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Late raises outrage parents in North Andover

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- Parents, teachers and school officials are angry about the large raises former Superintendent William E. Allen gave five administrators before he retired in June, even as the cash-strapped district was slashing staff and programs.

They want to know where Allen found the extra \$17,000. And if administrators can't account for it, they want to know if classroom needs will take a hit as a result.

"For the last two years now we've been told, 'There's doom and gloom. There's no money,'" said parent Melinda L. Renner, whose oldest daughter will have no librarian at the middle school this year due to budget cuts. "So where did Dr. Allen find that money?"

Middle School teacher Gregg A. Pascoe said he got so little money from the district for supplies that he bought just one package of paper for his class. Although the middle school revamped its social studies curriculum, it could not afford to buy new textbooks to match, he said.

"As a parent of two kids in the school system, I know (students) are having to be in larger classes than I would like to see," Pascoe said. "I know I am going to have to personally purchase some of the supplies that they are going to use, and maybe some of that burden could have been lessened" had Allen not issued the raises.

Allen's successor, Harry K. Harutunian said as far as he can tell, Allen did not specify where the money for the raises should come from. He said it is too early in the school year to determine whether further cuts will be needed to come up with the \$17,000 for the raises.

"In a budget of this magnitude," he said, "it is reasonable to assume that numbers that we have put into the budget for

something -- books, postage, professional development -- will be overbudget or underbudget, and ... the salary increases for these administrators are only a small amount."

Harutunian said the five administrators' salaries remain below average for this region even after the hikes, but the same is true of all administrators in the North Andover schools.

Contacted at home last week, Allen, now retired, refused to say why he had given the raises.

The five raises ranged from 7 to 9.6 percent, compared to the 4 percent that teachers and other administrators received.

The larger raises went to: High School Principal Susan Nicholson, 9.6 percent; High School Assistant Principal Bert Noyes, 8.8 percent; Assistant Superintendent Ronald Binkney, 7.3 percent; Director of Business Services Paul Szymanski, 7.3 percent; and Atkinson School Principal Bette Ann Coyle, 7 percent.

School Committee members were surprised to learn of the raises last week and are looking for a way to make sure they're not caught off-guard again.

State law makes administrators' salaries the domain of superintendents, Harutunian said, and some superintendents seek School Committee input on raises while others do not. But Chairman Daniel J. Murphy wants to find out more about how the committee can exercise some oversight.

"The question is, (superintendents) may have the discretion, but we have the overall power to approve or disapprove of a budget," he said. "So it's unclear to us how one gets a budget approved that does not have those raises in it. All of that should be brought to us at the time we approve the budget."

"The last time we met when we went over the budget," Committee member Alfred M. Perry said, "out of a \$30 million budget we were deciding where \$275,000 was going to be spent, and we had some real tough decisions. It's not a ton of money here on these raises, but it's the principle."

Committee members have not yet met to decide whether to try and design a new policy to ensure they will be kept better informed, but they say they have confidence that Harutunian will communicate openly.

"It's a moot issue," Harutunian said of enacting a policy, "because in 10 years as a superintendent I've never given a

dime to anyone without school committee approval."

Renner said she's talked to other parents who have expressed "outrage" over the covert raises. She fears Allen's secrecy will feed the mistrust some residents already feel toward school officials and their spending choices. The mistrust could discourage locals from supporting more funding for the schools, she said.

"I would like there to be happier politics in town," she said. "I would like there to be less, 'Oh yeah, I don't believe you,' and I think he made that harder for the people who are staying around."

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