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TO: Kate Davis, Jason Stuckey, Bricker Graydon  
FROM: Victoria L. Ferrise, Hilary DeSaussure, Brennan, Manna & Diamond  
DATE: April 11, 2025  
RE: Dr. C. Michael Robinson Investigation Summary and Disposition

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## **I. Scope of Investigation.**

At the request of Akron Public Schools (“APS”), the law firm of Brennan, Manna & Diamond, LLC (“BMD”) was retained and conducted an independent, internal investigation into allegations APS received concerning its Superintendent, Dr. C. Michael Robinson (“Dr. Robinson”). APS received reports that Dr. Robinson has bullied, harassed, intimidated, and retaliated against current and former APS employees, creating a hostile working environment. Some of the complaints and reports received prior to and during this investigation also accused Dr. Robinson of making derogatory statements and behaving in a hostile manner toward reporters and to APS students. BMD investigated these complaints and the allegations that emerged during the interviews conducted. This report contains BMD’s findings and conclusions.

## **II. Investigative Process.**

BMD initially met with APS’s board counsel, Roetzel & Address, to obtain background information and to discuss the general scope of the investigation. Complaints concerning Dr. Robinson’s behavior and professionalism have been raised to APS by current and former employees. BMD’s investigation focused complaints concerning bullying, harassing, intimidation, and retaliation which create a hostile and toxic working environment.

To properly determine whether Dr. Robinson’s behavior violated any policies or professional standards, BMD included in its investigation a review of certain documents including the complaints and supporting documents, APS’s posted policies and the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce’s Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators, news articles, Dr. Robinson’s personnel file, and a transition report that was requested by Dr. Robinson.



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## **A. Applicable APS Policies**

### 1) PO8310 – Public Records:

“The Board of Education is responsible for maintaining the public records of this District and to make such records available to residents of Ohio for inspection and reproduction in adherence to the State's Public Records Act.”

...

“The District's public records shall be organized and maintained so that they are readily available for inspection and copying.”

### 2) PO1411 – Whistleblower Policy:

“It is the responsibility of an employee who is aware of conduct on the part of any Board member or employee that possibly violates Federal or State law, or Board policy, to call this conduct to the attention of his/her immediate supervisor. If the employee's immediate supervisor is not responsive or is the employee whose behavior is in question, the employee may report to the Superintendent. If the reported conduct relates to the Superintendent, the report may be filed directly with the Board President.”

### 3) PO4362 – Anti-Harassment<sup>1</sup>:

**General Policy Statement:** It is the policy of the Board of Education to maintain an education and work environment which is free from all forms of harassment, including sexual harassment. This commitment applies to all School District operations, programs, and activities. All students, administrators, teachers, staff, and all other school personnel share responsibility for avoiding, discouraging, and reporting any form of unlawful harassment. This policy applies to unlawful conduct occurring on school property, or at another location if such conduct occurs during an activity sponsored by the Board.

The Board will vigorously enforce its prohibition against harassment based on sex, race, color, national origin, religion, disability, genetic information, or any other basis, and encourages those within the School District community as well as third parties, who feel aggrieved to seek assistance to rectify the problems. The Board will investigate all allegations of harassment and in those cases where harassment is substantiated, the Board

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Robinson's personnel file indicates that on July 18, 2023, Dr. Robinson signed an Acknowledgement and Waiver Form indicating that he received a copy of APS's anti-harassment policy and further acknowledged that he was responsible for familiarizing himself with the policy.



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will take immediate steps to end the harassment. Individuals who are found to have engaged in unlawful harassment will be subject to appropriate disciplinary action.

For purposes of this policy, "School District community" means students, administrators, teachers, staff, and all other school personnel, including Board members, agents, volunteers, contractors, or other persons subject to the control and supervision of the Board.

For purposes of this policy, "third parties" include, but are not limited to, guests and/or visitors on School District property (e.g., visiting speakers, participants on opposing athletic teams, parents), vendors doing business with, or seeking to do business with, the Board, and other individuals who come in contact with members of the School District community at school-related events/activities (whether on or off School District property).

**Other Violations of the Anti-Harassment Policy:** The Board will also take immediate steps to impose disciplinary action on individuals engaging in any of the following prohibited acts:

- A. Retaliating against a person who has made a report or filed a complaint alleging harassment, or who has participated as a witness in a harassment investigation.

## **B. Applicable Professional Standards**

- 1) **Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators – Rule 1. Professional Behavior** – “Conduct unbecoming to the profession includes, but is not limited to, the following actions:”

...

Rule 1(e): “Disparaging a colleague, peer, or other school personnel while working in a professional setting ... on the basis of race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, political or religious affiliation, physical characteristics, age, disability or English language proficiency.”

Rule 1(f): “Harassing, intimidating, or retaliating against a colleague, peer, or other school personnel.”

- 2) **Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators – Rule 2. Professional Relationship with Students** – “Conduct unbecoming includes, but is not limited to, the following actions:”

...

Rule 2(e): “Disparaging a student on the basis of race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, political or



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religious affiliation, physical characteristics, academic or athletic performance, disability or English language proficiency.”

Rule 2(f): “Using inappropriate language, gestures or signs at any school-related activity (such as racial slurs, or biased, lewd or lascivious expressions).”

- 3) **The National Education Association’s Code of Ethics for Educators – Principle I:**  
The educator strives to help each student realize his or her potential as a worthy and effective member of society. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit or inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals.

In fulfillment of the obligation to the student, the educator –  
...

5. Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement.

- 4) **The National Education Association’s Code of Ethics for Educators – Principle II:**  
The education profession is vested by the public with a trust and responsibility requiring the highest ideals of professional service. In the belief that the quality of the services of the education profession directly influences the nation and its citizens, the educator shall exert every effort to raise professional standards, to promote a climate that encourages the exercise of professional judgment, to achieve conditions that attract persons worthy of the trust to careers in education, and to assist in preventing the practice of the profession by unqualified persons.

