



# DR. JIM ROBERTS

## Championing Mental Well-Being

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

What happens when you combine humility with a fierce passion for mental health?

The emergence of “a quiet warrior.”

That description embodies Dr. Jim Roberts, superintendent of Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (BCSC) in Columbus.

Jennifer Pferrer, executive director of the Wellness Council of Indiana (WCI), works closely with Roberts, who for more than a decade has served on the WCI Board of Advisors.

“He’s really a staunch supporter of employee health and well-being,” she observes.

“Jim’s in a unique position because he has not just the responsibility for the health and well-being of his employees – but also the student population. He’s extremely involved in the community. Jim’s always made himself readily available to talk to other school systems across the state and share what’s worked and what hasn’t in his experience.

“He’s very unassuming. He’s kind of a quiet warrior there.”

At BCSC, which is comprised of 17 schools, 11,500 students and 2,000 staff members, Roberts stresses that he keeps “their well-being in mind” during all engagement.

“Any time we’re talking about public education, our school

corporation is a microcosm of our community. We are them and they are us. So, it’s about trying to align with the community, partner with the community and ensure that what we’re doing within our (schools) is benefiting the greater community.”

### **Motivations and engagement**

Roberts, a native of Nashville, Indiana, is a first-generation college student. He credits two mentors – his sixth grade teacher (Mary Kilgore) and a high school basketball coach (Rudy Crabtree) – with igniting a passion to pursue not only a postsecondary degree, but also an education career.

He earned a bachelor’s degree from Indiana University of Bloomington in 1987, followed by a master’s degree in school administration. In 2002, Roberts obtained his doctorate in educational leadership at Nova Southeastern University in Florida.

At the onset of his profession, he first taught math and computer science at Hauser Jr. Sr. High School in Hope. Roberts then spent over two decades as an administrator for the Batesville Community School Corporation; his collaboration with the WCI dates back to his time there as superintendent.

“We started down that path of getting recognized as an AchieveWELL business,” Roberts shares. (AchieveWELL is the WCI’s workplace wellness assessment, evaluation and recognition program).

"I helped mentor other schools that maybe were involved in the same thing and hosted meetings in case people were interested in getting involved regionally."

Each year, Roberts participates in the WCI's Wellness Summit, a two-day event that brings together Hoosier health and wellness professionals to offer best practices that enhance well-being for Indiana's workplaces and communities. The two-day event is a partnership with the Indiana Chamber.

"Businesses from across the state learn a variety of ways to take care of their staff," Roberts emphasizes. "It's always great to see the interaction and to believe that people are going back and making a difference in their worlds. If we're able to all do that, we bring down costs of health insurance, cost of medical services, all those kinds of things because we become a healthier group of people. The state of Indiana is not known for being ranked highly when compared to other states in terms of its health and well-being overall. So, that's a really big thing that hopefully we're trying to address and impact."

Roberts, for instance, has spoken on panels featuring health clinics.

"We have a really good health clinic system for our staff members here in Columbus and also did in Batesville," he imparts. "Aside from the Summit, I've been a speaker on webinars and other virtual meetings and continue to mentor or coach predominantly school people who are wishing to get engaged in wellness and through the Wellness Council specifically with AchieveWELL."

## Boosting access, a sense of belonging

Expanding access to resources has been a priority since Roberts joined BCSC in 2016.

"We talk a lot in our schools about equitable access – and we have to remove barriers that exist for people to get those services," he asserts.

Through a grant from the Lilly Endowment, for example, BCSC increased the number of medical health providers from approximately eight to 35 "so that each of our buildings had the opportunity to leverage that resource and get kids connected."

Another milestone was hiring a full-time director of wellness for the district's students and staff.

In fall 2023, BCSC implemented a high school restructuring program that Roberts refers to as "our school within a school" – an initiative at large schools such as Columbus North (with approximately 2,100 students) and Columbus East (student population: roughly 1,500).

"We've tried to make the schools feel smaller so that our students have a sense of connection to a group of adults," Roberts explains.



Dr. Roberts blends education and empathy to make a difference – big and small – in the lives of students and staff while treating each one as an individual.



"And not just today – but through time. As an example, our freshman class comes into those high schools and has a team of adults that almost serves as caseworkers for them: There's an assistant principal, a counselor, an administrative assistant and an academic coach all paying attention to that group of kids. And then they'll move through their four years of high school with that group of kids."

Students wear lanyards representing their grade level, which spurs conversation topics such as settling into life at a big high school for freshmen.

## 'Permission to Feel'

The reopening of schools and businesses amid the pandemic illuminated COVID-19's impact on mental health.

Roberts observes students were grappling with not only reintegrating and social issues but "lost some developmental time because of being in and out of school (physically) for a period of years."

He drew inspiration from one of his favorite books, *Permission to Feel*, and incorporated it into BCSC.

"The author, Marc Brackett, works with schools, adults and businesses on ways to take care of ourselves," Roberts describes. "I love the name of the book because I can probably

pretty easily (and candidly) answer a question about my physical health. But if you ask me how I'm feeling, sometimes we're not very open and honest about that."

Brackett delivered the opening session on *Permission to Feel* at one of BCSC's quarterly professional development events, which centered around staff health and well-being.

"I, as superintendent, stepped out there and displayed some vulnerability with the fact that we're all going through stuff on a daily basis and each of us may not know what the other one's going through," Roberts recounts. "(The message is to) first be aware of that – but also start asking instead of 'How are you?' – which is more of a greeting as we walk by each other in the hallway or in the classroom or whatever – ask 'How do you feel?'"

The concept applies to students as well. "At our high schools, very much a part of that is (asking), 'How do we make sure every child is a unique story?'" Roberts submits. "We can aggregate data and put them in these neat categories saying, 'This group is performing this way' or 'This grade is performing this way' or whatever. But at the end of the day, it's a unique story of what makes them unique and how we can help with those strengths to keep making sure that we develop them further." ■