

Cold temps allow ski season to open on time

By Jamie Pote

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HAVERHILL — You would think that with no snow on the ground there would have been issues for the start to the North Shore Ski League season earlier this month.

Quite to the contrary.

“For the first time in at least three years, we are starting the ski season on time,” said Haverhill/Pentucket coach Logan Seale. “We have been able to practice (all last week) on the (man-made) snow at Bradford (Ski).”

Last winter, the season started two weeks for high school teams who participate at Ski Bradford.

“The reason why we had so much trouble in past years was simply the mild temperatures. It needs to be 28 degrees or lower to make snow,” said Seale. “Since it is an expensive process, the ski area wants to look at weather forecasts to make sure that if they make it, they can keep it.”

Haverhill/Pentucket is one of the six schools that offer both boys and girls ski teams in the North Shore League. The other programs include North Andover, Andover, Masconomet, Newburyport and Hamilton-Wenham. St. John’s Prep offers just a boys’ program and Manchester-Essex offers just a girls’ program.

Central Catholic boys and



North Andover’s Emily Storch races in a North Shore Ski League girls meet.

CARL RUSSO/Staff photo



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North Andover High School students Kylie Sawyer, left, and Hadleigh Dowd, right, dressed in character during tech week as the North Andover Drama Guild readied for its Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella" production in December.

From left, Hadleigh Dowd, Harper Barrios and Anna Hearst, performing as Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters, appear at a rehearsal of "Cinderella."

ANGELINA BERUBE/Staff photos

NORTH ANDOVER

'This musical really brought us all together'

Drama Guild performs 'Cinderella'

By **Angelina Berube**

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NORTH ANDOVER — The North Andover Drama Guild brought the magical world of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella" to life with its production of the iconic musical last month.

The musical ran Dec. 15 to 17 with four performances at North Andover High School, 430 Osgood St.

More than 75 students were involved in the production as members of the cast, crew and orchestra.

Prior to opening night, student actresses Kylie Sawyer, a junior, and Harper Barrios, a senior, said they looked forward to showcasing this retelling of the classic fairytale.

"There are a lot of characters that have more dimension than in the traditional story, which is fun," said Barrios, who plays stepsister Charlotte.

"Cinderella has more opinions and one of the stepsisters is actually nice," said Sawyer, who plays the title role.

The theater guild began rehearsing for "Cinderella" in October. Slowly they added elements to the show, like performing in costume and then with the student orchestra section, which was accompanied by professional musicians.

Students also assisted with other elements of the production, such as managing lighting and sound or helping with costumes, props and set design.

"This musical really brought us all together," Sawyer said. "We have to depend on each other. I'm in the carriage that the stage crew made. The students are looking forward to seeing how

the audience reacts to the bigger scenes and songs on opening night.

Barrios said one of those moments would be the prince's ball, which involved the whole ensemble and was one of the bigger numbers for the guild to perform.

"It is really fun because everyone's in it and you get to see everyone and all these characters interacting," Barrios said.

Director Kelly Walsh said she enjoyed seeing the students in rehearsals when they accomplished something they didn't think they could. Walsh said she was looking forward to the moments after the show, as well.

"It's the look of realization on the students' faces that they've created a beautiful piece of theater," Walsh said.

The students were also under the guidance of music director Jess Chann and choreographer Renee Haley.



North Andover High School junior Kylie Sawyer played Cinderella.

Chicken spot flies the coop

Beloved eatery closes shop after 30 years

By Jonah Frangiosa

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HAVERTHILL – Broadway still bustles with traffic as cars whizz by, but one familiar stop along the way has gone silent.

The fryers are cold and the doors are kept shut at what was once called the best chicken shop in the city.

Late last month The Chicken Connection, a much beloved homestyle restaurant in Haverhill, announced its closure, putting a cap on more than 30 years of serving finger-licking foods to the community.

Since 1991, The Chicken Connection was the go-to spot for to-go food, cheffin' up crispy wings, legendary chicken pot pies, and comfort food that had the locals flocking. The restaurant had long been known for its impeccable services, which were often requested to cater for events around the city.

The menu covered every craving one could consider, from rotisseries to tenders, proving the family knew how to cook a bird.

But it was never only about business as the chicken shop was a family affair for owner Rick LeBlond, who worked alongside his son James and his father Dick.

