

A hot mic confirms cold hard truth

Schools often fail to support disabled, as a parent learns

By Mandy McLaren
GLOBE STAFF

Gaurav Jashnani couldn't believe his eyes.

The words, laid out in black and white, stung: administrators from his child's Northampton elementary school seemingly calling him "a pain in the ass" and saying the district would "go to war" with him over his parental advocacy. And even more stunning, they admitted the district doesn't provide students with disabilities, like his child, with the services to which they are legally entitled.

It was all there, in a transcript of a January special education meeting for his child, that Jashnani, a college professor, was reading weeks later. The unsettling exchanges captured on the transcript took place after he had left the room as the educators unknowingly continued to record themselves, believing the meeting was over.

"What is going to happen to my kid if the principal, the counselor, and the special education coordinator are sitting there saying they're going to war with me for asking that they provide accommodations to help my child learn?" Jashnani recalled thinking that day in mid-March. "What are they going to do to my child?"

It was the beginning of a saga that would lead to Jashnani reading the transcript comments aloud at a School Committee meeting, spurring a school district investigation and prompting outrage among other Northampton, Page A7



Devra First checks out Little Sage in the North End, with chef Tony Susi at the stove (above, potato gnocchetti). **G1.**

Non-tenure-track faculty at Wellesley College went on strike, leaving students with a dilemma. **B5.**

Attorney General Pam Bondi directed prosecutors to seek the death penalty against Luigi Mangione in the killing of a health care chief executive. **A2.**

Hopes faded of finding many more survivors of the earthquake in Myanmar. **A3.**



Springing us along

Wednesday: Chilly, late rain. High 38-43. Low 34-39.
Thursday: Clearing, warmer. High 60-65. Low 53-58.
High tide: 2:34 a.m., 3:14 p.m.
Sunrise: 6:25 Sunset: 7:11
Weather and Comics, G6-7. Obituaries, C9.

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Trump's targets feeling the pain



BRETT PHELPS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Demonstrators gathered Tuesday at Harvard University to protest the Trump administration's threats to cut federal funding and its immigration policies. **B1.** Princeton is the next to be threatened. **A4.**

Harvard braces for what his conditions will be

By Mike Damiano
and Hilary Burns

GLOBE STAFF

As Harvard reeled from the Trump administration's announcement Monday that it might cut billions in federal funding if the school "allow[s] antisemitism to fester," a central question remained unanswered.

What, exactly, does the administration want Harvard to do?

At Columbia University, the Trump administration made similar threats last month and canceled \$400 million in funding. Then it sent a list of demands the school must meet to combat antisemitism and control pro-Palestinian protests.

But Harvard has already undertaken many similar actions during its response to allegations of antisemitism on campus in the 15 months since former Harvard president Claudine Gay resigned.

"We fully embrace the important goal of combatting antisemitism, one of the most insidious forms of bigotry" and "have devoted considerable effort to addressing" it, Harvard president Alan Garber said in a letter Monday night after the government announced a "review" of nearly \$9 billion of research funding destined for Harvard and affiliated institutions, including top research hospitals like Mass General Brigham and

Boston Children's Hospital.

At Columbia, the White House asked university leaders to implement so-called time, manner, and place restrictions on campus protests. Harvard did that last year, and then enforced those policies when students and professors protested in a campus library.

The government told Columbia to adopt a formal definition of antisemitism, and cited as an example the definition that Harvard had already adopted on Jan. 21, the day after the presidential inauguration.

The administration instructed Columbia to place its Middle East studies

HARVARD, Page A6

'I like that people are talking about antisemitism, and I wish that more people would, but I don't think that he's genuine. And I don't think he is going to help.'

