

Hot off the press: High school reporters uncover principal's sketchy credentials

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Pittsburg, Kansas, high school student journalists (from left) Trina Paul, Gina Mathew, Kali Poenitske, Maddie Baden, Patrick Sullivan and Connor Balthazor hold up copies of *The Booster Redux* on April 5, 2017, containing their article that led to the resignation of the school's newly hired principal. Photo: Keith Myers/Kansas City Star/TNS

Connor Balthazor, 17, was in the middle of study hall when he was called into a high school newspaper meeting.

A group of reporters and editors from the student newspaper, the *Booster Redux* at Pittsburg High School in southeastern Kansas, had gathered to talk about Amy Robertson. She had been hired as the high school's head principal on March 6.

The student journalists had begun researching Robertson and quickly had some questions about her education. For one, when they looked up Corllins University, the private university where Robertson said she got her master's and doctorate degrees years ago, the website didn't work. They found no evidence that it was an accredited university.

"There were some things that just didn't quite add up," Balthazor told *The Washington Post*.

Information Was Hiding In Plain Sight

The students began a weeks-long investigation that would result in an article published Friday questioning the principal's degrees and work history.

On Tuesday night, Robertson resigned.

"In light of the issues that arose, Dr. Robertson felt it was in the best interest of the district to resign her position," Pittsburg Community Schools announced in a statement. The school board accepted her resignation.

The resignation thrust the student newspaper staff into local, state and national news. Professional journalists nationwide applauded the students for asking tough questions and prompting change in their administration.

"Everybody kept telling them, 'stop poking your nose where it doesn't belong,'" newspaper adviser Emily Smith told The Post. But with the encouragement of the school superintendent, the students persisted.

"They were at a loss that something that was so easy for them to see was waiting to be noticed by adults," Smith said.

"Incomplete Answers, Conflicting Dates and Inconsistencies"

In the Booster Redux article, a team of six students – five juniors and one senior – revealed that Corllins University had been described in a number of articles as a place where people can buy a degree or certificates. Corllins is not accredited by the U.S. Department of Education, the students reported. The Better Business Bureau's website says Corllins' address is unknown and the school is not BBB-accredited.

"All of this was completely overlooked," Balthazor said.

Robertson had been living in Dubai for more than 20 years before she was hired for the position. She said she most recently worked as the CEO of an education consulting business there.

On a recent call with the student journalists, Robertson "presented incomplete answers, conflicting dates and inconsistencies in her responses," the students said. She said she attended Corllins before it lost accreditation, the Booster Redux reported.

Seeking The Truth

When contacted by the Kansas City Star after the publication of the students' article, Robertson said all three of her degrees "have been authenticated by the U.S. government." She declined to comment directly on students' questions about her background, "because their concerns are not based on facts," she said.

In an emergency teachers' meeting Tuesday, the superintendent said Robertson could not provide proof of her undergraduate degree from the University of Tulsa, Smith said.

The students spent weeks contacting educational institutions and agencies to cross-check Robertson's background. They even worked through spring break.

A Heavy Responsibility

Smith removed herself from the story because she was on the committee that hired Robertson. So the students sought the help of Eric Thomas, the executive director of the Kansas Scholastic Press Association, and other local and national journalists and experts.

Under Kansas state law, "the kids are treated as professionals," Smith said. But with that freedom came a responsibility to get the story right, Smith said.

"At the very beginning it was a little bit exciting," Balthazor said. "It was like in the movie, a big city journalist chasing down a lead."

As the students dug deeper into the story, "it really started hitting me that this is a much bigger deal," Balthazor said.

Student Reporters Get National Recognition

The students were among those packed into a school boardroom Tuesday night when the board president announced Robertson's resignation. A parent in the audience asked school officials if they would be recognizing the students for uncovering details about Robertson's background. The superintendent said he would meet with the students to thank them.

"We'd broken out of our comfort zones so much," Balthazor said. "To know that the administration saw that and respected that, it was a really great moment for us."

After the news that Robertson had resigned, national journalists tweeted the students' story, congratulating them for their work.

"Holy crap," Balthazor thought, "why are these people paying attention to this little journalism story from southeast Kansas?"

While he was leaving track practice Tuesday night, he learned that Todd Wallack, a reporter for the Boston Globe's Spotlight Team, had tweeted the students' story. Wallack said: "Great investigative work by high school journalists." Balthazor sat in his car and called his mom to tell her the news.

"I honestly thought they were joking at first," Balthazor said. The Booster Redux staff had watched the investigative reporting movie "Spotlight" in class, Balthazor said. "It was awesome to know that such respected members of the journalism community had our backs."

"Surreal" Few Weeks

Balthazor, a junior, said that after graduation, he hopes to pursue a degree in creative writing or filmmaking. Even though he doesn't necessarily plan to stick with journalism, Balthazor said the past few weeks had been "surreal."

"Most high schoolers would never get even close to an opportunity to get to experience something like this," he said.