Another favorite of many customers was the restaurant's homestyle macaroni and cheese, a popular side dish.

However the chicken shop's lot was empty by the time roosters crowed the morning of Dec. 28.

The lights were out, the doors were locked, and there wasn't a chicken-crunching customer in sight.

LeBlond was not available for comment regarding the news. The only greeting visitors could receive were taped to the doors: printouts of the restaurant's closure announcement.

"From our very first day,



The Chicken Connection at 242 Broadway.

STAFF PHOTO//Jonah Frangiosa

each of you has been important to us. Your support and loyalty have been the backbone of our success and we

are deeply grateful for every moment," the paper read.

"Thank you for being the heart of the Chicken

Connection. We hope to carry the warmth of your love and support with us into the future." The

restaurant's website now directs users to an Indonesian online gambling page, which may leave some customers scratching their heads.

But the business is "permanently closed," as marked on its Facebook page.

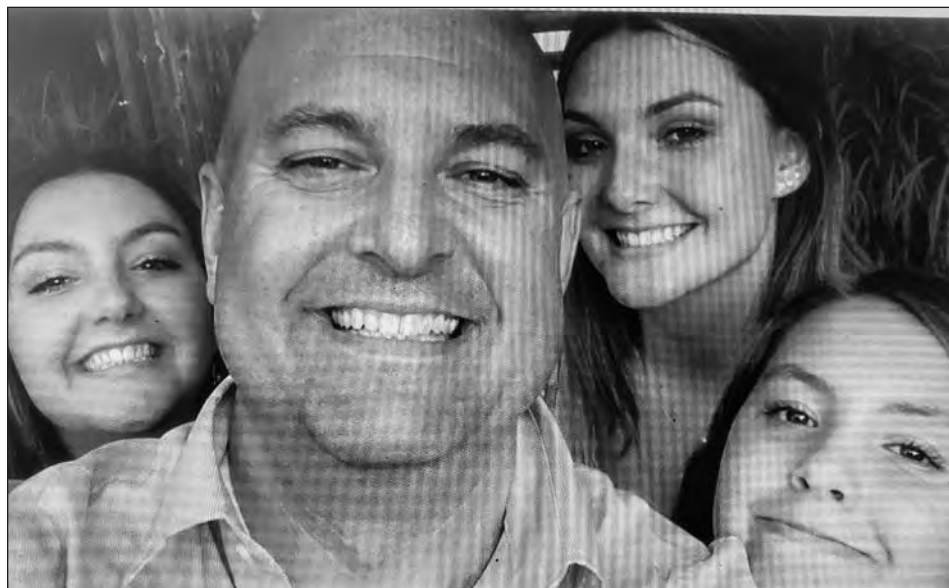
The Haverhill spot is not to be mistaken for the New Hampshire restaurant with a similar name.

Plaistow's Chicken Connection posted its own announcement via Facebook, explaining that their business will not be closing as it has different ownership.

"The Plaistow Chicken Connection will remain open and operating as usual for it is completely separate from Haverhill," the restaurant said on social media. "We wish them the best."

As for Haverhill's highly acclaimed chicken joint, the LeBlond family bids farewell to a business that kept folks full of fowl for decades.

Fundraising event for Methuen's coach O'Hearn



Methuen's Dave O'Hearn with his daughters, from left, Maddie, Riley and Kendall.

In late November a fundraising event was held at the Methuen High School hockey arena to benefit Methuen/Tewksbury girls hockey coach Dave O'Hearn as he battled pancreatic cancer.

Over 50 players came together to form three teams, including Methuen High alumni and coaches, and police and fire officials.

Players were encouraged to give cash donations of any amount. All proceeds directly supported O'Hearn and his family.

A WINNING DAY



Early this year, North Andover High School wrestling coach Larry Coughlin and his wife welcomed their first child into the world, a daughter named Bridget. Later in the night, he was able to watch as the Scarlet Knights came away with their first team win of the season over the defending Division 3 state champions of Tewksbury.



Haverhill's Ashley Gagnon competes in a girls meet at North Shore Ski League last February.

CARL RUSSO/Staff photos



North Andover's Sam Melville in her race at ski Bradfors.



Haverhill's Emily Miller is in control of her race during a season meet in 2024.



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» Skiing

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girls compete in the Mass Bay Alpha Division.

