Athey Jennings's contract.

Superintendents and school committees say the salaries and compensation packages are justified. In a way, they say, the job of school superintendent has evolved into a position similar to that of a corporate chief executive officer. Superintendents have to report to a board of directors -- their school committee. Their customers are students and parents, the latter of whom have grown more vocal. And their profit margin? Annual scores on the state's standardized test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, which soon will be accompanied by tests administered under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, raising the ante even further.

"We view Chelmsford schools as the largest business in town," said Richard H. Moser, who ranks 12th in the region in compensation, with an annual package valued at \$136,365. "We have 700 employees, a \$41 million budget. How I work with my School Committee is not unlike how a CEO would work with a board of directors. There are many parallels" between superintendents and CEOs, "but the job of superintendent is frequently misunderstood."

During the past decade, superintendents have conducted overhauls of their K-12 curriculums in preparation for high-stakes tests that eventually could lead to state takeover of their districts if their scores are not satisfactory. At the same time, most have been dealing with swelling student enrollments that have spawned multimillion-dollar construction projects, forcing superintendents to wade into the field of public relations as they try to sell the merits of the projects to taxpayers, who must agree to allow their property taxes to rise beyond the limits set by Proposition 2 to fund construction.

Then there is more red tape and paperwork required under state and federal education reform laws.

So when a superintendent proves successful, that person becomes a hot commodity, even if he or she is not looking for another job.

Kirtman, the North Shore consultant, said he has been accused of "stealing people" -- particularly in cases like Harutunian's.

"It's not stealing people," said Kirtman, who ended up being hired by Reading to find that town a new superintendent. "I'm not tying people up and putting them in trunks of cars."

While Harutunian's move from Reading to North Andover and his high salary is the talk of superintendents in the region, Harutunian's compensation package is fairly basic compared with those of his peers. The \$150,500 consists of a base salary of \$145,000 and an annual travel allowance of \$5,500.

Other superintendents have negotiated perks that are more reflective of the corporate world. Some 21 superintendents receive taxpayer dollars on top of their salaries -- anywhere from \$1,000 to \$18,000 annually -- for tax-sheltered annuities (investment funds that work similar to 401[k]s). Seven superintendents, including Harutunian, have lucrative buyout clauses in their contracts, which guarantee

them compensation for at least four months or until the actual termination date of the contract, depending on the district.

Edward Gotgart, assistant executive director for the New England School Development Council, a nonprofit agency based in Marlborough that provides research, training, and staff search assistance to local school districts, expects benefit packages only to grow in the coming years, as the pool of qualified candidates shrinks and the number of openings grows.

He believes it's only a matter of time before superintendent contracts include a provision for housing allowances, because of the high cost of living in Massachusetts -- a situation that makes it difficult to attract candidates from many parts of the country.

"While the absolute number of candidates have gone down," he said, "the quality of the top candidates has not gone down. There are just fewer of them out there."

The state is working with the state superintendents association and local school districts to help build future leaders within their districts through such avenues as mentoring programs. But such a practice runs the risk of having an heir apparent snatched by another district.

Despite the movement within the marketplace for school superintendents, about a third of superintendents in the suburbs northwest of Boston have been in their position for at least 10 years, and several of them said they have no desire to leave.

Robert J. Calabrese arrived from Ohio as superintendent of Billerica schools 20 years ago, bought a home in town, and raised a family. During that time, he said, he has had the benefit of working for a stable school committee.

"I've never been one that has had to chase the dollars, but I do feel I need to be fairly compensated," said Calabrese, whose compensation package of \$128,740 is slightly below the median for this area.

"The grass is not always greener on the other side."

Calabrese said that these days superintendents can become lightning rods for criticism from a number of sectors. But, he added: "There are not too many people who can do a superintendent's job."

This story ran on page NW1 of the Boston Globe on 12/21/2003.

© [Copyright](#) 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.