In fulfillment of the obligations to the profession, the educator –  
...

7. Shall not knowingly make false or malicious statements about a colleague.

### **C. Interviews Conducted**

BMD interviewed sixteen (16) current and former APS employees as part of its investigation, including Dr. Robinson who elected to have his counsel present. BMD requested an additional four (4) interviews with current and former employees, but those requests were declined or ignored. Given that the allegations of bullying, harassment, intimidation, retaliation, and hostile working environment are rendered against Dr. Robinson, BMD has elected to keep the identities of each witness anonymous.



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### **III. Background.**

#### **A. Dr. Robinson’s Employment History and Relationship with Colleagues, the Media, and Professional Organizations.**

##### **1. Dr. Robinson’s Employment History and Relationship with Former Colleagues.**

Dr. Robinson is an experienced educator having worked with various school districts including, but not limited to, Prince George’s County Public Schools, Pine Bluff School District, and East Baton Rouge Parish School System. Although Dr. Robinson’s employment history is predominantly in education, he served as a senior executive with Burns – Van Fleet between November 2018 – January 2021.<sup>2</sup> Immediately prior to moving to Akron, Dr. Robinson served as Chief Academic Officer for the East Baton Rouge Parish School System in Louisiana between February 1, 2021 through 2023. Dr. Robinson supervised several departments in this role and described having positive relationships with his former colleagues, describing them as being “like family.”

Dr. Robinson applied for Akron Public Schools’s Superintendent position in 2023. He underwent several interviews, including two Board interviews and one community interview, before he was offered the position. Dr. Robinson officially began working as Superintendent on or about August 1, 2023.

Dr. Robinson requested a transition report to learn more about APS and its needs (the “Transition Report”). Burns – Van Fleet, LLC (“Van Fleet”) Dr. Robinson’s former employer, was retained to perform this investigation and render its findings. Dr. Robinson denies having any input into the Transition Report despite having allegedly been accused of being involved in drafting it. The Transition Report makes some notable findings that are relevant to BMD’s investigation:

- 1) The report’s “executive summary” found an existence of “[a] contentious relationship between the Board of Education and the previous Superintendent” that “received a great deal of negative media coverage.”

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Robinson’s resume in his personnel file provides that he was employed by Burns – Van Fleet between 2018 and 2021. But the resume Dr. Robinson submitted to East Baton Rouge Parish noted that he worked for Burns – Van Fleet beginning March 2020 through 2021, and as a Senior Associate for BRP Associates of Jonesboro, GA between November 2018 through 2021.



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- 2) The report emphasizes the importance of maintaining a positive professional climate, including fostering collegiality, which it defined as “a cooperative, respectful relationship between the administration and the employee organization.”
  - 3) The report emphasized the media’s criticisms of APS’s “urban district” while not reporting on problems of suburban districts. However, the report found “there are solid efforts to engage the media which help” and that “the Communications Department ... try to keep staff informed.”
2. Dr. Robinson’s Relationship with Current Colleagues, the Media, and Professional Organizations.

Dr. Robinson described his relationship with his current staff as “evolving”, and that the “family-like” dynamic he had with his former staff does not currently exist with APS staff. He admitted to telling APS senior staff on different occasions that “Superintendents usually bring their own staff” but he wanted the opportunity to work with the current staff. Dr. Robinson noted that some staff members understood what he was saying whereas others “felt some kind of way,” implying that some staff felt threatened by his statement. Dr. Robinson elaborated, saying that if he did not want to work with certain individuals, he would have replaced them.

Dr. Robinson interacts regularly with his Chief of Staff, Angela Carter, seeing her every day, as well as a Facilities Supervisor, Darian Johnson, whom he interacts with frequently. He did not identify others he works with on a regular basis, stating that he sees various people depending on his schedule. But witnesses described Dr. Robinson has having a “core” group of people he interacts with regularly. Prior to December 2024, these people included his Chief of Staff Angela Carter, the former Director of Human Capital Yamini Adkins, and the former Director of Labor Relations Mike Defibaugh. Ms. Adkins and Mr. Defibaugh submitted their voluntary resignations in December 2024. Since December 2024, Dr. Robinson’s “core” group of people include Angela Carter (who has been serving as the Interim Human Capital Director since December 2024), the new Director of Communications Dr. Stacey Hodoh, and Mr. Darian Johnson.

Dr. Robinson stated that he is “anointed” and sees his work at APS as his “ministry,” describing his role as Superintendent as his calling. He stated that he enjoys coaching subordinates but sets high expectations for himself and his staff. Dr. Robinson believes that APS staff are not



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used to meeting high expectations and have not been held accountable for their work in the past. Despite these opinions, Dr. Robinson stated that APS had great results in his first year, but he would have liked to have accomplished more. Dr. Robinson described his coaching and communication style as being “direct” but not offensive. Although Dr. Robinson thinks his communication style is direct and professional, he stated that others might see it as being put down or disrespected.

Dr. Robinson clearly has a difficult and distrusting relationship with the media, as he has felt personally targeted and attacked after a meeting with Akron Education Association’s (the “AEA”) President in or around October 2023. Dr. Robinson alleges that during this meeting, he was pressured to sign an agreement committing to meet with the AEA on a weekly basis, but Dr. Robinson refused to sign and instead offered to meet with the AEA frequently without formal agreement. Dr. Robinson believes that the media’s reporting became personal and highly critical after this meeting. Dr. Robinson has a strong belief that the media conspires with organizations like the AEA and will print negative stories if the Superintendent does not align with these organizations. Dr. Robinson believes that something similar happened to the former Superintendent, describing it as part of a “playbook.”