North Andover head coach Jerry Marchegiani is entering his 52nd season in his role. He was excited that this year's season started on time and the conditions at Bradford were perfect for competition.

"If there's no snow, people automatically think

there's no skiing, but if you are into ski racing, you understand that man-made snow is more dense, more consistent and wears down much better and holds up much better than actual snow," he said. "Real snow is very soft and mushes. It doesn't hold up in traffic."

Marchegiani also said when it comes to high-school skiing, the teams that have skiers involved in weekend programs at

resorts such as Waterville Valley or Wildcat Mountain have the advantage.

"If skiers are in the weekend programs, they are on advanced hills, can hit the deeper and faster slopes, and the coaching is more intense and challenging," he said. "St. John's Prep, the state champions last year, got 55 boys out for the team. They had to cut it down to 30. All those kids are part of weekend programs."

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Doubted throughout childhood, Gyorda has developed into a floor general

By Evan Applebaum

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NORTH ANDOVER – For many athletes, they grew up as stars in their hometown, constantly hearing about the

impact they'll make at their high school down the road.

Not Bryan Gyorda.

Growing up in North Andover,

Gyorda wasn't seen as one of the top up-and-coming players in town.

He heard it all – that he didn't have the length, he didn't have the energy, and he simply didn't have the skill.

However, instead of taking all the doubt and putting basketball down for good, Gyorda was determined to prove the naysayers wrong.

Through consistent work and late nights in the gym, Gyorda has developed into becoming a floor general for North Andover, starting on varsity for three years, and doing it all on the court.

"I have been dealing with being an underdog throughout my basketball career," said Gyorda. "I use it as motivation to keep getting better. I think that with all the hard work I have put in, I don't see myself as the underdog."

As the senior neared the end of middle school, that's when he caught the attention of Scarlet Knights coach Paul Tanglis, who knew he had something special brewing.

"As a middle school player, you could tell that Bryan really had potential," said Tanglis. "What really separated him was his work ethic. He just kept getting better year after year. I think that often gets overlooked,



North Andover captain Bryan Gyorda sails under the basket for two points. North Andover defeated Andover 51-47 in boys basketball action Jan. 3.

CARL RUSSO/Staff photo

just going out everyday and getting a little bit better."

Like many Scarlet Knights have in the past few years, it was Zach Wolinski that Gyorda closely followed his game after, analyzing how the former North Andover

star was able to excel consistently.

"I have always watched Zach Wolinski and how he plays the game," said Gyorda. "Whether it's how he handled the ball or how he is as a teammate, I think

Zach is a great player to model aspects of your game after."

Gyorda may not be a flashy player tearing up the stat-sheets, but he knows what it takes to win and get better, and that's what

Tanglis credits to his exceptional growth over time.

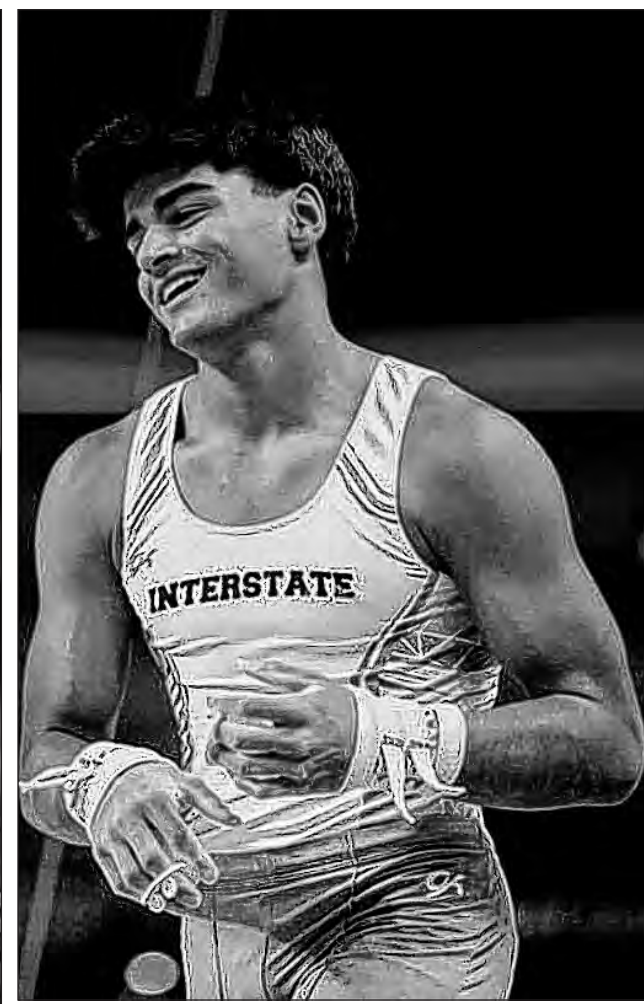
"Bryan is self-motivated, he is the type of kid who is going to succeed at anything he does, no matter what he is told," said Tanglis. "His leadership, work ethic, and