EVAN EPSTEIN,
Harvard student,
talking about
President Trump

President appears to set a plan: 'reciprocal' tariffs, in effect today

By Tony Romm, Ana Swanson,
and Jeanna Smialek

NEW YORK TIMES

President Trump has settled on a final plan for sweeping "reciprocal" tariffs, which are expected to take effect Wednesday after he announces the details at an afternoon Rose Garden ceremony.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt confirmed the timeline in a briefing with reporters Tuesday, adding

►Retailers face a reckoning. **B5.**

ing that Trump had been huddling with his trade team to hash out the finer points of an approach meant to end "decades of unfair trade practices."

When pressed on whether the administration was worried the tariffs could prove to be the wrong approach, Leavitt struck a confident note: "They're not going to be wrong," she said. "It is going to work."

The administration has been weighing several different tariff strate-

gies in recent weeks. One option examined by the White House is a 20 percent flat tariff on all imports, which advisers have said could help raise more than \$6 trillion in revenue for the US government.

But advisers have also discussed the idea of assigning different tariff levels to countries depending on the trade barriers those countries impose against American products. They have also said that some nations might avoid tariffs entirely by striking trade deals with the United States.

Speaking to reporters in the Oval Office on Monday, Trump said the United States would be "very nice, relatively speaking," in imposing tariffs on a vast number of countries — including US allies — that he believes are unfairly inhibiting the flow of US exports.

"That word reciprocal is very important," Trump told reporters. "What they do to us, we do to them."

By Tuesday, Leavitt said the president had made a decision and was

TARIFFS, Page A6

MGB finds research terminated

By Robert Weisman,
Chris Serres,
and Kay Lazar

GLOBE STAFF

The deepening Trump administration budget cuts have hit Mass General Brigham, the nation's largest hospital recipient of research grants, and other Massachusetts universities and hospitals, canceling tens of mil-

►Unspent COVID relief for Mass. schools cut. **B1.**

lions in funding and shutting down medical research programs in areas such as primary care, reproductive health, and pandemic preparedness.

Over the past few weeks, nearly three dozen research programs led by Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women's Hospital were terminated by the National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies, according to researchers tracking the cuts.

In February, the administration attempted to cut billions of dollars in overhead expenses for research, such as utilities and the upkeep of laboratories, before a federal judge put that move on pause.

The latest cuts will affect research programs awarded at least \$70 million at MGB hospitals' labs over multiple years, with most of that money already paid but at least

CUTS, Page A5

A RECORD-SETTER



Senator Cory Booker held the floor for 25 hours and 5 minutes as he railed against President Trump in a "talking filibuster." **A4.**

SPLIT DECISION

The Democratic-backed candidate for the Wisconsin Supreme Court beat a Trump-endorsed challenger, while Republicans took two Florida House seats in special elections. **A2.**

Looking for a rebirth, Fitchburg turns to artists

By Malcolm Gay

GLOBE STAFF

FITCHBURG — When Nick Capasso arrived at the Fitchburg Art Museum more than a decade ago, the abandoned school opposite the museum served as a stark reminder of the challenges facing this once-prosperous mill town on the banks of the Nashua River.

The city's downtown had been hollowed out as the paper and other industries departed. Median household incomes had fallen well below state levels, and the old B.F. Brown School, attended by generations of area schoolchildren, sat gathering dust, its windows covered with red plywood.

So Capasso, FAM's director since 2012, was receptive when developer Marc Dohan approached him with an idea to convert the school and two other buildings into affordable housing for artists.

"The last thing I wanted was three boarded-up buildings across the street from the art museum," said Capasso, whose museum played a supportive role in the project. "If our community doesn't thrive, the art museum's not going to thrive. It's just that simple."

Now, after more than a decade of work, developers have completed renovations to the erstwhile school, which began leasing 68 units of artist-preferred affordable housing in March. The \$45 million project, where one-bedrooms start at less than \$1,200 and roughly 70 percent of the units are deemed affordable, is a critical piece in Fitchburg's broader bid to leverage arts and culture to revitalize the Gateway City.

"We decided to build on our unique strengths and try to stimulate the local creative economy," Capasso said, "which in turn

FITCHBURG, Page A7



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Steven Cook (left) and Marc Dohan of NewVue Communities stood in the auditorium of a renovated building now housing artists in downtown Fitchburg.