But Dr. Robinson’s belief that the AEA and the media conspire to personally attack him, or APS, is not supported by any evidence or corroborated by witness statements. Instead, it is apparent that Dr. Robinson’s own behavior and distrust continues to fuel his poor relationships with the media and APS staff. Dr. Robinson refused to trust and properly utilize APS’s Communications Department, which caused further deterioration between him and the media.

Dr. Robinson began attacking the former Director of Communication’s competency when the Director offered constructive feedback on how to deal with local media outlets. Dr. Robinson felt “frustration” with the Communications Department when it tried to meet deadlines to respond to stories and articles. Rather than meeting deadlines set by the media, Dr. Robinson felt like the Communications Department should have tried to work with the media to set different deadlines that worked for Dr. Robinson. Dr. Robinson’s frustrations increasingly grew as he and the Director had differing opinions on how to respond to media inquiries. One witness corroborated these differing opinions on how to respond to the media, stating that Dr. Robinson did not want to



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respond to media requests, but rather wanted APS to do their own stories and demanded that the Communications Department focus its efforts and resources on developing APS's website focused primarily on videos of the Superintendent.

Dr. Robinson admitted to writing up the former Director on three separate occasions, telling him on one occasion, "if you don't get your act together, you're going to have to figure out what you're going to do." Despite this admission and his acknowledgment of increasing frustration, he denied there being any heated discussions with the Communications Department or its former Director. This statement is inconsistent with various witness statements, which are discussed in more detail below. Eventually, the former Director retired and was replaced by a new Director in December 2024. Dr. Robinson believes that the Communications Department is doing better since the new Director was hired, but he wants to see more improvement in building relationships between APS and the media.

Given Dr. Robinson's poor and distrustful relationship with the media, he expects APS staff to keep business confidential and to not discuss or deal with the media without his approval. Several witnesses stated that they were instructed to no longer communicate with the media directly, and that all communications must go through Dr. Robinson and the Communications Director, Dr. Hodoh. Dr. Robinson describes this confidentiality as simple "etiquette" despite APS being a public entity that is subject to basic principles of transparency through Ohio's Public Records Act. Dr. Robinson agreed that he impressed upon staff during meetings to keep information "close to yourself" and to "not be caught sending things to the media" but denied ever reprimanding or threatening employees for communicating directly with the media.

This demand for confidentiality and his desire to control what was sent to the media prompted Dr. Robinson to search for ways to make it harder for employees to share information outside of APS. Dr. Robinson contacted outside counsel regarding sending "confidential" emails (emails that could not be saved, forwarded, or printed, and would expire after a certain amount of time) and received a legal opinion that these emails were consistent with Ohio's Public Records Act. According to Dr. Robinson, outside counsel found that the "confidential" emails were not in violation of Ohio's Public Records Act because they could be accessed if they were responsive to a public records request. Dr. Robinson denied that anyone ever told him that making emails



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confidential was a bad idea or was otherwise inconsistent with APS’s public records policies. But this statement is inconsistent with three witness statements, one of whom indicated that Dr. Robinson baselessly accused this witness of “leaking” the confidential emails to the press after raising concerns about the use of the emails.

### 3. Dr. Robinson’s 2023 – 2024 Performance Review.

In or around May 2024, the Board conducted a performance review of Dr. Robinson performance. BMD was provided a copy of Dr. Robinson’s evaluation, which was reviewed during the investigation and in rendering this report. Dr. Robinson’s evaluation identified several strengths, which acknowledge his ability to perform his duties and responsibilities competently, his good rapport with stakeholders and community leaders, his engagement with members of the community, and his advocacy for children and families in the community.

The Board also identified several opportunities for improvement which include:

- 1) Continue to build strong, collaborative, and cooperative relationships with the treasurer, board of education members, staff, and community.
- 2) Ensure all communications to and about stakeholders are professional, clear, direct, respectful and constructive.
- 3) Provide professional leadership to inform and engage the public as well as enhance and highlight the goals and accomplishments of Akron Public Schools.
- 4) Develop creative and innovative solutions to address aging building and facilities.

Dr. Robinson disagreed with the Board that his performance could be improved in these areas. However, during the investigative process, BMD found that these areas not only need significant improvement but are lacking any effort to rectify the issues identified by the Board.

### **B. Complaints and Allegations Against Dr. Robinson.**

In the Fall of 2024, the Board received two complaints pertaining to Dr. Robinson and one complaint relating to two former APS employees who resigned in December 2024. The complaints regarding Dr. Robinson relate to allegations of bullying, harassment, hostile working environment, and retaliation. Specifically, these complaints allege that Dr. Robinson regularly berates and humiliates APS staff during meetings, that Dr. Robinson intimidates employees by threatening to fire them, that Dr. Robinson retaliates against employees for exercising independent judgment or



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providing feedback, and that Dr. Robinson uses disparaging and demeaning language when referring to the media and even students. BMD finds that these complaints are true and have been corroborated by witnesses.

#### **IV. Detailed Findings.**

##### **A. Bullying, Intimidating, and Hostile Behavior.**

Complaints have accused Dr. Robinson of engaging in bullying, intimidating behavior and creating a hostile working environment by threatening to terminate and replace staff on a regular basis, yelling at employees both in public and private, humiliating employees in front of colleagues, and admonishing employees for offering feedback or differing professional perspectives. BMD concludes that these allegations are true.

Dr. Robinson requires APS senior staff to attend weekly Tuesday “Think Tank” meetings. In or around March 2024, Human Capital communicated with senior staff that Think Tank meetings were mandatory, and employees would be subject to discipline for failure to attend. The stated purpose of Think Tank meetings are predominately for Dr. Robinson and senior staff to meet and discuss ongoing projects and receive feedback from the group. Think Tank meetings are meant to be a productive time, but these meetings are frequently derailed by Dr. Robinson who does not adhere to the agenda and instead focuses on himself, the media, and his criticisms of senior staff. Witnesses have felt like they are “held hostage” during these mandatory meetings, especially when Dr. Robinson openly berates colleagues.