coachability are all traits that would translate to the next level collegiately."

Follow Evan Applebaum on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, at [EvanApplebaum2](#).



In April, Methuen High senior Divier Ramos-Delgado finished fifth in the all-around competition, including competing on the pommel horse, during the U.S. National Junior Championships held in Texas. That performance earned him a spot on the U.S. Junior National Team.



Divier Ramos-Delgado is all smiles after finishing fifth in the all-around competition during the Junior National Championship Meet held in Texas back in April.

Stanford-bound Ramos-Delgado among US best

By Jamie Pote

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METHUEN – Since April, Methuen High senior Divier Ramos-Delgado’s life has completely flipped upside down.

He competed in the United States Junior National Gymnastics Championships in Texas.

He finished fifth in the all-around competition, which landed him on the U.S. National Junior Team (17 and under).

In October, he verbally committed to attend one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country, Stanford University where he’ll be a member of the four-time NCAA Division 1 Men’s Gymnastics National Champion team.

And last weekend, he took a trip to the United States Olympic Training session in Colorado and



Divier Ramos-Delgado

worked along with members of not only the U.S. Senior National Team (18 and older), but also with a handful of members on the U.S. Olympic team.

“It was just crazy and I was

speechless the whole time. The Olympians were there and were talking to me, and correcting some things that I was doing. They were all extremely nice and it was just an amazing experience,” said Ramos-Delgado, who last year as a member of the MHS co-ed team scored a perfect 10.0 on the vault at the MVC Championships.

Making the national team, training with Olympians and being accepted to Stanford is just the beginning for the 17-year-old, says his club coach Duncan Gould of Interstate Gymnastics in Methuen. The two have been together (minus one year) since Ramos-Delgado was five years old.

“Divier could eventually represent the country down the line in the Olympics or the World Championships and those things are definitely on the table for him. He is definitely heading in the right

direction,” said Gould.

Gould said that in his 35 years of coaching, Ramos-Delgado is the first gymnast to compete in the nationals, as well as make the national team. By being one of the 12 members of the national team, Ramos-Delgado will be competing internationally in 2025.

“Right now his possibilities will be in Germany, London and maybe Sweden,” said Gould. “The United States has won the Junior National Championships the last three years. On the table for Divier is a competition in London. The U.S. has not competed at in the past and we’re not sure the other countries that will be competing but he could very well be one of the top gymnasts there.”

Over the past seven years, Ramos-Delgado has been competing nationally. His rankings went from top thirty in the country to

top twenty, down to finishing fifth in the all-around competition at the junior national championships back in April held in Forth Worth, Texas.

“After the meet was over, I went out to dinner and (Duncan). He got an email that said that I made the team and I just burst into tears,” said Ramos-Delgado. “I didn’t think I had what it took to make the national team. When I found out that I made it, it was just a moment where I was just speechless. Since then it’s like ‘wow, I can actually go somewhere with this’. My whole thought process has changed and I’m even more motivated.”

Before that performance, Ramos-Delgado was already chatting with some collegiate coaches. He applied to Stanford thinking it

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was a “reach school.”

When he returned from the Texas competition, it was Stanford coach Thom Glielmi, who “reached out” to Ramos-Delgado.

“When the Stanford coach reached out to me saying he was interested in me, my jaw just dropped,” said Ramos-Delgado. “To even have an opportunity to go there was just mind-boggling to me. I was so grateful because that’s such a prestigious school and I know academics are very important to me.”

And the gymnastics team? “They have won four straight NCAA National Championships. I know I’m going to be pushed there and I know they are going to try to get the best out of me, not only as a great gymnast but as a great student.”