Looking for a rebirth, Fitchburg turns to artists

►FITCHBURG
Continued from Page A1

would help to stimulate investment in the city, and that’s exactly what’s been happening.”

That’s not to say Fitchburg, population 41,000, is bustling. Downtown has plenty of empty storefronts. One of the city’s two breweries closed in 2023, and its unemployment rate, at 6 percent, is 2 points higher than the rest of the state.

But there are also signs of new life: An art gallery, dance studio, and restaurant incubator have all opened on Main Street in the past few years, and there are several new cafes and restaurants. The Fitchburg Cultural Alliance began offering affordable downtown studio space in 2022, and an arts and culture group is opening a performance, events, and studio space in a former nightclub.

Meanwhile, the library, also downtown, is undergoing a \$40 million renovation, and Fitchburg State University is working to redevelop a property that includes a 1,600-seat theater and a suite of adjoining storefronts.

The net result, said Mayor Samantha Squailia, is that developers have become more interested in downtown residential and commercial projects.

“There’s a lot more opportunity to develop housing in Fitchburg than in some other more built-out areas,” Squailia said. “We’re trying to incentivize conversion to housing in our upper stories in downtown.”

City leaders are calling the new artist-preferred housing development, known as the Fitchburg Arts Community, an important “proof of concept.” Roughly 1,000 people have expressed interest in leasing an apartment in the new development, which consists mainly of one- to three-bedroom units.

During a recent tour, Dohan pointed out several artist-specific amenities: The old auditorium has been reimaged as a shared workspace, and in addition to a sound-isolated room for rehearsals or recording, there are common spaces for meetings or talks.

“It’s hard to figure out how the space will be used until the artists move in,” said Dohan, executive director of NewVue Communities, a community development corporation.



PHOTOS BY LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF



Jacqueline Pelnar, a retiree and watercolorist from Leominster, plans to move in at the end of April. She said she was excited about the auditorium and the prospect of living in a community of artists.

“It just makes you want to do art,” said Pelnar, who added she was a little apprehensive about living in Fitchburg, a city she doesn’t know well. “Is it a good section of town? I don’t know any of that stuff.”

Capasso said FAM plans to work with tenants, adding that

the museum could offer portfolio reviews, exhibitions, or seminars for neighboring artists.

“We’re committed to having a dialogue with the community,” he said. “It just depends on what they want and what they need.”

The project has faced plenty of obstacles over the past decades, including a fire that destroyed a portion of the building’s roof. But during that time, Dohan, Capasso, and a variety of city leaders met each month to strategize how Fitch-

burg could reenergize its economy.

“They’ve been really instrumental to helping us advance this vision,” said Dohan, referring to the monthly group. He added that members have supported each others’ projects, testifying at City Council meetings and presenting a unified message when outside funders came to visit.

The approach has helped Fitchburg attract significant outside investments geared toward economic redevelopment

Mayor Samantha Squailia said Fitchburg offers more opportunity to develop housing than more built-out areas. At left, the former B.F. Brown School.

and sustainable cultural infrastructure.

Derek Craig, who administers a grant known as Creative Cities, said the funding has supported a variety of projects, including an annual music festival and start-up costs for an art gallery.

Craig’s own arts and culture group, CoFF33 Corp, is preparing to open a new events and performance space in an old nightclub on Main Street.

“There’s a lot more openness to change,” said Craig, who’s also preparing for a local art week in April. Still, he said, some residents remain pessimistic about the city, which can make it difficult for new ventures to get off the ground.

“It’s hard to escape some of the negativity,” said Craig, noting that some good businesses have failed to make it. “How do you expect to continue to get nice things when you don’t treat the new thing that you just got nicely?”

