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North Andover's school chief insists he's open, responsive, too

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian says he is an open, accessible leader who frequently seeks community input, despite charges by ex-School Committee member Darlene Rose Torosian.

When she resigned Friday, Torosian accused Harutunian and her fellow committee members of being "politicians" who never really listened to her concern that some teachers use an unnecessarily harsh tone and humiliate students, including her son and daughter. She called Harutunian a manipulative leader who controls the information the public and School Committee receive and brushes issues under the rug to keep a grip on his power.

Harutunian was out of town when Torosian announced her resignation, but yesterday he responded to her charges.

"I've always thought that I have followed through and returned calls to everyone and tried to find an answer to all problems," he said. By involving parents in budget discussions and the search committees for two elementary school principals, "I think we're a pretty open administration."

Citing as examples the district's need to improve the elementary math curriculum and boost academic performance overall, he said, "I've been very clear that North Andover has issues. I don't understand where Darlene says that the School Committee and superintendent say everything is fine and there are no problems."

Compared to those issues, he said, Torosian's concerns about teacher behavior were not a priority for him or the hundreds of community members he spoke with in his first few months on the job.

Torosian said she was initially enthusiastic about Harutunian -
- whom the committee unanimously hired to take over from

retiring Superintendent William E. Allen last July -- but has changed her mind. Now she said she shares the criticism of Informed Residents of Reading, a citizens group in the community where Harutunian was previously superintendent. On its Web site, the group charges Harutunian with manipulation similar to what Torosian described.

Harutunian said he has "no idea" why Torosian and the Web site authors have interpreted his behavior that way.

"I have a strong leadership style, and sometimes when things don't go the way people want them to be, sometimes they lash out," he said. "I honestly do not know. I'm speculating."

School Committeeman Bruce E. Baker said while some people like how Harutunian operates and others don't, he has been responsive to community comment.

"The superintendent's done a great job building bridges with other members of the community," he said. "Not everybody agrees with him on everything. I don't agree with him on everything, but we have a good working relationship and I think he's doing a pretty good job."

Committee Chairman Daniel J. Murphy said he is "extremely pleased" with Harutunian's performance.

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