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New superintendent wants to bridge the gap between town and schools

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Some kids make it through all 12 years of a public school system without even knowing the name of the superintendent of schools.

Harry Harutunian wants to change that.

Harutunian, who took over for retiring Superintendent William Allen last month, has been settling into town with one central goal ahead of him for the next few months - to meet and talk to as many residents, officials, teachers, parents and kids as possible.

During the first three weeks of school, he plans to visit every classroom in the district and introduce himself to every student in North Andover.

Harutunian already has his supply of Scarlet Knight pins that he'll pass out to students, and he's ready to explain his free homework deal. If students approach him to say hello outside of school, he'll give them his business card that will serve as a homework pass to be negotiated with an individual teacher.

It's all part of the entry plan Harutunian brought with him when he was hired as North Andover's new superintendent last February. He hopes to interview about 1,000 people by October and everyone from PTO members, firefighters, clergy members and librarians are on his list.

Harutunian wants to know what the town values about its school system, what residents think the problems are and what they expect of him as the new superintendent.

Although he has only been talking to people for a month, Harutunian says one message has already come through loud and clear.

"Obviously people want the schools and the town to work better together," he said this week as he sat for an interview in his new office on High Street which is already filling up with his prized baseball memorabilia. "They want to see the town and the schools work together hand in hand."

Bridging the gap between town leaders and school advocates is tall order for a new guy who hasn't been

around for the past couple years to watch the tension build as each side tries to wring as much as possible out of shrinking town budgets.

But Harutunian is up to the challenge, and he has already set his sites on several opportunities he believes will help settle the rift.

The new superintendent was at a reception held to welcome him when he heard a piece of news that surprised him.

"I found out at the reception that the Board of Selectmen hadn't walked through the new high school yet," he said. "They're the fathers of the community and they should see the building."

So, Harutunian got on the phone and began personally arranging a tour for town officials. With a new building about to open and a new school year soon to begin, Harutunian thinks there are plenty of positive things in the immediate future to help bring people together to work together.

Although he is taking over in the wake of budget cuts that many school advocates vehemently opposed, Harutunian seems ready to make the most of the resources the schools have.

He said that the type of cuts North Andover faced this year are similar to the budget problems other districts had already struggled with the year before.

At his old job in Reading, Harutunian faced the prospect of laying off 70 members of the school staff, 59 of whom were teachers. Reading, however, approved a \$4 million override to avoid those cuts.

Harutunian plans his own comprehensive review of the department's budget.

"I want to see where our money is going and make sure as much as possible is going to teachers and principals," he said.

As an educator with a masters degree in curriculum, Harutunian plans to spend time reviewing materials and programs used in classroom. He also intends to talk as much as possible with teachers about which resources they feel work best with students.

But for the time being, Harutunian is focused on learning as much as he can about the ins and outs of North Andover.

He's been experimenting with different driving routes to from his home in Beverly and trying to find the fastest way to each school from the new central office. He's also been learning about school enrichment groups and is already filling his calendar with must-see school performances and talks.

Harutunian knows his relationship with the town is critical because many people judge the school department through its administrators.

"Some people see the schools through the principals, other through the superintendent and others through the School Committee," he said. "People pay high taxes and they want to know what's going on in the schools."

Harutunian seems determined to establish as many lines of communication that residents need and to play as big a role in town life as people expect of him.

"It's all about being a part of the community as much as you can," he said. "It's about being out there."

For students, Harutunian promises to be there with them on Sept. 3 when school opens.

And while students may not want to think about that date just yet, for Harutunian it won't come fast enough.

"I'm excited," he said. "I wish school would start tomorrow."

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