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Allen says raises were warranted

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Thursday, September 18, 2003

Former School Superintendent William Allen said this week that the \$17,000 in extra pay-raises he awarded to five top school administrators last spring before he retired were both warranted and necessary.

Allen came under fire at the opening of school this year when parents, teachers and School Committee members first learned of raises which were more than the standard 4 percent given across the board to administrators and teachers.

School Committee member Charles Ormsby called the move by Allen "disgraceful." He and other School Committee members complained that they had not been made aware of plans for the additional raises, except for the raise to Atkinson Principal Bette Anne Coyle, who will be retiring after this year.

"When we discussed the raise to Mrs. Coyle, we asked if there were any others and we were told 'no'," said School Committee member Al Perry.

Ormsby said while it was Allen's right not to discuss the raises, the information should have been made public so that parents and School Committee members could be privy to how their money is being spent in such a tough budget climate.

"This is just the sort of thing that government does that makes people disgusted with it," he said.

But Allen said the raises were part of a long term plan, dating back as far as four years, to bring administrators' salaries up to levels competitive with others in the area. And, he said the money for raises was included in a line item called "pending negotiations," which also contained \$108,000 currently being used for collective bargaining with the school's custodians among other things.

Because of the 1993 Education Reform Act, administrators are forbidden to engage in collective bargaining. The state's Office of Educational Quality and Accountability requires that superintendents evaluate the performance of administrators annually, and that salaries of those administrators reflect the results of the evaluation. Money for raises was included in the pending negotiations category, Allen said, for that reason.

But School Committee members say the use of the pending negotiations money was never made clear completely clear.

He said that only Coyle's raise was discussed in detail because all the others were only hypothetical at the time of the budget discussions pending his review of each administrator's performance.

He said he chose certain administrators to receive pay increases that were larger than others because they went above and beyond in their service and commitment to the schools.

Allen noted that even after the raises, all of the school's administrators, with the exception of one he did not specify, still have a salary that is on the low end compared to others in the region.

Without keeping the salaries competitive, said Allen, the school system risks losing top-rate, experienced administrators to school systems that can pay better.

"I lost a principal two years ago because we couldn't meet her salary needs," he said. "I know of a couple of administrators who have been approached recently about other jobs that could pay substantially more money."

To illustrate his point, Allen noted that in hiring a new superintendent, the School Committee had to offer the new super a 34 percent raise from what Allen made a year ago.

"They did that because they needed to be able to compete with what's out there," he said.

"We have a number of quality principals here," said Allen, "and we're not doing right by them with what we are paying them."

Teachers too, said Allen, , remain at the bottom of the region's pay average despite the 4 percent raises.

He justified the raises to High School Principal Susan Nicholson, 9.3 percent; Assistant Superintendent Ronald Binkney, 7.3 percent; and Operations Manager Paul Szymanski, 7.3 percent, saying they were all merited for exceptional work.

In Nicholson's case, Allen said she had done a "tremendous job," but said all the work she has done in preparation for the move to the new high school was "the kicker."

"Susan Nicholson will be managing the most costly facility in the community," he said.

He called the work of Assistant Superintendent Ronald Binkney and Operations Manager Paul Szymanski "yeoman-like," noting that Binkney had taken charge of the schools' curriculum in the absence of a much needed curriculum director and Szymanski had increased the grant money received by the schools from a few hundred thousand when he began to over a million today by his extensive writing efforts.

However, School Committee Chairman Dan Murphy said that even if Allen felt the raises were warranted and necessary, "I would have hoped there would have been some discussion on the merit of the raises. There was none."

He said the School Committee had never considered whether the raises were merited because the issue was never discussed, nor was the School Committee informed until long after they were enacted.

To explain why School Committee members weren't notified of the raises even after the fact, Allen said, "when the budget season came to close I didn't know specifically what the raises would be. Normally it is something I would inform them of at the point the decision is made, but during the summer, I wasn't there. I assumed it was something my successor would do."

Allen claims that raises were among the topics discussed during conversations with then incoming superintendent, Dr. Harry Harutunian, on at least "two, possibly three occasions." He said the two discussed the need to give High School Principal Susan Nicholson a raise that would make her salary competitive. Nicholson received the highest of all raises at 9.3 percent.

"He pointed out to me that Susan's salary was well below average," said Allen.

Allen said that when he told Harutunian about the raise he had in mind, Harutunian's response was to ask 'Is (Nicholson) okay with that?'

Harutunian said otherwise. According to the current superintendent, during the conversations with Allen before the changing of the guard, the two administrators "went all over the place" and covered numerous issues, but "at no time was my permission sought about raises, nor were any numbers discussed."

"Nor would it have been appropriate, because, at the time, I was not the superintendent of schools," he added.

Harutunian, who has vowed better communications as part of his entry-plan into the school system would not comment on Allen's decisions, but said during his administration he would not give out raises without consulting the School Committee first.

"I'd choose to handle things like pay raises a bit differently, but what Dr. Allen decided was appropriate was his business," he said.

"During this budget process we discussed the details of nearly 1,500 separate line items," said Allen. "In the end, literally about two minutes were spent on this particular item in the course of a very thorough examination of the budget. If the School Committee members can't remember the specifics over every single detail that was discussed, it's no knock on them."

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