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Freshman year finished Ann Arbor schools chief ends 1st year with good reviews

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Looking out the large, curving windows of a classroom inside Skyline High School, Ann Arbor schools Superintendent Todd Roberts can visualize students in the fall of 2008 glancing out at the leaves changing on the trees in the woods along the north side of the school.

"This is going to be a great spot," he said during a recent visit to the school, still under construction. "This is my favorite spot. There's all the glass looking out at the woods. It's just beautiful."

In his first year on the job, Roberts has had to spend a lot of his time focused on details of the new high school, but it's just one of many issues on his plate.

He's recommended budget cuts that led to layoffs of food service workers and a buyout of almost 60 teachers. He's had to replace several key members of his administration and deal with school safety issues.

"It's been busy," Roberts said. "I spent a lot time getting to know people, both in the district and in the community in order to really learn about the district. I spent a lot of time out at the schools."

This is the first time in his career that Roberts has lived in the same community he's working in. He said that's made it easier to be involved in more community events.

While he's been juggling all the normal work of a superintendent, he's also been under scrutiny to see how he would handle all of the district's the construction projects, mostly because he took over for a superintendent who left town as the new high school was being delayed a year and overrunning its budget, and other construction projects were falling apart.

Roberts has gotten the projects back on track, district officials said.

"He's out there with the principals and the staff letting them know exactly what we need to do and what the expectations are for communicating with each other," said Randy Trent, the district's director of physical properties.

Roberts credits his support staff.

"I think it has been a matter of getting the right structure in place for oversight," he said. "Randy Trent has done a great job since taking over, and Robert Allen (deputy superintendent of operation) has really helped us. The professional team has done a good job of communicating. Things are going well."

The school board recently gave Roberts a positive evaluation, saying he "has performed admirably in his first year as a superintendent."

The school board sent out a survey to about 50 citizens asking them to grade Roberts in a number of categories. He received an average score of 4.3 out of a possible 5 in the eight categories. The highest rating came in character and deportment, with people noting he was "very approachable and available to staff. Easy to deal with."

However, some people knocked him; one respondent labeled Roberts "indecisive - cannot make decision independent from a process that includes a number of people. Avoids conflict and noise of differing views and agendas."

Roberts also got good marks in the survey for his financial management.

"He and Robert Allen make a power pair," said one survey respondent. "We're lucky to have them both. These are difficult times. Dr. Roberts gives us hope that together the system will pull through and evolve in a positive direction."

That direction next year will focus on achievement issues, Roberts said.

"We're still going to have to monitor the other issues, but hopefully we'll have more time to spend on curriculum and achievement and implementing the strategic plan."

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