Progress can also be slow. Fitchburg State, which originally planned to renovate the the-

ater with an eye toward presenting shows, is reassessing that plan. The region’s needs and economic landscape have shifted, a university spokesperson said, and the school is now exploring plans that would address the city’s needs for market-rate housing, innovation spaces, and community-oriented uses.

Donna Hodge, who became the university’s president last year, described the school’s future as “inseparable” from its namesake city.

“That’s why we’re investing in projects that reflect real regional needs — from creative spaces to housing — while partnering with civic leaders and cultural institutions to imagine what’s possible,” she said in a statement.

During a walking tour downtown, Liz Murphy, the city’s executive director of community development and planning, pointed out some of the area’s new cultural features. Main Street, previously a one-way thoroughfare, has been converted to a more pedestrian-friendly two-way road. A retro arcade is set to open, and developers have renovated a smattering of older buildings, creating ground-floor commercial space with housing above. The city is seeking to establish a cultural district, and there is a series of frames to display public art along a walkway that leads to a small outdoor stage. Work will also begin soon on a pedestrian bridge connecting downtown with a rail trail that links Fitchburg to Leominster.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of properties that could use some love, including a stretch of storefronts where tenants have used fabric to block out the windows. The city is also working to redevelop the old courthouse, a stately Neo-Gothic building just off the central strip.

“What I would love to see is a boutique hotel,” said Murphy, who earlier that day had recalled going to Boston when she was younger with no real plan for the weekend.

“Just go hang out — there’s always something to do,” she’d said. “I want people to think about Fitchburg in that way.”

Malcolm Gay can be reached at malcolm.gay@globe.com. Follow him @malcolmgay.

A hot mic confirms a cold hard truth about school priorities

►NORTHAMPTON
Continued from Page A1

er special education parents, many of whom reposted a video of his speech on social media.

The discovery has shaken Jashnani’s faith in the public school system: How could administrators in a city as inclusive as Northampton speak that way about parents and their disabled children?

According to special education advocates, it’s more of the same across the state.

“It’s the Wild West,” said Nancy Duggan, a longtime advocate for students with disabilities. “If Joe Schmo in Northampton or Susie Q. in some other town decides they don’t give a crap, then they don’t give a crap.”

“I promise you this is not an isolated thing.”

Marshfield-based special education attorney Collins Fay-Martin concurred: “Northampton is only unique in that they were caught on a hot mic.”

Jashnani, 43, moved to Northampton last August with his wife and two children. He believed the Western Massachusetts city, known for its liberal stances, would be welcoming and supportive of his child who had disabilities and a preexisting special education plan. (Jashnani requested the Globe not disclose his child’s identity or specific disabilities.)

By late January, after learning his child was not receiving legally mandated services, that belief was shattered, and Jashnani found himself seeking accountability through the state’s formal complaint process. According to Jashnani’s grievance, which was reviewed by the Globe, his child required a second adult in their classroom five

days a week to implement accommodations necessary for the child’s learning under their special education plan. Instead, the child for more than two months was receiving the extra support just two full days a week — a fact verified by two of the child’s teachers in writing, documentation also reviewed by the Globe.

In its response to the state, Northampton Public Schools denied wrongdoing, according to a copy of the response provided to the Globe by Jashnani. The response included several attachments, including a written transcript of a Jan. 31 meeting at the school — attended by Jashnani and several school officials — regarding the child’s Individualized Education Plan, or IEP.

According to the transcript, school officials continued their conversation about Jashnani and his child after he departed the room. Jashnani said there were four people in the room when he left: Bridge Street Elementary School principal Carol Ruyffelaert; school special education coordinator Julio Fernandez-Rodriguez; school counselor Laurie Prothero Sperry; and district special education director Matt Holloway.

The transcript, reviewed by the Globe, did not include time stamps or speaker names. But it showed what appeared to be disdain for Jashnani and his advocacy for his child’s rights. Ruyffelaert, Fernandez-Rodriguez, and Prothero Sperry did not return a request for comment. Holloway declined to comment.

