

Former Eastwood Elementary teacher **Mark Robertson** pleads no contest to accosting minor

By Remington Hernandez,

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LAKE CITY — A former Big Rapids Public Schools teacher pled no contest to accosting a minor for immoral purposes in a Lake City courtroom, Monday, Oct. 6.

Mark Robertson, 59, was a special education teacher at Eastwood Elementary in Big Rapids, and had been previously employed at both Reed City Area Public Schools and Lake City Area Schools. Defense attorney Lin Goetz said Robertson resigned from BRPS.

Court documents show that on Aug. 8, he was charged with two counts of accosting a minor and two counts of using a computer to commit a crime. According to the charge, he accosted, enticed or solicited an individual he believed to be a child less than 16-years-old online.

Robertson's bond was set at \$10,000, and posted \$1,000. Ultimately, a plea deal was struck, and Robertson agreed to plead no contest to one of the accosting charges, if the remaining three charges were dropped.

No contest means defendants accept the punishment for the crime, but does not admit guilt.

In the hearing Monday, 28th Circuit Court Judge Jason Elmore reviewed the plea, the reason for which was the potential for civil liability if Robertson were to admit guilt.

Prosecutors and Goetz said there were **concerns a guilty plea could put his benefits from the district at risk.** Elmore questioned the reasoning, saying it's **"a bit pathetic,"** but allowed the plea to move forward.

"I'm not real too certain if I like this no contest plea because the school is still going to take direction," he said. "The fact that the exhibit's admitted and it's not necessarily a court system. I don't know how it's going to help him."

The single count of accosting allows for a penalty of up to four years in prison and/or a \$4,000 fine. A sentencing date has not yet been set and Robertson remains out on bond.

Robertson's case follows statements from BRPS and law enforcement about an incident with details that align with the case.

In a March 26 letter, BRPS Superintendent Tim Haist said an elementary teacher was placed on leave after an investigation was launched into allegations of potentially illegal communications.

Then on March 27, the Big Rapids Department of Public Safety reported that they were notified by an adult, who had posed as a minor, that they were in contact with the teacher in online chat groups.

Big Rapids police said they forwarded the case to Missaukee and Livingston counties, as the alleged activity did not occur in Big Rapids.

Also on March 27, Missaukee County Sheriff Wil Yancer confirmed his department opened an investigation.

Discussions during the Monday, Oct. 6, hearing brought to light that the case involved a decoy, rather than a victim, as Big Rapids police had reported in their release.

Haist also previously confirmed to The Pioneer, upon the hiring of a new special education teacher at Eastwood in July, that the position opened up due to a resignation.

In a statement, Big Rapids Public Schools said it is aware that a former teacher reportedly pled “no contest” yesterday in Missaukee County court to one criminal count of accosting a child for immoral purposes.

"None of the allegations from the criminal complaint concerned conduct at work. However, when the district learned of the allegations, it fully cooperated with authorities and performed its own internal investigation," the statement read. "The investigation did not identify any misconduct related in any way to our students. The district considers the safety and protection of its students to be its paramount responsibility and appreciates the trust parents have in our District."

Reed City Area Public Schools Superintendent Michael Sweet said his district has no comment specific to a former teacher's actions after leaving employment with the district.

"Reed City Schools expects all teachers to fully abide by the Michigan Code of Educational Ethics at all times," he said.

The Pioneer will continue to follow this story and issue updates as new information warrants.