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EDUCATION

Report: Akron Public Schools superintendent created 'a toxic and fearful work environment'

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Akron Public Schools Superintendent [Michael Robinson](#) has created a "toxic and fearful working environment where employees are subject to pervasive ridicule, unjustified verbal abuse, and are under constant threat of losing their jobs," an independent investigation into his conduct concluded.

He reportedly threatened a board member's children, retaliated against those who spoke out against him, and told staff he was "anointed" to his role by God.

The investigators determined Robinson "has engaged in threatening, intimidating, and harassing behavior toward media, the board, staff, and even students."

The findings support months of previous [reporting by the Akron Beacon Journal](#), which has chronicled Robinson's rocky tenure, particularly his treatment of staff, students, the media and even some of his own bosses at the APS Board of Education.

The report paints a picture of a disastrous leader who admitted to some of his bad behaviors but didn't recognize them as problematic. On the reported threats against a board member and her children, the report states Robinson "justified these statements."

Robinson's actions violated a myriad of policies, codes of ethics and standards of professional conduct, the report said, all of which "subjects him to discipline by the board."

The 24-page investigative report — done by Akron law firm Brennan, Manna & Diamond — does not suggest what action the board take.

On April 15, the board [voted to place Robinson on paid administrative leave](#). It was not unanimous, with one vote against from Diana Autry and two abstentions, Bruce Alexander and Summer Hall.

Robinson was not present for the meeting.

Board President Carla Jackson said in a statement that the board has "developed a plan for swift action regarding his employment status and anticipates a final decision by the next scheduled board meeting," on April 28.

The board voted at the end of the meeting to publicly release the report. The Beacon Journal has acquired a copy of the report, but the board has yet to release it.

Here's a look at what is in the report:

'Bullying, intimidating, and hostile behavior'

Every week, Robinson and APS senior staff gather for a mandatory "Think Tank" meetings. They are supposed to be a gathering where people can discuss ongoing district projects and and provide feedback.

The meetings, however, "are frequently derailed" by Robinson, because he does not adhere to the agenda and "instead focuses on himself, the media and his criticisms of senior staff," the investigative report said.

Witnesses told law firm investigators they felt like they are "held hostage" at these meetings, particularly when Robinson berates their colleagues.

Since Robinson took over the APS administration, he has repeatedly threatened to fire the senior staff and bring in his own team, the report said. These threats were often repeated during Think Tank sessions, which some witnesses said were filled with Robinson yelling about employee incompetence.

One witness told investigators that staff felt like they had to "walk on eggshells" around Robinson. Another witness said it felt like "joy being sucked from the room" when Robinson entered the meeting, the report said.

In September or October, Robinson instructed senior staff to draft a succession plan, outlining their duties and responsibilities so someone could immediately step in to fill their jobs.

Robinson conceded to investigators that he told senior staff to draw up such plans. But Robinson also told investigators he reassured administrators their jobs were safe.

Yet "almost every witness" told investigators about "their very real fear of losing their jobs," the report said.

Not one witness corroborated Robinson's version that he told them their jobs were safe, the report said.

Human resources and labor relations were usually present for the Think Tank and smaller senior staff meetings, the report said.

Despite observing Robinson's "unprofessional and hostile behavior, and despite receiving complaints from staff," human resources "would take no action," the report said.

The head of human resources has since resigned last year.

Yet even now, "staff are scared to raise complaints" with human resources, labor relations or the APS board because they fear Robinson could verbally abuse or fire them, the report said.

Changes to APS Diversity Equity & Inclusion Department seen as retaliation

Robinson on Feb. 21 provided formal notice to the APS Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) Department of his intent to "abolish" certain positions and reassign people.

It happened as school districts around the country were responding to the so-called "Dear Colleague" letter from the Donald Trump administration, threatening to cut federal funding to those schools that did not eliminate their DEI efforts.

Two APS employees who worked in DEI were told they would receive lateral transfers.

The head of the department, however, was going to be demoted and offered a coordinator position, which was three levels below her chief-level job, the report said. Her salary did not change.

That department head has a relationship with an APS board member who had been critical of Robinson's job performance in the past.

The report doesn't name the APS board member, but it is known to be the Rev. Greg Harrison.

Harrison also made news after he and Robinson's new communication director, Stacey Hodoh, [had a tense exchange in an APS elevator](#) shortly after she was hired in December.

Harrison said he didn't recognize Hodoh in an elevator crowded with APS board members. Hodoh alleged he knew who she was. Harrison and Hodoh filed conflicting complaints about the incident.

The run-in wasn't part of this investigation, but three witnesses described the demotion of the head of DEI as retaliation for her relationship with Harrison, the report said.

Other witnesses raised concerns about how other employees were fired.

Robinson told investigators it was up to human resources to list employees whose jobs would be eliminated in an ongoing APS restructuring.

But a witness refuted that.

"The witness indicated that decisions are being made without the input of department directors," the report said.

It specifically singled out employees who had expressed concerns about APS Facilities Manager Darian Johnson.

Johnson, who previously worked for the city of Akron and Akron Municipal Court, was hired by the district as a part-time summer grounds keeper in 2024.

Within six months, Johnson leap-frogged over longtime APS employees to become APS facilities manager.

Johnson, along with Hodoh, are now part of Robison's small inner circle, the report said, despite Robinson recently claiming he had no relationship with Johnson other than through the course of his job duties.

And, employees who complained about Johnson's qualifications or his behavior were targeted for termination, the witness told investigators.

The report concluded "it is clear that employees who voice concerns are targeted for either termination or a complete restructuring of their position."

Robinson claims to be 'ordained by God'

Robinson viewed himself and his position through a lens of religion that some found unsettling, the report said.