Dr. Robinson’s bullying and hostile behavior is not limited to Think Tank meetings. Multiple witnesses have reported Dr. Robinson calling employees into individual meetings to berate them for expressing opinions or providing constructive feedback to Dr. Robinson’s decisions or policies. Nearly every witness recounted Dr. Robinson openly admonishing the Communications Department on multiple occasions. The more extreme examples of Dr. Robinson’s behavior are detailed below:

##### **1. Dr. Robinson Regularly Threatens to Fire and Replace Senior Staff.**

Since the beginning of his tenure at APS, Dr. Robinson has threatened to fire the senior staff and bring in his own team. Dr. Robinson stated during his interview it is common practice for



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Superintendents to replace existing senior staff and to bring in their own people. Dr. Robinson also admitted that he communicated this practice to the existing APS senior staff on numerous occasions. However, the majority of the witnesses have either worked for numerous superintendents, or for different school districts, and denied that this was a common practice, or even a practice that they have heard of at all. Nearly all the witnesses reported feeling intimidated and scared that they will lose their jobs at APS because of Dr. Robinson's repeated and pervasive threats.

The mandatory Think Tank meetings subject senior staff to bullying and threatening behavior. Witness No. 4 described the feeling that any misstep would result in a termination, and that the entire demeanor of the room would change when Dr. Robinson entered, describing the feeling as the "joy being sucked from the room" when Dr. Robinson entered. Witness No. 2 felt like they had to "walk on eggshells" around Dr. Robinson and during Think Tank meetings. Witness No. 5 reported regular beratement and yelling during Think Tank meetings, and Witness No. 6 reported similar conduct stating that Dr. Robinson frequently spoke with a raised, condescending voice and lodged *ad hominem* attacks on employee competence. Witness No. 8 reported that Dr. Robinson would tell senior staff that they "may or may not have a job," and supported the accusation that Dr. Robinson repeatedly threatened to replace senior staff with his "own people." Witness No. 9 recalled a meeting where Dr. Robinson threatened to fire senior staff and stating that they may have to reapply for their positions. Witness No. 11 reported that Dr. Robinson told senior staff that he can "bring his own team in," and that "I [Dr. Robinson] am the Superintendent, I can do what I want."

In or around September or October 2024, during a Think Tank meeting, Dr. Robinson instructed senior staff to begin drafting a "succession plan" for their respective jobs. The instruction was to create a document that outlined their duties, responsibilities, and ongoing projects so that if they were no longer at APS, someone could immediately fill their role. By itself, a request to develop a succession plan is not on its face bullying or intimidating. But taken together with Dr. Robinson's repeated and frequent threats to fire and replace senior staff, witnesses took Dr. Robinson's demand as a very real threat to their position. Witness No. 9 felt specifically targeted by this because Dr. Robinson ignored this witness both personally and professionally. Dr.



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Robinson refused to include the witness in daily APS duties that are normal for their position. This belief was corroborated by Witness No. 8, who spoke with Witness No. 9 about the succession plan.

Dr. Robinson admitted that he instructed senior staff to create a succession plan and acknowledged that some people thought they were losing their jobs. Dr. Robinson denied there being an ulterior motive behind requesting the succession plans, stating that he reassured the administrators they were secure in their positions. Almost every witness expressed to BMD their very real fear of losing their jobs, and not one witness corroborated Dr. Robinson's statement that he reassured staff. Dr. Robinson stayed his request for succession plans in January 2025 but plans to ask senior staff to resume and complete them in the upcoming months.

Dr. Robinson admitted to writing up employees in the past and stated that he should probably write people up more often. Dr. Robinson admitted to giving one employee at least three write ups. Another witness described a meeting with Dr. Robinson where he threatened to write the witness up for scheduling a meeting with other APS employees at the North Main Street office, which Dr. Robinson did not like. Dr. Robinson has called this witness into his office asking, "what is your job?" in a demeaning and unprofessional manner. This witness reported that Dr. Robinson frequently tells this witness that the witness is "fired" or will lose their job. Several other witnesses corroborated that Dr. Robinson regularly threatens to fire this particular employee, and that his communications to this witness are unprofessional and inappropriate. This witness confirmed that they felt Dr. Robinson's interactions with them were sometimes unprofessional and inappropriate.

## 2. Dr. Robinson Bullies and Threatens to Communication Department.

Nearly every witness described a specific time they saw and heard Dr. Robinson verbally abusing and admonishing the Communications Department. Witnesses described a time where Dr. Robinson took the Communications Department out of a Think Tank meeting into an open hallway and berated them so loudly that people from two floors up came downstairs to see what was happening.

Witness No. 10 described two instances involving Dr. Robinson's beratement of the Communications Department. The first instance involved APS's website's format and layout. A Communications employee asked a clarifying question to Dr. Robinson, asking what about the



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format and layout was not working for him. In response to this question, Dr. Robinson “screamed at [the witness] for a half hour,” admonishing the employee for questioning his authority, and telling the employee that they were going to have a problem. Dr. Robinson was never able to articulate what the problem was with the website. Two additional witnesses corroborated Witness No. 10’s description. One witness who corroborated this event described situations like this as becoming “everyday life” with Dr. Robinson, as his reactions to typical workplace questions or situation are increasingly “unreasonable.”

Witness No. 10 described a second instance that occurred during late August or early September 2024. Dr. Robinson requested an urgent meeting with the entire Communications Department, which lasted approximately three hours. During this meeting, Dr. Robinson referred to problems with the Communications Department but could not articulate what the problems were. He gave the Communications Department one week to fix their unidentified problems, or else he would “clean house.”

Dr. Robinson publicly humiliated the Communications Department during a presentation employees were putting on during a principals meeting. Dr. Robinson loudly interrupted the presentation from the back of the room saying, “this is why I need a competent Communications Director.” Witnesses reported feeling shocked and embarrassed by Dr. Robinson’s unprofessional behavior and statements. At least three witnesses corroborated these events.

