

Schools hit crisis point

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Fewer teachers, larger classes, redistricting and shutting down Bradstreet School are just a few of the changes students and parents will face next year if the town does not come up with more money for the School Department.

Superintendent Harry Harutunian outlined the consequences of the budget shortfall at a packed School Committee meeting this week.

"Over the years the School Department has deferred a lot of items and it has caught up with us," Harutunian told a crowd of about 300 people who turned out for the meeting at North Andover High. "What you see tonight is going to be difficult. Kids are going to be moved out of their home schools. There are going to be 30 kids in classes."

Earlier this year, Harutunian presented a budget calling for a 13.5 percent increase or \$4 million more than last year. Town Manager Mark H. Rees has recommended a School Committee budget of \$30.4 million, a \$45,000 increase over last year.

More than 33 existing teacher positions will be cut next year, Harutunian said. The loss of 12 elementary teachers and six other staff positions will open up space at the five elementary schools.

Harutunian said this will accommodate the flood of kindergartners from Bradstreet School, which is slated to close in June. The shutdown of Bradstreet, the town's oldest school, is expected to save \$225,400. The money will be used to save teaching jobs.

School Committee candidate William Kelly asked if the superintendent's office would be moving to Bradstreet. Harutunian said the School Committee could consider that option, but he cautioned it would be costly to open up office space at Bradstreet and suggested the property is better off being sold.

In order to balance class size, elementary students will be shuffled to different schools.


"Entire neighborhoods are going to be moving," Harutunian said. Some 40 to 45 Kittredge students will move to Thomson, 50 to 55 Franklin students will move to Atkinson, and 80 to 85 Sargent students will move to Kittredge.

Redistricting and the loss of nine elementary school teachers will increase average class sizes, Harutunian said. The Franklin School is going to lose two classes, Sargent will lose six and Thomson will lose one. The size of the average first-grade class at the Atkinson School is now 16 children, but next year the class size could jump to more than 26 students. According to a new projection for the next five years, class sizes will be in the mid-30s.

"There is nothing we can do to alleviate the pain," Harutunian said. "It's gut wrenching."

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Computer labs will be eliminated at all the elementary schools. Franklin, Kittredge and Thomson Schools will no longer have music classrooms. Kittredge will also lose art and special education rooms, he said.

Every elementary school will have two half-day sessions of kindergarten. Full-day kindergarten classes will be based at the Atkinson, Franklin, Thomson and Sargent schools.

There was one note of good news in the budget presentation. Harutunian and the School Committee avoided cutting the plan for a new math program in the elementary schools. The School Department ran three math pilot programs this past year. This week, Harutunian announced Houghton Mifflin Math will be the new curriculum for the fall.

Turnpike Street resident Susan Flaherty questioned how the size of a first-grade class could suddenly jump to 33 children. She asked what parents could do for the children who will be affected by larger class sizes, and complained that the schools always seem to be the target when money is tight.

The town has spent too much time waiting for state aid that's not going to be forthcoming, Harutunian responded.

"The only way North Andover is going to solve this is for them to solve it themselves," he said "There is always something you can do. Bottom line is that as a citizen of this town you have to decide how you want to spend your money."

Harutunian recommended that residents bring their concerns to the Board of Selectmen.

Dianne Stevens was one of many residents who were clearly frustrated by the cuts and the dwindling options to avoid them.

"I am a little upset that you tell us to get involved now when we have been over the past four to five years," Stevens said, adding the School Committee should back up parents at a possible budget showdown at Town Meeting.

But Harutunian warned it would be difficult to convince the town to make cuts in other services in order to channel money to the schools, since some people do not believe the school budget is being spent in the best way.

School Committee member Al Perry suggested it's the town that has problems with its financial priorities. Perry said the School Committee and the Finance Committee are going to get together to make some changes.

"We're going to get organized and stand up," he said.

But School Committee member Charles Ormsby urged parents and administrators to look for solutions rather than confrontation. He recommended building a baseline budget that would be much more reasonable for the town to accomplish than next year's proposed \$34.5 million recommendation. The overall budget problem is mandated special education costs, he said.

"When you show up in June and July the situation won't be as oblique as it is now," Ormsby said. "The other side of this issue is more powerful than money. We need to talk more about expectations and parent involvement in academics."

But that advice did little to calm concerns of parents who were facing the prospect of their children changes schools and soaring class sizes.

Cindy Jalbert, of Webster Woods Lane, pressed Ormsby and the committee about where they would find more money and how they would reconcile the fact that class sizes are headed far above what the School Committee members themselves have said is acceptable.

"I don't know what kind of math class you have had," Jalbert said. "But I can add."

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