Among other things, Robinson said being superintendent was his "ministry" and that he is "anointed" and "ordained by God."

Because of that, Robinson warned people that harm could befall those who challenge him, the report said.

Multiple witnesses recounted times when Robinson told the APS staff about his former supervisor at another job who was diagnosed with cancer "because he treated Dr. Robinson poorly," the report said.

Other witnesses said Robinson warned that "bad things happen" to people who "come for him," implying that he is "dangerous" and has connections to organized crime, the report said.

Robinson denied saying he was dangerous or had ties to crime, but acknowledged to investigators that he made statements "that people will get what they deserve," the report said.

One of those people is APS board member Rene Molenaar.

A witness told investigators that Robinson said "I could just wring her neck" after Molenaar publicly accused him of bullying behavior, the report said.

She "better watch out, she has kids," the witness recounted Robinson saying.

When investigators asked Robinson about this, he admitted telling Molenaar that if she "doesn't live long enough" her "children, and her children's children" will reap what she has sown, the report said.

Robinson "justified these statements because he felt that (Molenaar) spoke to him in a demeaning and condescending manner," the report said.

‘Hos,’ a ‘heifer’ and ‘thugs’

Another section of the report dedicated to Robinson's "threatening, intimidating and harassing behavior" includes examples of derogatory terms the superintendent used to describe everyone from reporters to students, along with threats he made to Molenaar.

Two witnesses told investigators Robinson had referred [to two education reporters as “hos,”](#) a slang terms for "whores."

Robinson denied the allegation.

The report also detailed what it called "alarming" allegations about Robinson's conduct with students.

In one case, two witnesses said Robinson threatened to have two students arrested if they didn't get to class.

One of those witnesses added that Robinson said students who act out or fight in school should also be arrested, the report said.

"While behavioral problems are not always easy to deal with, threatening police involvement or arrest should not be considered as a first option," the report said.

Other witnesses said they had heard Robinson refer to a female student as a "heifer," and refer to students as "thugs," implying they were criminals.

Robinson told investigators he uses words like "ghetto" to describe the behavior of some children, but denied calling a specific child "ghetto," the report said.

Robinson calls APS treasurer a 'Pat Shipe Boy'

The APS board has encouraged Robinson to build relationships, but Robinson told investigators he doesn't see the need.

Robinson pointed to his relationship with APS Treasurer Steve Thompson as "being a normal working relationship," the report said.

But witnesses described the relationship between the two as "poor."

Robinson told investigators about "perceived slights or differences" with Thompson about how APS should be run. He also described Thompson as an ally of Akron

Education Association President Pat Shipe, calling Thompson a "Pat Shipe Boy," the report said.

When investigators asked the superintendent if he was trying to improve his relationship with Thompson, Robinson said Thompson had invited him to dinner a couple of times, but Robinson did not go and likely wouldn't.

Witnesses cry as they describe superintendent's conduct

"The overwhelming consensus across witnesses interviewed is that the workplace culture at (APS) central office is 'toxic,'" the report said.

The report said other words and phrases witnesses used to describe working under Robinson include: "Horrible," "as bad as it can be," "hostile," "bullying," "intimidating" and "demeaning."

Four witnesses became emotional during their interviews, the report said, "crying when describing Dr. Robinson's conduct."

Robinson denied that his leadership style was problematic, the report said.

But the investigation showed "this culture of fear, intimidation, and hostility would not exist but for Dr. Robinson," the report said.

If nothing changes, APS risks losing long-time, experienced educators, the report said.

Some employees have already started exploring other jobs. Others have reached out to attorneys over issues of retaliation, intimidation and a hostile work environment, the report said.

"It is important to note that these witnesses are largely administrators, not union employees, who work or have worked directly with Dr. Robinson every day," it said.

Witnesses did credit Robinson for bringing good ideas to APS, but said his inability to work with other hinders progress, the report said.

APS public relations department bears brunt of Robinson's wrath

Almost every witness interviewed by investigators described seeing and hearing Robinson "verbally abusing and admonishing" the Communications Department, which longtime spokesperson Mark Williamson ran until retiring last year.

In one case, Robinson interrupted a Think Tank session to speak to the communications staff in the hallway.

Robinson "berated them so loudly that people from two floors up came downstairs to see what was happening," the report said.

The report describes other incidents involving the communications team, including a three-hour meeting in which Robinson gave that staff a week to fix their problems or face losing their jobs.

But, a witness told investigators, Robinson never articulated what he thought the problems were in the department.

Robinson also accused Williamson of "leaking" negative news stories to the media, but had no proof, the report said.

It cited Beacon Journal education writer Jennifer Pignolet's reporting about APS [being forced to return about \\$800,000 in state of Ohio grants](#) to adopt state-approved reading curriculum.

Pignolet, the investigation said, "discovered the error through their own due diligence." But Robinson was convinced, without evidence, a leak prompted her reporting, the report said.

Witnesses said Robinson called Williamson into human resources at least 20 times to "yell," "scream," and "berate" him about various news reports Robinson didn't like.

Robinson violated APS policies, education codes, report says

After interviewing witnesses, including Robinson, investigators concluded that Robinson violated various policies and codes, including:

APS Whistleblower Policy, by retaliating against an employee who complained about Johnson.

APS Anti-Harassment policy by using disparaging and sexist language referring to two female reporters as prostitutes.

Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators by "continuously" intimidating other administrators, by threatening to terminate them, by making threatening statements about board members and other educational professionals, by berating employees and by retaliating against employees who challenge his "bullying behavior." Robinson also violated this code by referring to students' behavior as "ghetto" and likening them to "thugs."

National Education Association's Code of Ethics for Educators by threatening students with arrest and accusing staff of leaking information to the media.

This story will be updated.

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