Others have reported Dr. Robinson frequently berating the former Communications Director. Dr. Robinson falsely accused the former Director of “leaking” negative stories to the media without proof. One example of Dr. Robinson’s false accusation surrounded a time where the State erroneously provided APS with \$800,000.00 in grants. A reporter discovered the error through their own due diligence, but Dr. Robinson, without proof, was convinced that the former Director “leaked” this information to the media.

Others recalled that Dr. Robinson would regularly call in the former Director of Communications to his office with Human Capital and Labor Relations present, which occurred at least twenty times according to one witness, and “yell,” “scream,” and “berate” this Director. Witnesses describe Dr. Robinson’s yelling as a “daily occurrence.”

### 3. Other Examples of Dr. Robinson’s Bullying and Intimidation of Staff.



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One witness described a series of interactions they had with Dr. Robinson in 2023 while Van Fleet was conducting its investigation for the Transition Report. In September, this witness received a calendar invitation for a meeting with Dr. Robinson in his office. When the witness attended the meeting, Dr. Robinson told them “some people won’t be part of the team next year” and said he was “unsure that [the witness] can be a team player.” The witness felt like the purpose of the meeting to intimidate the witness. Another example occurred when the witness described something as “chaotic” to a colleague. Dr. Robinson overheard the witness and called them into his office with Human Capital and Labor Relations present to admonish them. The witness felt intimidated but had no one to turn to discuss their complaint.

Two witnesses reported that in a December 2023 meeting, before winter break, Dr. Robinson declared that the names of staff who had been “talking about [Dr. Robinson] would be revealed” to him during the winter break. The perception was that a high power would “reveal” these names to Dr. Robinson. During this meeting, Dr. Robinson also asked the senior staff to apologize to Dr. Robinson for undisclosed wrongs they had allegedly committed against him.

Human Capital and Labor Relations<sup>3</sup> were usually present during Think Tank and smaller meetings. Human Capital and Labor Relations would observe Dr. Robinson’s behavior, hear his threats to terminate, and would observe these extreme instances where Dr. Robinson would berate employees, especially the Communications Department. Despite observing this unprofessional and hostile behavior, and despite receiving complaints from staff, Human Capital would take no action. Witnesses reported that Human Capital would be dismissive of employee complaints or concerns, never having any discussions with Dr. Robinson about his unprofessional, bullying, and intimidating behavior.

Even now, staff are scared to raise complaints with Human Capital, Labor Relations, or even the Board because they believe they will be targeted by Dr. Robinson, be subjected to further abuse, or lose their jobs in retaliation. APS employees simply feel like they have no avenue to seek relief and must accept Dr. Robinson’s abusive and hostile behavior to continue working at APS. Witness Nos. 4 – 13, and 15 each agree that they have no avenue to submit complaints about Dr.

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<sup>3</sup> The Labor Relations department does not currently attend Think Tank meetings since the resignation of its former director.



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Robinson. Witness No. 4 stated that the leaders are the “perpetrators” and there is a feeling of retaliation and intimidation.

## **B. Retaliation.**

Multiple employees have alleged that Dr. Robinson has retaliated against them by changing job titles and/or responsibilities. There have also been allegations that employees filing complaints or voicing concerns about Darian Johnson, a Facilities Supervisor who frequently interacts with Dr. Robinson, are targeted and retaliated against. BMD has found merit to these allegations.

### 1. The Facilities Department.

In November 2024, Dr. Robinson and the Director of the Facilities Department were working to restructure the Facilities Department to create a more balanced, efficient, and effective department. Dr. Robinson proposed a plan that, according to witnesses, would create an unbalanced and unrealistic workload on facilities staff, especially for facilities supervisors. The Director of Facilities attempted to work with Dr. Robinson in creating more realistic expectations but was met with hostility from Dr. Robinson, who called the Director into a closed meeting and verbally reprimanded him for challenging Dr. Robinson’s authority and expressing dissenting opinions about the restructuring.

After exhausting all his attempts to work with Dr. Robinson, and after being admonished in a closed-door meeting, the Director sent a letter to the Board President to raise concerns about workplace dynamics, staff treatment, and operational decisions involving the restructuring of the Facilities Department. The Director of Facilities was particularly concerned about how the Facilities Department would operate while he was out on leave. The Director’s submission of this letter was entirely consistent with APS’s whistleblowing policy, PO1411, which allows an employee having concerns about the Superintendent to raise them directly with the Board’s President.

Despite acting in compliance with APS policy, Dr. Robinson wrote a separate letter to the Board strongly criticizing the Director’s competence, acknowledging his “admonish[ment]” of the Director on several occasions, and calling his letter to the Board “inappropriate.” Almost immediately after the Director sent the letter to the Board, Human Capital (who worked closely with Dr. Robinson), revoked the Director’s access to his work email. This revocation was explained



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as a change of policy so that the Director (and others) being on leave should not have access to, respond to work-related emails. However, this policy was revoked in January 2025, after the Director returned from leave. No other employees were reported to have their access to work emails revoked while out on leave.

After returning to work, the Director's office was moved to a different location and was placed in a cubical rather than an office. The Director was told he could not communicate with his staff and his job duties changed to focus more on business administration and capital projects rather than facilities services and management of staff. While the Director is now in an office instead of a cubical, this change did not occur until after the Director met with Dr. Robinson, at the prompting of another employee, and the Director offered an apology to Dr. Robinson in the way he went about handling his issues with Dr. Robinson. The Director did not retract his complaint but rather apologized for the way in which he made it. One witness who has some personal knowledge of Dr. Robinson's interactions with the Director agreed that Dr. Robinson retaliated against the Director, and that Dr. Robinson still harbors a grudge for the transpiring events in November 2024.