At Stanford, Ramos-Delgado will expand on his skills, competing in not just



Divier Ramos-Delgado with his longtime club coach Duncan Gould of Interstate Gymnastics out of Methuen.

the vault and floor exercise, but on the pommel horse, the still rings, the parallel and horizontal bars.

“Divier has very strong basics. For learning the more advanced skills, he is all set up to go,” said Gould.

“His skill level is still at the top level. He is learning the hardest skills that can be done now. He has increased his start values so he’s doing harder routines come this season. His execution and how clean and well he executes his routines has always been so strong for him.”

Between competing for the national team and verbally committing to Stanford, Ramos-Delgado had arthroscopic knee surgery back in August. He has been cleared for about six weeks. He will most likely start competing next week for the high school team and then with the National team with the Winter Cup in February.

“One of the greatest assets that he has, you tell him something or tell him to fix something and he does it. That’s how he does things. He’s a bit of a perfectionist and he really works hard to master our sport. He’s always willing to do things the best way that they can be done,” said Gould.

Parent calls for action after crosswalk incident

HAVERHILL – After an 11-year-old was reportedly struck by a vehicle when leaving school, the district’s traffic safety came under scrutiny.

The Haverhill School Committee recently heard from local parent Stephen Costa, who voiced his concerns about safety measures at Caleb Dustin Hunking School.

His daughter, a sixth-grade student at the school, was reportedly hit by a vehicle while on a crosswalk nearby.

The incident occurred as students were leaving the building on the afternoon of Dec. 5. Costa received a phone call from the child’s mother about the accident.

He would later hear from his son that his daughter was not seriously hurt. However, Costa said his daughter suffered bruising and has experienced difficulty walking after the incident.

“It’s no hidden secret that we have a safety concern across our city, but especially at the Hunking School,” Costa said.

Costa called for immediate improvements, which included proper staffing a key crosswalks, more strategic emergency protocols and better communication with the community following an incident like

this.

Principal Tim Betty, who has served at Hunking since 2020, said that school staff responded almost immediately by contacting the girl’s family and visiting her home.

Betty reported he spoke with a parent who witnessed the incident. According to the principal, the parent reported that Costa’s daughter said she was uninjured and continued walking home after the incident.

Staff members were sent to the girl’s residence after Betty viewed surveillance footage of what happened.

However, a letter to all Hunking parents acknowledging the accident was not sent until Dec. 11, nearly a week later. Costa expressed frustration with the delayed public response.

“No man should be able to write one week later. Unacceptable,” Costa said. “I’m not trying to fear-monger or grandstand. What I’m trying to do is point out facts.”

Despite his complaints, Costa expressed gratitude for the principal’s efforts to ensure student safety. As students walk to and from Hunking, Betty regularly

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Consultant sought in superintendent search

By Angelina Berube

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NORTH ANDOVER — The School Committee has put out a request for consultants as it continues its search for a permanent superintendent of North Andover Public Schools.

The school district has had an interim superintendent since August, and an acting superintendent for four months prior, following a \$3 million deficit crisis.

The School Committee named Pam Lathrop as interim superintendent Aug. 20 after former superintendent Gregg Gilligan voluntarily resigned.

In the spring, Gilligan informed town officials the district faced a deficit of more than \$3 million for fiscal year 2024. He was placed on paid administrative leave after the news.

The School Committee initially put out a request for proposals (RFP), looking for qualified firms or individual consultants to help with its superintendent search. At its Thursday meeting, the committee withdrew the RFP and instead voted unanimously to issue a request for quotation (RFQ).

The school district had sent out the RFP in November with a deadline to

respond by Dec. 16. In the initial request, the School Committee looked to appoint its next superintendent by May 1.

Committee Chair Alissa Koenig said two consultants, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and Collins Center, have shown interest in aiding the district's search.

While the two are interested, they couldn't respond to the RFP.

MASC sent in a proposal, but town officials said it didn't meet requirements under a provision in Massachusetts General Law. Collins Center officials reached out about the proposal,

saying they would be "happy to submit a quote," Koenig added.

The committee had two options and chose to withdraw the RFP and then seek a quote from MASC or Collins Center. The school district will now seek quotes from both consultants and will consider and encourage other appropriate organizations to submit quotes.

"I think we can open it up," Koenig said.

"If anyone else wants to give us a quote, we'll take it," member Kelly Cormier added.

MASC's proposed contract would have cost

\$11,500.

