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North Andover's school chief seeks equity in supply fund

By Grace Rubenstein
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NORTH ANDOVER -- The amount of money the district is giving schools to buy supplies ranges widely, and Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian wants to set the inequity right.

The amount varies from one elementary school to another, ranging from \$162 per student at Sargent to \$267 at Kittredge. The high school receives \$199 per student -- a lower rate than most of the elementary schools -- and the middle school gets only \$104.

The inconsistencies among the schools in this year's spending plan, which was designed by now-retired Superintendent William E. Allen, are "unexplainable," said Harutunian, who took over the post in July.

Next year, Harutunian wants to boost the total amount of money given to the schools -- which principals use for books, pencils and other supplies and some teacher training -- and make the distribution more equal. The budget for salaries, custodial services, nursing, athletics and special education at each school is separate.

Harutunian told the School Committee last week he wants to raise the supply money from \$755,000 to \$1.16 million and allocate \$300 per student to the high school, \$275 to the middle school and \$250 to all other schools.

He said he is adding \$410,000 to next year's supply fund to put more of the district's \$29.8 million budget directly into the classroom. He plans to cover the cost by looking for expenses that do not provide direct services and trimming those back.

Since he was not privy to how Allen designed his budget, Harutunian said, "I have no idea how it got the way it did."

Sargent School Principal John McAleer said the inequity

developed over time, because school leaders facing a financial crunch and state aid cuts "really didn't look at equity. We really just looked at how we can retain what we have."

McAleer said the proposed change would relieve the "frustration and concern" the inequity has caused school leaders and assure them of getting the supplies they need.

"Certain things have been put to the side because we haven't had the money," he said. For example, his school has had to buy a set of special books for its literacy program piece by piece, rather than the whole collection, he said.

High School Principal Susan M. Nicholson said her art department came up \$5,000 short of what it needed to buy supplies this year, and the program for at-risk youth needed \$2,000 more than it got. Other departments, like foreign language, cut back on supplies like instructional videos and paper to make up the difference.

"We need clay for these kids to work with," she said. "We need all these supplies, and (the art department) bought only what they needed and yet there wasn't enough money."

The high school gets a lower per-pupil rate than four of the district's five elementary schools, although Harutunian said instruction is most expensive there because of its science classes and a curriculum that is more advanced than that in younger grades. For example, textbooks for higher-level classes are pricier than simpler ones, he said.

The elementary schools "do not have microscopes, chemistry labs," Harutunian said. "They do not have biology class. They do not have any of the equipment."

Although the high school and middle school will see two of the biggest increases, all the schools but two stand to gain from the change. The Atkinson and Kittredge schools, which now get \$257 and \$267 per student, respectively, will each receive \$250 per student under Harutunian's plan.

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