During his interview, Dr. Robinson denied that he retaliated against this Director because "he could have fired him" for sending the letter to the Board President, but he chose not to.<sup>4</sup> Retaliation is not limited to termination. Retaliation occurs when a person engages in protected activity and is punished for it. This is precisely what occurred in this circumstance, and Dr. Robinson is unable to see how his actions toward this employee are retaliatory.

## 2. Changes to the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Department.

On February 21, 2025, Dr. Robinson provided formal notice to the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion ("DEI") Department of his intent to "abolish" certain positions and reassign individuals to different positions and departments. Two DEI Department employees would be reassigned to the same level position in different departments (i.e., a coordinator would be reassigned as a coordinator). However, Dr. Robinson declined to offer the Chief of the DEI Department the same

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<sup>4</sup> APS policy prohibits termination, or any other retaliatory actions, for exercising a right to complain about Dr. Robinson to the Board.



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title in a different department.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Dr. Robinson provided notice indicating that the Chief's position would be abolished, and their administrative contract would be suspended effective March 11, 2025 as part of APS's restructuring. Dr. Robinson offered the Chief a position as coordinator (a position which is three levels below a Chief position) in a different department, with their pay remaining the same. Dr. Robinson's notice provided an opportunity for the Chief to resign and agree to reassignment prior to Board action. Without Board approval, Dr. Robinson had no authority to unilaterally abolish this Department or reassign its Chief to a coordinator position.

The Chief has a relationship with a Board member who has been critical of Dr. Robinson in the past, and who reportedly had a confrontation with Dr. Hodoh in an elevator in December 2024.<sup>6</sup> The timing of the notice in conjunction with the elevator incident and dueling complaints from the Board member and Dr. Hodoh is concerning, especially considering that the Chief was the only employee from the DEI Department would effectively receive a demotion in job title and responsibilities. Three witnesses have described Dr. Robinson's demotion of the Chief as being retaliation for the Chief's relationship with a Board member.

### 3. Employee Termination Under Restructuring.

Dr. Robinson acknowledged that APS is undergoing a restructuring process that will result in employees losing their positions. According to Dr. Robinson, Human Capital decides which employees are included on a termination list and Human Capital discusses the list with Dr. Robinson. But one witness's statements refute Dr. Robinson's assertion that employees are not being identified for termination. This witness indicated that decisions are being made without the input of department directors, and that employees who have expressed concerns about Darian Johnson's qualifications<sup>7</sup> or otherwise complained about his behavior are being targeted for termination. When this witness received a list of potential terminations, they pointed out issues with labor considerations and the list of potential terminations was altered.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Robinson indicated during his interview that he offered the Chief a coordinator position and would then be immediately promoted back to a Chief position. However, documents reviewed did not reveal this offer and no witnesses who spoke to this topic corroborated Dr. Robinson's statement.

<sup>6</sup> The allegations surrounding the Board member and Dr. Hodoh are outside the scope of BMD's investigation and BMD makes no opinions pertaining to the competing allegations. However, the timing of the interaction is relevant to the allegation of retaliation in this investigation.

<sup>7</sup> Darian Johnson was hired as part time summer grounds help in the summer of 2024. Within six months, he was promoted to facilities supervisor.



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APS's whistleblowing policy makes clear that employees who have a good faith belief to report misconduct or other behavior that violates APS policy are protected from retaliation. Based on the foregoing, it is clear that employees who voice concerns are targeted for either termination or a complete restructuring of their position in contravention of APS's whistleblowing policies.

### **C. Threatening, Intimidating, and Harassing Behavior.**

BMD has concluded that Dr. Robinson has engaged in threatening, intimidating, and harassing behavior toward media, the Board, staff, and even students.

#### **1. Dr. Robinson's Disparaging Comments Regarding Women Reporters.**

Dr. Robinson has been accused of referring to female news reporters as "hos" during a meeting. While Dr. Robinson denied that he ever called these reporters "whores" or "hos" in his interview, he did indicate that he possesses opinions about these reporters but did not elaborate on those opinions. Dr. Robinson's denial of this statement is inconsistent with witnesses who were present during this meeting. Witness Nos. 1 and 5 verified that they were present during this meeting and personally heard Dr. Robinson call these reporters "hos," which they both felt was unprofessional, inappropriate, and made them feel uncomfortable. Using sexist language while acting in a professional capacity is not only unprofessional, but it violates APS policy on anti-harassment.

#### **2. Dr. Robinson Has Made Threatening and Intimidating Statements Directed to the Board, Staff, and Former Colleagues.**

During this investigation, multiple witnesses described statements Dr. Robinson made that they felt were threatening, intimidating, or harassing. Dr. Robinson has made religiously based statements that some found threatening and intimidating including but not limited to: "I am ordained by God," "I am the great I am," and "I have divine discernment." Dr. Robinson himself acknowledged that being the Superintendent is his "ministry" and that he is "anointed." In the context of these statements, witnesses reported that Dr. Robinson implies that harm occurs to people who oppose him. For example, multiple witnesses recounted times when Dr. Robinson told APS staff that his former supervisor got cancer because he treated Dr. Robinson poorly. Dr. Robinson admitted to making these statements about his former supervisor to employees at APS



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multiple times. Other witnesses reported Dr. Robinson saying “bad things happen” to people who “come for him,” implying that he is “dangerous” and has connections to organized crime. Dr. Robinson denied that he has ever stated or implied that he is dangerous, or that he has connections to organized crime, but agreed that he makes statements that people will get what they deserve.

