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Early News updated at 6 a.m.

School Committee gives Harutunian vacation during investigation

By **Shawn Boburg**

Staff Writer

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NORTH ANDOVER — During a contentious closed-door disciplinary hearing yesterday, Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian agreed to take paid vacation time while a private investigator hired by the School Committee probes his romantic relationship with a school secretary whose salary he raised by 29 percent.

In a prepared, one-page statement issued after the six-hour meeting — Harutunian's first public response since the controversy erupted Tuesday — the embattled superintendent acknowledged his relationship with secretary and high school gymnastics coach Brenda A. Shea and apologized for not foreseeing "the public's perception of a personal relationship I began with a school department coworker."

"The only way to clear this situation would be for me to go on vacation while the North Andover School Committee conducts an investigation," the statement said, adding, "I am confident that in the next week the investigation will show that I have been honest and frank with the school committee and that certain rumors and statements that have been made are completely false."

He declined to specify the statements he was referring to after the meeting in the school administrative offices.

The School Committee also issued a prepared statement, saying they expect to settle on a course of action after the investigator, who they would not identify, completes "a full report regarding the facts of this matter." They would not say when they expected the report to be complete. The

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five-sentence statement concluded by saying the board would offer no further comment "until the investigation is complete."

Harutunian's contract gives him five weeks of vacation annually.

School Committee members would not say what the private investigator's inquiry centers on. Harutunian's contract gives him the right to appeal to an arbitrator if the School Committee fires him without "good cause." The contract does not define "good cause."

But if the arbitrator were to side with Harutunian, he could seek the value of the remainder of his contract, or over \$600,000. The contract runs through July 1, 2010. Harutunian made \$173,673 last year, including a \$10,000 performance bonus.

Documents show Harutunian requested and received sole authority over Shea's salary by removing her from the secretarial union in June, then raised her pay by 29 percent, from \$32,562 to \$42,058. By comparison, the highest paid union secretaries received \$34,883, after a 2.5 percent raise last year, the negotiated contract shows. Harutunian has removed three other secretaries from the union — with School Committee and union approval — because he said they had access to information that could compromise contract negotiations.

It is unclear, however, whether Harutunian's relationship with Shea began before or after he gave her the raise. Harutunian also paid Shea's son, a North Andover High School student, \$540 this school year for part-time, after-school janitorial work at the middle school, payroll records show, and he rode on buses with Shea and the gymnastics team to out-of-town competitions.

Harutunian and his wife of 26 years, who have two grown sons, filed for divorce Nov. 1 due to an "irretrievable breakdown of the marriage," court records show. In his statement, Harutunian wrote the past year "has been very difficult for me personally and for my family."

Several people, including Shea, entered the school administration conference room to testify during yesterday's hearing, which was attended by the five school board members, the school's labor lawyer, Harutunian and his personal lawyer.

Shea reported to work yesterday for the first time this week. She works in the special education office, only 20 yards down a corridor from Harutunian's office. Before and after Shea entered the conference room, Shea consulted with Harutunian's lawyer, Michael Long of the Quincy firm Long & Long. Also testifying was a man who would only identify himself as a parent of a student Harutunian had "helped."

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By the time the meeting concluded at around 6 p.m., school employees in the administration building had left for the day.

The School Committee's statement said the board had "a frank exchange" with Harutunian. Yelling could be heard in the hallway outside the conference room on several occasions, including after Shea entered the room. The statement also said the superintendent "has been cooperative and assured us that he will continue to fully cooperate with the investigation." Harutunian personally handed out copies of his statement to the media, declining to answer questions, including who will act as top administrator in his stead.

Assistant Superintendent Richard A. Bergeron said after the meeting, "In my position as assistant superintendent, I'll be working in conjunction with (School Committee Chairman) Al Perry and (Business Manager) Paul Szymanski."

The scandal and Harutunian's paid vacation come at a precarious time for the school district, which faces a \$2.7 million budget deficit that Harutunian has said could lead to larger class sizes and the loss of between 50 and 65 school jobs, mostly in arts, music, and physical education.

Harutunian's statement concluded: "In the end, I recognize that personal decisions made by me are the source of these troubles and I am sorry for the pain to other individuals and the community my decisions have caused."



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