"I've talked to the folks at MASC and they've done hundreds of these," Committee clerk Ed Moscovitch said.

The School Committee will discuss the quotes at its next meeting and select an organization to begin the next phase in the superintendent search.

Cormier asked if the committee will have the opportunity to influence phases in the process with the consultant and if they could cancel the contract at any time.

"I hold strongly that one of the first things we need to do is understand the job

description and the skills that we need in a superintendent," Cormier said.

Koenig said, in MASC's contract at least, there are refund points along the way, depending on how far into the process its services are used.

After the committee selects a consultant, it will eventually form a screening committee along with community outreach efforts to determine what families want in the district's next superintendent.

Availability of consultants may influence the committee's decision on who it rewards the RFQ, Koenig added.

METHUEN

School audit to cost \$140K

By Teddy Tauscher

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METHUEN — The city is looking to spend \$140,000 on an operational audit of the public school district.

The audit, which will look at the culture, leadership and practices of the school, was slated to get conditional approval from the City Council in mid-December, but has so far lingered on the agenda as its funding source, free cash, has been tied up by a state review.

Through a public bid process, Marcum, a national firm out of New York City that has since merged with accounting giant CBIZ, was chosen to conduct the audit and it's likely a contract with the company will be presented to the council during its next meeting on Jan. 6, according to Council Chair Joel Faretra.

The audit has been a central focus of the newly elected Mayor D.J. Beaugard, who hopes it can be used to make improvements to the district, which has struggled with staffing, among other issues. School Committee Chair Laurie Keegan said she hopes the audit will give the district more information on morale among staff.

"This is something that we need to get done as soon as possible," said Beaugard on Dec. 2.

The school has also faced financial struggles, including as a result of cuts to state aid and rising cost, as well as maintenance issues, such as rodents in school buildings. At the same time, ongoing union negotiations have been troubled by glaringly different proposals.

While the upcoming audit will not look at funding, the city hopes it will shine a spotlight on leadership and practices in the district, among dozens of other non-financial aspects. Another audit of the school's funding will be conducted later.

Faretra said he is looking for answers from the audit on the structure of the school system's administration.

"Are we too top heavy?" he asked.

He is also asking why the school has struggled to retain staff.

"Is it pay based, is it morale based," he said.

Keegan said she was hoping to get feedback on how to improve morale in the district and if morale differs between schools, and what practices can be learned or adopted between schools. Keegan is also looking for ways the School Committee can improve in its governance.

Former Mayor Neil Perry initially tried to audit both the finances of the district and culture in one effort, but the combined proposal failed to get any takers from outside

firms.

The upcoming audit, which only managed to draw one bid, will "examine and evaluate all aspects of current management practices, including but not limited to: district culture, organizational structure, leadership and governance, hiring and retention, stakeholder engagement, and any other deemed essential aspect non-financial in nature," according to bidding documents.

During his tenure as mayor Perry conducted audits of both the police department and department of public works.

According to its website, Marcum is "a national accounting and advisory services firm."

Documents suggest the firm will look at relationships between administration, faculty, staff, students and the broader community, as well as evaluate the "values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape the district's environment."

Communication inside the school, goal setting, administrative to classroom ratios and disciplinary policies will also be explored and the firm may also conduct confidential interviews with faculty and parents.

While the financial audit will likely look at the school's use of grants, reserves and other funding sources.

» Haverhill

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monitors one of the key crosswalks that connect to the school's property.

Betty was helping children cross the street at another intersection at the time of the incident.

Instead, Costa placed the blame on budgetary cuts and lack of staffing, which he said restricts the school from achieving proper traffic safety.

"We pay a great freight of taxes with a \$19 million cut and we're all aware of it. What cuts for safety were done?" Costa said. "If you keep handcuffing this man (Principal Betty) from doing his job properly, what else can we do?" Costa asked the committee.

The father demanded new procedures be implemented to prevent similar incidents. He said staff must be stationed at critical crosswalks on Winchester and Revere streets, helping students in the mornings and afternoons.

Additional safety concerns were acknowledged as traffic in the area could potentially increase once the nearby apartment complex, The Beck, is completed and occupied. The riverside apartment building at 39 Railroad Ave., will contain 290 units and a four-minute car ride from Hunking.

"The No. 1 priority is student safety. That's before the academic piece." Betty said.

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