Other disturbing statements are made in reference to one Board member, Dr. Rene Molenaar. Witness No. 11 heard Dr. Robinson say “I could just wring her neck” when referring to Dr. Molenaar. Witness No. 9 heard Dr. Robinson make other threatening statements about Dr. Molenaar after she accused Dr. Robinson of unprofessional and bullying behavior in an open letter to the Board. This witness reported Dr. Robinson saying, “she better watch out, she has kids.” When questioned about this during his interview, Dr. Robinson admitted saying, to Dr. Molenaar herself, that if Dr. Molenaar “doesn’t live long enough” that her “children, and her children’s children” will reap what she (Dr. Molenaar) sows. Dr. Robinson justified these statements because he felt that Dr. Molenaar spoke to him in a demeaning and condescending manner.

### 3. Dr. Robinson’s Conduct and Statements Directed at School Children.

This investigation uncovered alarming allegations pertaining to Dr. Robinson’s conduct directed at students. One witness described an event that occurred at one of APS’s high schools where two students were outside during school hours. Dr. Robinson confronted the students, saying they needed to get back to class. When the students did not listen to Dr. Robinson, they were threatened with arrest. Dr. Robinson confirmed this event during his interview, saying he told the students “you should be in someone’s school” and “I don’t want to have the police officer come and get you.” Dr. Robinson provided the students with options on how to get back to school or be arrested. Dr. Robinson noted that he has no problem with a student being arrested if they were violating the law.

A second witness corroborated Dr. Robinson’s interactions with the two students, reporting the same set of facts and that Dr. Robinson requested that the students be arrested if they did not go back to class. This witness also reported that Dr. Robinson expressed a belief that students should be arrested if they act out or fight in school. While behavioral problems are not always easy to deal with, threatening police involvement or arrest should not be considered as a first option to resolve the problem and as described by witnesses appears to be an escalation of conflict.



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Dr. Robinson has used derogatory and disrespectful language to describe students. Dr. Robinson admittedly uses words like “ghetto” when describing the behavior children but not calling a specific child “ghetto.” Other witnesses have heard Dr. Robinson refer to a female student as a “heifer,” refer to kids as “thugs” or imply they are criminals.

**D. Witnesses’ Perspective on Dr. Robinson’s Leadership Style and Relationships, Dr. Robinson’s Effect on Workplace Culture, and His Ability to Continue in a Leadership Role at APS.**

1. Dr. Robinson’s Ability to Develop and Maintain Relationships.

Dr. Robinson disagrees with the Board that building relationships is an opportunity for improvement. Dr. Robinson specifically referenced his relationship with the Treasurer as being a normal working relationship, but various witnesses described Dr. Robinson’s relationship with the Treasurer as being very poor. Dr. Robinson discussed perceived slights or differences with the Treasurer, including their philosophies on how APS should be run. Dr. Robinson discussed a time when he felt the Treasurer intentionally embarrassed him at a Board meeting, accusing Dr. Robinson of writing the Transition Report. Dr. Robinson also described the Treasurer of being a “Pat Shipe Boy” without elaboration.

When asked whether Dr. Robinson was working on developing a better working relationship with the Treasurer, he indicated that the Treasurer has made efforts to improve their relationship by asking him to dinner. Dr. Robinson turned the Treasurer down the first time and only agreed to dinner when the Treasurer asked a second time. To date, they have not gone out to dinner, and it does not appear likely that Dr. Robinson will ever take the initiative to either have dinner with the Treasurer or otherwise work to build a positive relationship.

2. Dr. Robinson’s Leadership Style and Effect on Workplace Culture.

The overwhelming consensus across witnesses interviewed is that the workplace culture at Akron Public Schools’ central office is “toxic.” Other words used to describe the current culture under Dr. Robinson are: “horrible”, “as bad as it can be”, “hostile”, “bullying”, “intimidating”, “fear,” “demeaning.” Witness No. 5 stated that staff are “scared to death” and “so afraid.” Four witnesses became visibly emotional during their interviews, crying when describing Dr. Robinson’s conduct that they have endured since August 2023. Witness Nos. 14 and 15 described



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a serious lack of trust which contributes to the toxic workplace environment. One witness described Dr. Robinson as getting loud or curt at times and having a low EQ, perhaps not realizing that he holds grudges or retaliates against employees.

Dr. Robinson denies that his “direct” communication and leadership style are offensive or problematic. However, it is clear that the workplace culture is suffering significantly because of Dr. Robinson’s behavior. Based on the witness interviews and evidence gathered, this culture of fear, intimidation, and hostility would not exist but for Dr. Robinson.

### 3. Dr. Robinson’s Ability to Continue in a Leadership Role at Akron Public Schools.

BMD questioned various witnesses on the ability to move forward should the status quo be maintained. If the status quo is maintained, APS is at significant risk of losing long time, experienced educators. Two former employees stated that a part of their decision to leave APS was due to Dr. Robinson’s behavior. Other employees have admitted to seriously considering looking for alternative employment in different districts because of Dr. Robinson. Other witnesses have sought the advice of legal counsel due to feelings of retaliation, intimidation, harassment, and hostile work environment. If Dr. Robinson continues as Superintendent, talented and experienced administrators will leave APS and may take legal action to protect themselves. 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.

Although witnesses credited Dr. Robinson for his good ideas for APS, his inability to work with others hinders progress. One witness stated that Dr. Robinson is “a problem,” but perhaps is not the source of the problem, citing to the Transition Report’s findings about pre-existing dynamics in APS. However, the witness interviews and documents overwhelmingly establish that Dr. Robinson cannot see how his behavior is problematic or unprofessional. For instance, Dr. Robinson stated that he is not a retaliatory person because he “could have fired” the Director of Facilities Services for reporting Dr. Robinson’s behavior to the Board. This statement indicates that Dr. Robinson cannot see how his actions against this Director are retaliatory in of themselves. Further, Dr. Robinson’s repeated assertion that the union is behind the complaints brought against him is unfounded as many if not all of the witnesses interviewed were nonunion employees.