Superintendent Portia Bonner said in a statement that she has confirmed Holloway, the district official, was not present



GLOBE STAFF/ADOBE

School officials continued their conversation about Gaurav Jashnani and his child after he departed the room.

when the “alleged” statements were made.

“Please know that the district is investigating this matter fully in consultation with our legal counsel,” Bonner said. “We will apprise the community when we have further information.”

Bonner did not respond to a question asking whether she would publicly disclose the names of the transcript speakers when the investigation concludes.

In the conversation, one speaker brought up Jashnani’s Facebook presence, while another questioned whether he was part of “Save Our Schools,” a conservative movement that advocates for parental rights in education. (It’s possible the speaker meant to refer to “Support Our Schools,” a local community group pushing for the district to fully fund its schools.)

In another exchange, a speaker compares Jashnani to one of his or her relatives, a man whose advocacy for his autistic son, according to the speaker,

makes him “a pain in the ass.”

Further in the exchange, a speaker admits, “We don’t always give kids everything they should get on their (IEP).” Another speaker then refers to Jashnani’s “power and privilege,” comparing him with less advantaged parents.

“We have so many, so many families of kids who need so much more, so much more than we give them, and they don’t know that they can come in and make a fuss,” the speaker said.

In the transcript’s final comment, one speaker brings up Jashnani’s state complaint against the district: “So, yes, this is one of those times that we’ll go, apparently, we’ll go to war.”

Jashnani, who read excerpts from the transcript at the March 13 School Committee meeting, said he hasn’t received an apology from the educators or the district. But more importantly, he said, he wants the district to uphold disabled students’ rights, regardless of their parents’ political, social, or financial standing.

“If someone doesn’t speak English, if they are working multiple jobs, how are they going to go fight for just the minimum that their kids need?” he said.

When Jashnani asked for a copy of the audio recording containing the hot mic comments, Bonner told him it did not exist, according to a letter viewed by the Globe. The transcript and the audio recording were made on two separate apps, and the audio app was turned off before the exchange started, she said.

Duggan, the advocate, said the transcript comments show how broken the state’s special education system is.

As laid bare in a scathing federal report earlier this year, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education repeatedly has not enforced special education law. In turn, districts feel safe to provide as few services as possible and, in some cases, none at all, said Duggan, executive director of the advocacy group Decoding Dyslexia.

In Northampton, special education parents have felt validated by Jashnani’s School Committee speech, said Andrea Bertini, who has battled the district for services entitled to her dyslexic son.

“I’ve felt for years that they have been shortchanging kids in special education,” Bertini said.

Lisa Modenos, another special education parent, said budget cuts and understaffing in the district have put rank-and-file teachers in “terrible situations.” She blamed district administration, including the superintendent.

In late March, Jashnani heard back from the state regarding his complaint against

the district. The state ruled against Northampton, citing the district’s failure to follow state special education law and, as a consequence, denying Jashnani’s child’s right to a free and appropriate public education.

The state ordered corrective action, requiring Northampton to submit a student schedule to the education department by April 18 documenting who would serve as Jashnani’s child’s aide. The district also must provide the child with makeup services for the nine weeks he didn’t have a consistent aide, the state said, according to documents reviewed by the Globe.

Jashnani said he has spoken with an attorney and plans to file a new state complaint, based on the transcript comments, alleging systemic non-compliance.

Ultimately, Jashnani sees the district’s investigation into the transcript discussion as an opportunity as a community to identify pervasive problems, acknowledge their impact, and commit to doing better.

“What I want to happen is not [for] those people to be scapegoated, and then everybody pretends there’s not a bigger problem,” he said.

School Committee member Mike Stein said he’s called on his colleagues to hold a meeting to discuss the broader issues highlighted in Jashnani’s experience.

No such meeting has been scheduled. To force the issue, Stein needs a second committee member to echo his request.

He’s still waiting.

Mandy McLaren can be reached at mandy.mclaren@globe.com. Follow her @mandy_mclaren.