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Wednesday, March 22, 2006

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Committee: We have a 'good handle on the truth'



Harry K. Harutunian attends a joint meeting of state, local and school officials last night to discuss budget shortfalls.

By Shawn Boburg and Davin Wilfrid*Staff Writers*

NORTH ANDOVER — Before a crowd of 500 people, School Committeeman Daniel J. Murphy last night called on Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian to publicly address allegations he had an improper relationship with a school employee.

"We do our business in public. Ugly or not, it must be in public. Otherwise the public will believe we are hiding things, which will destroy our credibility," Murphy said. "The only focus of your decision going forward should be what is in the best interests of the kids of North Andover."

Harutunian said nothing.

The scene unfolded at a joint meeting of state, local and school officials and residents, and only a few hours after Murphy had been sitting behind closed doors with Harutunian and School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry. The three met to negotiate a resolution to the controversy in advance of a closed-door disciplinary meeting today between Harutunian and the full committee.

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Neither Perry nor Murphy would comment further on the discussions in the superintendent's office or on the details of the proposed resolution.

Perry said the School Committee has been investigating rumors about the romantic relationship for two weeks and has "a good handle on the truth" in advance of today's meeting. The 4 p.m. meeting will be at Perry's private insurance company at 522 Chickering Road.

"There have been negotiations between the superintendent and School Committee members, and we discussed the issue in detail," Perry said, adding that he hopes to reach a resolution at this afternoon's private meeting. Laws allow governing bodies to hold meetings behind closed doors if they are considering disciplinary action against an employee.

The allegations against Harutunian involve "our leadership's ability to continue to lead in an effective manner," Perry said yesterday.

At last night's budget meeting, the public participation segment was put to the bottom of the agenda. By the time the public was allowed to speak at 10:20 p.m., the crowd had dwindled from about 500 to 50.

The only member of the public to address the Harutunian controversy was Laura McMillan, co-president of the middle school Parent-Teacher Advisory Committee. She said the group only hoped the ongoing controversy would not harm the mission of the local schools.

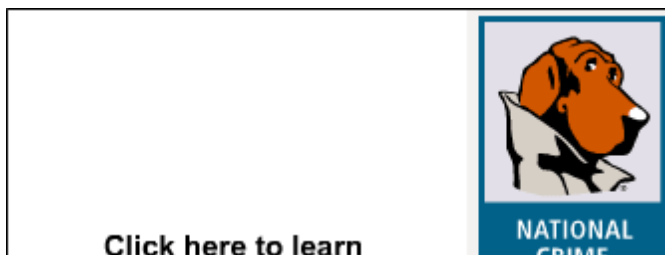
"We have grave concerns about how this particular situation is going to negatively impact our efforts," she said. "We have every hope that our community leaders will rise to the occasion and see beyond this extremely unfortunate series of events and do what it takes to make a better North Andover."

Harutunian has not returned phone calls for comment since Friday. Approached after the meeting, Harutunian again refused to comment on the controversy.

"I'm here with two friends, and I'm going home," he said.

Harutunian was hired in 2003 after leading Reading schools for eight years. He was previously an assistant superintendent in Beverly, where he lived with his wife and two sons when he took the North Andover job.

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100 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA 01845 978-946-2000
