

Harutunian feels the heat: Disciplinary hearing set for today

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NORTH ANDOVER — Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian did not report to work yesterday, while residents called for him to resign or come clean about his alleged romantic relationship with a school secretary whose salary he raised by 29 percent.

"We need to know the truth," said Debbi Raffalli, a parent of two children in the schools. "He needs to stand up and tell the town the truth, and if he's not willing to, he needs to go."

School Committee Chairman Alfred M. Perry said he has received more than 200 e-mails since the controversy erupted Tuesday — the overwhelming majority of them urging Harutunian's ouster. The School Committee is scheduled to meet today at noon in a closed-door disciplinary hearing with Harutunian at the school administrative offices on High Street. The location was changed yesterday from Perry's Chickering Road business office to a public building.

Documents show Harutunian requested and received sole authority over secretary and gymnastics coach Brenda A. Shea's salary in June, then raised her pay from \$32,562 to \$42,058. He has also paid her son, a North Andover High School student, \$540 since July 1 for part-time, after-school janitorial work at the middle school — \$400 of that since the start of the year, payroll records show.

Many parents interviewed yesterday said Harutunian, who has remained silent since the allegations surfaced, has lost too much credibility to be an effective leader. They also were concerned that Harutunian might sue the town — and seek a \$600,000 payout for the remainder of his four-year contract — if school leaders fire him. Harutunian's contract says he can be fired only for "good cause" and gives the superintendent the right to appeal the decision to an arbitrator.

Perry said Harutunian did not report to work yesterday. Harutunian did not respond to messages sent to his private e-mail account or phone messages left at his Beverly home.

"People don't think he should continue in the job," said Jodie Leibowitz, a former high school teacher with three sons in the public schools. "They think what he did was inappropriate, especially regarding the allegation he gave this woman a large raise."

She called the 29 percent raise "outrageous."

"If he gave one person that raise and he ends up having a relationship with her, that's indefensible."

Documents show Harutunian requested four secretaries be removed from the union's bargaining contract, giving him sole authority over their salaries. Shea, a special education secretary, and Lucy McCarthy, a secretary for the business manager, were removed and given raises July 1 of last year. The two others, Cynthia Parent and Pamela Zengilowski, the assistant superintendent's secretary and the transportation coordinator, were removed from the union July 1, 2004. All four removals were approved by the School Committee and the union.

Harutunian's office did not respond to an e-mail request for the other secretaries' raises.

Cindy Jalbert, a parent, said she was "furious" at the raises given to Shea last year, even as Harutunian cut more than a dozen teaching positions and increased class sizes.

"He said he couldn't find the money," Jalbert said.

This year the schools face a \$2.7 million budget deficit that Harutunian has said could lead to larger class sizes and the loss of between 50 and 65 schools jobs, mostly in arts, music, and physical education.

"In general the reaction has been utter disgust," Jalbert said, "both at the morality issues and the fact that he did things with our money that people view as inappropriate."

She said many people also expressed sympathy for both Shea's and Harutunian's families.

Melynda Renner said she felt "frustrated" and "disappointed" by the scandal, but added, "I hope that our School Committee finds an appropriate response that still keeps him here because we're going to be making cuts" to the school budget. "I'm afraid if we lose (Harutunian), we are further away from getting good schools in North Andover and that's what I want."

But many predicted Harutunian would not be able to recover from the maelstrom.

"I just don't think someone in his position can behave in that manner and have any type of leadership impact," said Bernie Kavanagh, a father of two children in the schools. "Most people are hoping he does the right thing and resigns, but they are expecting that he won't and that it will cost the town."

"It's one thing if it were just an affair," he said. "An affair within your staff is bad. An affair with someone you've repositioned and given a 29 percent raise — there's no way to overcome that."