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**Opinion****School Committee must stand ground with Harutunian**

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The North Andover School Committee must stand its ground in the storm surrounding Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian. The committee must not give in to the temptation to settle with Harutunian to make the controversy go away.

North Andover cannot afford an expensive payout to a man who deserves to be fired for his behavior in office. To pay Harutunian a settlement on his contract would unfairly punish North Andover taxpayers and students for the superintendent's misdeeds. Getting rid of Harutunian and hiring his replacement already looks like an expensive proposition, one that a school system with a \$2.7 million budget deficit can ill afford.

As we have said, the School Committee should fire Harutunian for his romantic relationship with a subordinate — secretary and gymnastics coach Brenda A. Shea. Harutunian should be paid through the end of the current school year and no more.

If the committee does this, there is a strong possibility Harutunian will appeal its decision to an arbitrator or even sue, claiming he was unjustly fired.

We've seen this before in other communities that have dismissed their superintendents. The filing of a lawsuit is usually enough to get a school system to concede at least a partial payout on the remaining years of a superintendent's contract. The idea is that the cost of the payout is less than what defending the lawsuit will cost the community.

Harutunian earned about \$173,000 last year, including a \$10,000 bonus. A full payout of his contract, which runs to July 1, 2010, could cost more than \$650,000.

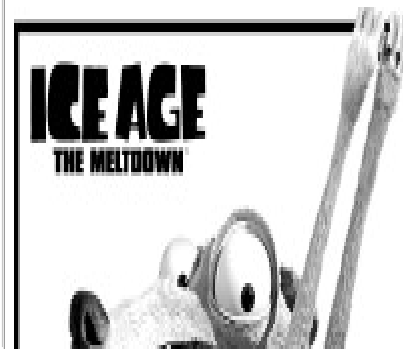
If Harutunian chooses to sue, let the lawsuit go forward and let

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him air his claims in open court. If the revelations of recent days are any indicator, the School Committee will have plenty of evidence of its own to submit.

Reporter Shawn Boburg looked at the phone records from Harutunian's school-issued cell phone. Boburg found Harutunian was doing a lot of talking with Shea on his town-paid phone. Harutunian used his phone to talk to Shea 900 times over five months last year, an average of 7.6 calls per day. Of those calls, 276 were made during working hours — a total of 15 hours of talk time.

The records show that Harutunian could be persistent in his efforts to talk to Shea. In the five minutes before one 143-minute call, Harutunian dialed Shea's cell phone 19 times.

Over a five-month period, Harutunian's phone calls to Shea cost the town more than \$420 in bills for exceeding allotted minutes.

That's just the phone records. The School Committee has hired an investigator to look into the relationship between Harutunian and Shea. The committee has postponed any disciplinary action until it receives the investigator's report. The committee wants to know whether the relationship had already begun when Harutunian removed Shea from a secretarial union and granted her a 29 percent raise.

Once Harutunian is gone, the work is just beginning for the School Committee. The committee should allow existing leadership to run the schools, rather than hiring an interim superintendent. Surely the system's upper management is capable of keeping the schools operating for a few months without the added expense of an interim superintendent.

And as the search for a new superintendent proceeds, the School Committee should subject candidates to the same level of scrutiny it is forced to apply now to Harutunian. That kind of diligence will save the community from repeating the upheaval and expense it must endure now.





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