

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

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Harry K. Harutunian

By Davin Wilfrid and Shawn Boburg*Staff writers*

NORTH ANDOVER — The School Committee will confront Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian about an alleged improper relationship with a female school employee at a closed-door disciplinary meeting tomorrow, The Eagle-Tribune has learned.

School officials declined to publicly comment on the reason for the disciplinary hearing but acknowledged it was prompted by "rumors" that call into question the superintendent's ability to lead the district.

"The School Committee is actively working on dealing with these rumors and we will discover what is fact and what is fiction," School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry said last night. "All I can say is the rumors involve our leadership's ability to continue to lead in an effective manner."

Harutunian has not returned repeated phone calls for comment since Friday. A reporter who waited for more than an hour in the lobby of the School Department offices on High Street was told the superintendent was "tied up" in budget meetings for the rest of the day. Reached briefly on his cell phone yesterday

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afternoon, Harutunian said he was "on the phone" and would return the call but failed to do so.

The School Committee plans to meet in a closed session at 4 p.m. tomorrow in the offices of an insurance agency Perry owns on Chickering Road. The state Open Meeting Law allows governing bodies to hold meetings behind closed doors if they are considering disciplinary action against an employee.

Committee members would not discuss specifics of the "rumors" about the alleged impropriety or say if Harutunian faces possible dismissal.

"We've eliminated a lot of information given to us as incorrect and we'll have a full determination of what's fact and what's fiction. ... That's all I can say," Perry said.

Some parents say they've heard rumors of possible wrongdoing for weeks, and want to know when the information gathered by the School Committee will be made public.

"My feeling is I don't know and I want to know," said Cheryl Means, president of the Parent-Teacher Advisory Committee at the middle school. "I want to know the facts as soon as they're available."

Diana Headrick said she was more worried that the School Committee was careful to make a full and thorough review of the situation before making any decisions on Harutunian's future.

"I think I'm less concerned about how soon I know what's going on and more concerned that they take their time to figure out what's going on," she said. "It shouldn't drag on for weeks, but I'd rather them solve it the right way. I just hope the School Committee does the right thing, whatever that is. The town is really depending on them."

The School Committee is scheduled to host a meeting tonight with the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee and several state representatives to discuss a \$2.9 million budget shortfall they say could cost between 50 and 65 jobs next year. Last month, the committee asked the selectmen to consider asking for an override to help bridge the budget gap.

Harutunian was hired in 2003 to replace retired superintendent William Allen. The Connecticut native was superintendent of the Reading school system from 1995 to 2003, and was previously assistant superintendent in Beverly. He is married with two sons, and has lived in Beverly.

His contract, which expires in 2009, lists his salary at \$150,000 per year. It also includes a \$5,500 per year stipend for district-related travel expenses and last year he was awarded a \$10,000 performance bonus.

The contract does not contain penalties for engaging in inappropriate relationships with school employees, and protects

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Harutunian from being unilaterally fired by the School Committee. If discharged for "good cause," the contract says Harutunian has the right to an arbitration hearing and possible monetary damages.

The North Andover School Department oversees a \$31.2 million budget and employs more than 550 teachers, administrators and other employees. More than 4,660 students attend local schools.



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