

# 'He sees the best'



Teachers and staff at Bartow Middle School surprised Principal Christopher Roberts with a party at the school in Bartow on Wednesday. Roberts was named principal of the year for Polk County Schools this week. [SCOTT WHEELER/THE LEDGER]

## Bartow Middle's Christopher Roberts is named 2019 Principal of the Year

By Kimberly C. Moore  
The Ledger

BARTOW — When Christopher Roberts, 48, arrived at Bartow Middle School three years ago, he was the fifth principal in seven years. The school was on the verge of being closed or turned over to a consulting firm after earning several D's and an F.

He has brought the school's

grade up to a C and created a culture in which teachers clamor to work and students know they are loved.

This week, Roberts was named Polk County Public Schools 2019 Principal of the Year. He is also the district's nominee for Florida's Principal Achievement Award for Outstanding Leadership, which recognizes "exemplary principals for their

contributions to their schools and communities."

"When I came here — I'm not going to lie to you — I had my doubts. But Bartow is home, and this school is home," said Roberts at a surprise congratulations party thrown by his staff on Wednesday. "I am a better principal in three years just because of the challenges."

See ROBERTS, A3

## ROBERTS

From Page A1

Roberts was already familiar with Bartow Middle School — he had been a student there in the mid-1980s. He joked that it was the last place he had ever been paddled at school, a fact he shares with students so they can relate to someone who once had some behavior issues, but overcame them to have a successful life and career.

One after another, teachers, para-professionals and his assistant principals talked of their deep respect and love for the man they say they don't work for, but instead work with. They describe a leader who learns the names of all of his students and staff and takes the time to develop genuine relationships with each of them.

Melissa Giles' son attended Highland City Elementary when Roberts was principal there for eight years. She now works for him as a parent-involvement paraprofessional. She said she first encountered him on her son's field trip to a fire station. She watched as he spoke to every student by name and talked with them.

"He just wants every child to reach their fullest potential," Giles said. "No matter the behavior problems they have, he sees the best in every child."

Giles is one of many staff or parents who followed Roberts from Highland City Elementary. And he needed them. In his first year at Bartow Middle, he had 28 vacancies to fill.

Shawn Tyre worked as an assistant principal at Highland City and is now the testing coordinator at Bartow Middle.

"It's about building relationships, not just with students, but staff and parents, taking the time," Tyre said.

She described an eighth-grade student who had some behavior problems at Highland City Elementary. He was labeled an "at-risk" student.

The student is now at Bartow Middle.



**U.S. History teacher Nicole Jiskoot signs a poster for Principal Christopher Roberts.** [PHOTOS BY SCOTT WHEELER/THE LEDGER]

"He was a kid who could have gone one way or the other," Tyre said. "He was just awarded the district's About-face Award."

Assistant Principal Dwayne Johnson described a staff that had been traumatized by the high teacher turnover. He said Roberts came in and listened to those who were left and treated people as professionals.

"He let people do what they were hired to do," Johnson said.

Roberts said that kids have to know that you love and care about them. His advice to his staff: "Just come to work, love kids, build a relationship and give it your all each day."

He allowed sixth-grade teacher Samantha Swafford to open up a clothing boutique that students can discreetly shop in for items they don't have, like winter jackets, shoes that fit and school uniforms. He pays for teachers' pizza parties when their students score well on practice exams. He throws special parties for students he and the other assistant principals catch "genuinely" engaged in learning.

One parent said on Facebook that the day after her home burned down, Roberts showed up with backpacks, school supplies and vouchers for new clothes and shoes.

"Needless to say, the kids were able to return back to school the following day after losing everything!!!" Misty

Blankenship Holt wrote. "He truly goes further than just being a principal!"

Roberts' mother, Betty Rehberg, and son Quinn were in the school's media center Wednesday afternoon for the party. She recalled getting a phone call from her son, telling her the district wanted him to move to Bartow Middle.

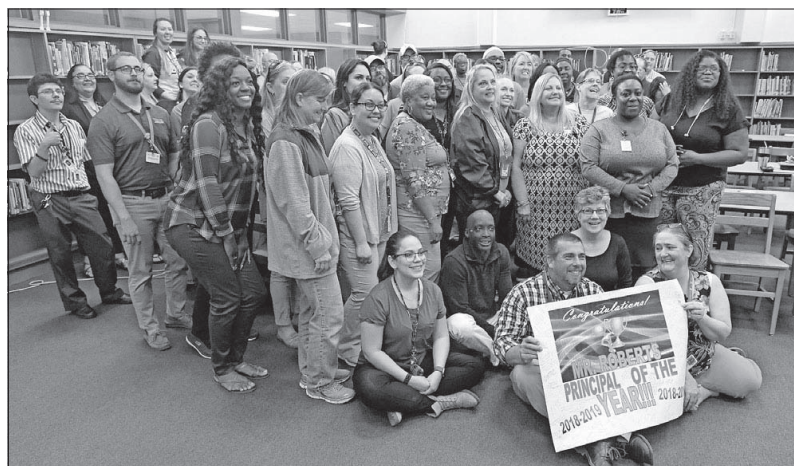
"He said, 'We need to pray about this so I know what to do,'" she said. "I had a really good feeling about this from the very beginning. He had decided to accept the challenge."

She added that he is emphatic about giving his staff credit for the good things that have happened at Bartow Middle.

His son, who attended Highlands City Elementary when his father was principal there, said he is very proud of him.

"He always had a great work ethic. He stayed extra hours, he would do things for his staff," Quinn Roberts said. "Things have definitely been tough for him. It's made him a better dad. I feel like he's really made a great impact on the school and the city. He's a really good role model for me and my sister and I really look up to him a lot."

Kimberly C. Moore can be reached at [kmoore@theledger.com](mailto:kmoore@theledger.com) or 863-802-7514. Follow her on Twitter at [@KMooreTheLedger](https://twitter.com/KMooreTheLedger).



**Teachers and staff pose for a photo with Principal Christopher Roberts (seated foreground) during a surprise party for him.**