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EDUCATION

Akron school board hires outside firm to investigate superintendent, other administrators

Jennifer Pignolet Akron Beacon Journal

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The Akron Public Schools board is hiring an outside firm to investigate unspecified allegations made against Superintendent Michael Robinson and other administrators.

The board announced the move in a statement issued Thursday afternoon.

The board has not voted to place Robinson or any of the other unnamed administrators on leave while the investigation takes place.

"In recent weeks, the Akron Public Schools Board of Education has met to consider some personnel-related issues involving superintendent Dr. Michael Robinson and other administrators," the board statement reads. "The Board has decided to engage an independent, professional firm to conduct a thorough and impartial review of these allegations.

"It is the Board's responsibility to take any allegations seriously. The independent firm will commence this review promptly and the Board will make its findings public upon completion."

The statement indicated that board members are deferring comment on the issues that prompted the investigation "pending results from the ongoing review."

"The top priority for the Board is to ensure continuity of high-quality education for Akron kids," the board said in the statement.

The board held a three-hour executive session the previous night and took no action afterward, but Board President Diana Autry said a statement would be released.

Autry, who is listed as the point of contact for questions about the investigation, did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment Thursday evening.

The Akron Education Association issued its own statement Thursday, admonishing the board's allowance of Robinson to stay on the job while he is investigated.

"This decision is an egregious departure from how similar allegations have been managed for any other employee in the district," AEA President Pat Shipe said in the statement, adding that employees facing allegations are removed from campus, lose email access and are instructed not to speak with other APS staff members.

"The fact that the Board has chosen a different standard for the superintendent is deeply troubling and blatantly inequitable," Shipe said.

The concern, she said, is those who will be asked to speak with the investigator will be in fear of retaliation if they speak honestly, if Robinson is still in the building.

While the board did not specify the allegations against Robinson that are prompting the investigation, a department head recently accused Robinson of retaliation after that employee raised concerns about Robinson's workplace conduct to the board.

Facilities Director Steve Keenan said in a Nov. 23 letter to that Robinson had subjected the facilities staff to "ridicule, demeaning behavior, and beratement" and that they had been forced "into situations that are beyond their qualifications or comfort levels."

Robinson wrote a response to Autry Nov. 25 calling Keenan "a disappointment" and saying he had "grave concerns" about his work in the district.

Keenan said after he wrote his initial letter, he was removed from his position while he was on family medical leave.

A district spokesperson said Keenan's title and pay did not change, and he will now oversee the district's two biggest construction projects, the new school in Kenmore and the rebuild of North High School.

Looking back: Akron Superintendent Michael Robinson is under investigation. See a timeline of his tenure

The board has received other allegations against Robinson, including from one of its own members.

Board member Rene Molenaur in July issued a letter to her fellow board members saying Robinson had bullied her and yelled at her so loud during a Zoom meeting that others at district headquarters heard him and texted her to see if she was OK.

Robinson had responded at the time by saying he does not yell and remembers the conversations differently.

Robinson last month also admitted to using a function of Gmail called "confidential mode" that allows a sender to make emails disappear after a certain amount of time, a potential violation of public records law that runs in contrast with Robinson's previous pledges of transparency.

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter @JenPignolet.