



Sunday, October 19, 2003

## North Andover school chief: No area safe from cuts

**By Grace Rubenstein**  
*Staff Writer*

NORTH ANDOVER -- Harry K. Harutunian is starting from scratch in his attempt to fix his district's school budget woes.

Next September, Harutunian is likely facing cuts even worse than those affecting students this fall -- including larger classes and fees for busing and sports. The superintendent said he is putting every school position and program on the table for review.

Instead of assuming that everything in place is worth keeping, Harutunian is building the new spending plan from the ground up, questioning how each expense supports students and teachers in the classroom.

"We're looking at everything and revisiting it at least twice before it goes into the budget," said Harutunian, who took over North Andover schools in July. "Typically, you just add to what already exists."

Harutunian said he is also considering whether some programs and positions that were cut this year -- such as librarians, middle school foreign language and instrumental music for grade five -- should be restored. Last spring, school officials slashed programs and eliminated 24.5 positions to meet the district's \$29.8 million budget -- \$2.2 million short of what they said they needed to maintain all services.

"We're looking at additional cuts in state aid," Town Manager Mark H. Rees said. "We're looking at double-digit (10 percent or more) increases in health insurance. We're looking at limitations on property taxes from (Proposition) 21/2, so at this stage of the game I'm looking at a repetition of what happened last year, with resultant losses in positions and reduction of services."

Proposition 21/2 is the state law that prohibits communities from raising property taxes by more than 2.5 percent a year.

Rees says the clean-slate budget approach is a good one, similar to what he does every year by asking his staff to justify each expense.

Harutunian, who replaced the now-retired Superintendent William E. Allen, started reassessing the school budget shortly after he arrived. He said he is starting to think now about cuts to avoid surprising people when the budget is decided in the spring. He plans to develop a list of potential cuts and get School Committee input months in advance "in an attempt not to rush the cuts and do it last-minute," he said.

He has formed a leadership team to help. It includes the principals, assistant superintendent and directors of athletics, music, special education and school support services.

As he considers what to eliminate, Harutunian said, he is particularly concerned about saving classroom teachers and making sure the new high school is properly staffed and maintained. However, he will wait for more input from community leaders before determining his top spending priorities, he said.

Since personnel accounts for almost 85 percent of the school budget, some positions may have to be cut, he said.

Diane J. Huster, who served on the School Committee for 18 years, said the clean-slate approach has been done before but will be aided this year by Harutunian's fresh perspective.

"It's an excellent approach," she said. "It's always good when a new person's on board with brand-new eyes to take a fresh look at everything you're doing and try to gauge what is most important and what is doable."

However, she said, "you may come out with exactly the same because (the services) are all so needed."

Harutunian said it is too soon to tell whether the district will lose students to private schools as a result of the cutbacks expected next year, but he will watch for any trend. He does not have data on how many students switched to private schools last year, he said.

He emphasized that parents can expect an "excellent education" for their children in the North Andover schools, despite the cuts. "Because of the quality of the student that comes to us every day and because of the high caliber of our staff," he said, "we will always do a very good job."

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