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Fire Harry Harutunian

(single page view)
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The North Andover School Committee should fire Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian for his involvement in a romantic relationship with a subordinate. The committee should resist any effort on Harutunian's part to claim he is owed a payout for the years remaining on his contract.

Harutunian on Friday admitted his relationship with Brenda A. Shea, a secretary and gymnastics coach. The relationship with a subordinate under his control was poor judgment on Harutunian's part, enough to merit his firing.

Harutunian is taking vacation time now while the School Committee investigates details of the relationship. Among the questions still unanswered is whether Harutunian was already involved with Shea when he removed her position from the secretarial union and gave her a 29-percent raise.

Harutunian's behavior has thrown the school system into turmoil at a time it cannot afford such disorder. School leaders must deal with a \$2.7 million deficit in the budget for the coming year. Harutunian has said that deficit threatens the loss of 50 to 65 jobs and larger class sizes.

Yet Harutunian has shown little compunction for his ill-considered behavior. He remained defiantly silent through much of last week as the accusations piled up against him. Finally, after a meeting with the School Committee that lasted most of Friday afternoon, Harutunian issued a public statement with a weasel-worded apology.

Harutunian said he was sorry not for his bad conduct but that he "did not foresee the public's perception of a personal relationship I began with a school department coworker." He was also sorry for "the pain to other individuals and the community my decisions have caused."

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If the School Committee fires Harutunian, it is possible he will demand compensation for the years remaining on his contract, which runs through July 1, 2010. At a salary of more than \$163,000 a year, Harutunian could demand more than \$600,000. He should be paid through the end of the current school year and no more.

There's an important lesson here for the School Committee to learn. The committee must keep future superintendents under closer control by refusing to sign contracts like Harutunian's — a four-year deal that renewed each year for another four years unless the committee said otherwise. Contracts with superintendents should require periodic review that subjects their behavior and performance to public scrutiny.

Harutunian has done a great disservice to the North Andover school system, parents and their children. The town should be rid of him as soon as possible.

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