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New school chief looks to community

By Grace Rubenstein

Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- The new schools superintendent is striding into his role with no specific direction for the district - before he sets his goals, he wants to put his finger on the pulse of the community, he said.

Through group and personal interviews with more than 1,000 local officials, parents and community leaders over five months, Dr. Harry K. Harutunian says he intends to tailor his leadership to the town's priorities.

What he wants to hear from them is simple -- what in the schools needs fixing, what is worth preserving and what they expect from him as superintendent.

"I'm fighting that urge to size things up very quickly," he said. "It's an attempt, in the end, to match me and what I'm doing with what the community is asking me to do. ... We have limited funds. We have limited staff. It only makes good sense that you go and ask the customers out there -- the parents, the taxpayers and the kids -- 'What is it you want us to do?'"

His three-page list of people to interview includes the police and fire chiefs, the High School Band Boosters, Merrimack College President Richard J. Santagati and local clergy. He expects to complete the meetings by Thanksgiving.

So far, he says, the community has told him it wants more money and accountability in the school budget. The other theme among the 30 to 40 locals he has already interviewed was a hope to quell the tension between residents and officials who have clashed recently over school spending, he says.

He has conducted the one-on-one meetings, each lasting about two hours, since he started work July 1.

Eventually, Harutunian will compile the results of his interviews and integrate them into a long-term plan for the schools.

"I'm trying to avoid driving the bus by just looking over the windshield," he said. "I'm trying to look down the road. ... If you're only looking just over the windshield, you have a tendency to zig and zag a lot."

The best way for a superintendent to foster the community-wide peace that locals have asked him for is to be visible in the community -- as he plans to be, he said.

During the first three weeks of school this fall, he intends to visit every classroom in the district. After that, he will make regular school visits and attend plays, concerts, sports events and faculty and parent meetings throughout the year, he says.

But he recognizes that some dissatisfaction will be directed his way no matter how hard he tries.

"What we're talking about is change," he said.

Whatever direction the community gives him, he says, he wants to craft a school district that will make North Andover an attractive place to move and take a strong system "to the next level."

Harutunian -- whose own two sons attend Beverly High School and St. Michael's College in Vermont -- says he senses that people in North Andover want to be proud of their schools.

"You don't usually hear people say, 'I moved here because I hear they've got 9 millimeter Glock automatics at the police department,'" he said, "'and the best snow plowing east of the Mississippi.'"

Harutunian, who is collecting an annual salary of \$145,000, said he will provide office hours this fall for anyone he has not interviewed who wants to give input.

The 50-year-old Connecticut native conducted a similar community survey when he began his last position as superintendent in Reading. The process is based on the book "Entry: The Hiring, Start-Up and Supervision of Administrators" by Harvard University education professor Barry Jentz.

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