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'Does anyone know who I am?'

By Grace Rubenstein
Staff Writer

NORTH ANDOVER -- It's just after lunch, and Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian knocks gently on the open door of Paula Travers' seventh-grade language arts classroom.

With a nod from Travers, he strides in and commands the students' attention.



Harry K. Harutunian (right), North Andover's new superintendent of schools, speaks to Paula Travers' seventh grade class at the Middle School.

"Does anyone know who I am?" he asks. "What's my name?"

"Um, I think it's like, Ed," a girl ventures.

"I came today to wish you a good school year," he says.

This is one of more than 250 stops Harutunian plans to make in the first three weeks of school -- one in every classroom in the district of 4,400 students. He introduces himself to students and staff in each room, breaks the ice and answers their questions, gathering bits of their feedback along the way.

His goal is to make himself accessible, foster unity within the school system and show teachers he cares about life in the classroom -- not just in the district office.

Though a few of the middle school teenagers Harutunian has visited call his eagerness uncool, most enthusiastically retell his jokes and show off the pins he gave them for answering trivia questions. Teachers, too, say the school chief's show of interest is important to them.

In Travers' room, Harutunian paces among the desks, peppering the kids with questions. He keeps one hand in the

pocket of his dark gray suit, poised to hand out pins showing a Scarlet Knight -- the high school mascot -- for right answers.

"What planet, a week ago, could you see with the naked eye, and it was scarlet red?" he asks. "Last week the president talked about security and he mentioned two countries besides the U.S. Which ones?"

Mars, Iraq and Afghanistan earn two students pins.

The students have just as many questions for him.

"How'd you get your job?"

"Is it fun or boring being superintendent?"

"If anything ever happens to our school, where would you put us?" a boy in Kenneth Elliot's seventh-grade social studies class wants to know. The superintendent says he would have to think about it.

Harutunian acknowledges that his visiting campaign is unconventional.

"Some people would say, 'Is this the best use of his time?'" he said. "I would argue it is -- for students to know who the leader of the school system is, to engage with students."

"One of the things I'm trying to put together is a cohesive organization that's connected," he added later. "The next time I go in that building, teachers feel like we're connected. Teachers want me to know they're doing a good job, and I want to see what they're doing."

He says he intends to meet each of the district's 700 employees, including cafeteria workers, secretaries and custodians. Each one he meets gets a pin -- different from the one he gives students -- that reads: "Children First."

Patrick McGravey, who teaches eighth-grade social studies, said in his seven-year tenure in North Andover that Harutunian is the only one of three superintendents to visit his classroom. That personal connection would make him comfortable raising concerns with the school chief in the future, he said.

"If he goes before the School Committee and he is talking about class size," McGravey said, "well, he's been in our classroom and he saw the class size, so that means a lot to me."

Margi Lanzoni, a sixth-grade math teacher, said Harutunian's positive energy is likely to have a "domino effect," spilling down to everyone in the district.

She already took the opportunity to give her new boss some feedback, telling him the district should help teachers get more involved with professional organizations like the New England League of Middle Schools.

"Middle school is a really transitional time and teachers need a lot of support," she said.

Some students, too, have told the superintendent what concerns them.

A boy in Travers' class complained that the buses are "too crowded."

Katie Gangi, 13, said she told the school chief "there's too many kids in Spanish class for the teachers to handle" since the middle school lost two foreign language teachers to budget cuts this year.

The classroom visits last from five to 15 minutes, depending on how engaged the students are, Harutunian says. In each room, he explains his job, how he calls snow days and how to earn one of his signature homework passes.

If a student sees him off school grounds and greets him by name, he will give the child a pass -- his business card with a note scribbled on the back -- to get out of one homework assignment with the teacher's approval. He started the practice 20 years ago as a high school principal to relieve the awkwardness of bumping into students outside of school, and kept it up in his last position as superintendent in Reading. He says he dispenses 35 to 50 homework passes a year and has given them in locations as far-flung as Fenway Park and Orlando, Fla.

McGravey and Lanzoni say they don't mind honoring the passes, which Lanzoni called "cute."

When Harutunian arrives in a classroom, most students have heard from friends or siblings that he's coming.

"It's good that he wants to get to know us," said Kelly Demers, 13, "because it's not like we're just nothing. We really are people to him."

Kelly said she will probably invite Harutunian to school

shows and events, as he urged all the students to do.

Arielle Evans, 13, said the school chief's visit was important because "we know who he is and who we can talk to when something needs to be changed."

But Dann Nicolosi and Harmony Lu, both 13, said it seemed like Harutunian was trying too hard to be funny.

"I thought the gesture of him coming in to present himself was good," Harmony said, "but it seemed like he was trying to be too buddy-buddy with us when he was a strange man coming into our classroom."

If nothing else, Harutunian has made himself approachable, earning a reputation as a friendly guy who hands out cool pins and homework passes.

"I've never met him," said Drew Pickul, 14, "but I hear he's the man."

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