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75 East Market Street, Akron, Ohio 44308

Witnesses overwhelmingly reported that Dr. Robinson cannot accept constructive feedback or differing perspectives, taking any perceived negative comment as a personal attack and undermining his authority as Superintendent. As noted above, Dr. Robinson admonished the Director of Facilities Services in his office for suggesting different ideas for restricting the department. Dr. Robinson frequently yelled at and berated the Communications Department for asking questions or offering advice on media relations. Dr. Robinson similarly cannot recognize his own unprofessional or bad behavior. One witness said that when Dr. Robinson is confronted with his misconduct he never apologizes, minimizes the complaint, and cannot admit that he has made a mistake.

The toxic workplace culture and pervasive hostility and fear administrators feel would not exist but for Dr. Robinson serving as Superintendent. Many of the witnesses served and worked successfully in different school districts or with different Superintendents at APS. The culture created and fostered by Dr. Robinson is so toxic and so hostile, that talented APS staff and administrators have strongly considered leaving the district, as they can no longer work under Dr. Robinson's direction. Dr. Robinson cannot recognize that his behavior is the main contributing factor to the toxic dynamics existing at the North Central office, cannot take responsibility, and cannot admit that his behavior is unprofessional, hostile, and retaliatory.

**V. Conclusions.**

BMD concludes that Dr. Robinson's conduct violates certain APS policies:

1) Public Records Policy:

Dr. Robinson's "confidential" emails do not adhere to APS's public records policies. PO8310 requires that public records, such as emails, be "organized and maintained so that they are readily available for inspection and copying." These confidential emails do not comport with this policy because they are automatically deleted after they are sent, and they cannot be saved or forwarded. The emails are preserved in APS's system but are not "readily available" for inspection as required by APS policy.

2) Whistleblower Policy:

Dr. Robinson has violated APS's Whistleblower Policy. PO1411 encourages employees to file a report directly with the Board President if the employee has a complaint about the



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Superintendent’s conduct. One employee filed such a report in November 2024, but Dr. Robinson called the report “inappropriate,” revoked the employee’s access to his work email, moved his office to a cubical, and changed his job duties and responsibilities.

3) Anti-Harassment Policy:

Dr. Robinson has violated APS’s policies regarding Anti-Harassment. PO4362 protects not only employees, but students, Board members, and third parties who contact members of the school district during district-related events and activities. As such, this policy would encompass the media. This policy prohibits conduct that subject individuals to harassment. This policy also protects employees who file complaints alleging harassment from retaliation. Dr. Robinson has violated this policy by using disparaging and sexist language about two female reporters, whom he referred to as “hos,” and a female student, whom he referred to as a “heifer.” Dr. Robinson’s conduct is also harassing toward senior staff, as he subjects them to pervasive bullying, beratement, and constantly threatens their jobs. One employee complained about this behavior, and that employee was subjected to immediate retaliation from Dr. Robinson.

BMD also concludes that Dr. Robinson has violated certain professional standards:

1) Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators – Rules 1(e) and (f):

Rule 1(e) and (f) of this Code prohibits a member of the profession from disparaging a colleague on the basis of gender and from harassing, intimidating, or retaliating against a colleague, peer, or other school personnel. Dr. Robinson’s disparaging comments to female reporters violate Rule 1(e). Dr. Robinson’s conduct violates Rule 1(f) as he continuously intimidates other administrators by threatening to terminate them, by making threatening statements about Board members and other education professionals, by berating employees in front of others and so that others overhear and by retaliating against employees who have spoken out about Dr. Robinson’s inappropriate and bullying behavior. This conduct violates Rule 1 of the Code of Professional Conduct and is not becoming of a Superintendent.

2) Licensure Code of Professional Conduct for Ohio Educators – Rules 2(e) and (f):

Dr. Robinson’s conduct violates Rule 2(e) and (f) because he has used disparaging language directed toward students. Indeed, Dr. Robinson has admitted to referring to students as engaging in “ghetto” behavior, likening them to “thugs” or criminals. Witnesses have reported Dr. Robinson



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75 East Market Street, Akron, Ohio 44308

name calling students, referring to one female student a “heifer.” This conduct violates Rule 2 of the Code of Professional Conduct and is not becoming of a Superintendent.

3) The National Education Association’s Code of Ethics for Educators – Principle I:

Dr. Robinson’s conduct has violated this principle. In addition to using disparaging language, Dr. Robinson has demeaned students by threatening them with arrest if they did not follow his instructions to back to school. Likening a student to a criminal is neither professional nor appropriate, and it certainly would subject a reasonable person to feelings of embarrassment or disparagement.

4) The National Education Association’s Code of Ethics for Educators – Principle II:

Dr. Robinson’s conduct has violated this principle. Dr. Robinson falsely accuses senior staff, especially the Communications Department, of wrongdoing. Specifically, Dr. Robinson has accused witnesses of “leaking” information to the media regarding a grant that was erroneously awarded to APS and other information that Dr. Robinson unilaterally deemed “confidential.” Dr. Robinson’s false accusations send a chilling effect throughout the school district and cause administrators to feel as though their jobs are constantly at risk.

There is a difference between having high expectations and holding employees accountable, and behaving in an unprofessional, toxic, demeaning, and hostile manner. A leader can be firm yet respectful. Dr. Robinson, however, has failed to be a firm, respectful leader. Instead, Dr. Robinson’s leadership creates a toxic and fearful working environment where employees are subject to pervasive ridicule, unjustified verbal abuse, and are under a constant threat of losing their jobs. There are examples of blatant retaliation that Dr. Robinson attempts to justify under the guise of restructuring. But the timing of protected activity with adverse employment action creates a strong presumption that Dr. Robinson is motivated by retaliatory purposes. Dr. Robinson shows a clear disrespect for other professionals, including the media, members of this Board, and to the students.

This investigation concludes that the complaints rendered against Dr. Robinson are valid, have merit, are corroborated, and that Dr. Robinson’s conduct violates APS policies which subjects him to discipline by the Board.