

Iowans protest following kidnapping of Des Moines superintendent by immigration Gestapo

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The kidnapping of Des Moines Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Ian Roberts by the immigration Gestapo on Friday has provoked mass outrage throughout the state of Iowa and beyond. Since the leader of the largest school district in the state was taken, protests have been held every day in multiple cities throughout Iowa.

In Cedar Rapids on Sunday, students, teachers and community members gathered at Greene Square Park before marching to the Linn County Correctional Center demanding the release of Roberts. Protesters held signs that read “ICE is gestapo,” “Who’s next?!” and “ICE + KKK are two sides of the same coin.”

On Friday, the day Roberts was kidnapped, hundreds of people massed in downtown Des Moines holding signs and chanting “Free Dr. Roberts!”

Homemade signs at the Friday rally read: “Lead us not into detention, but deliver us from ICE,” “Resist fascism,” “No human is illegal,” “Free our school superintendent! My rage can’t fit on this poster,” “Education not deportation, free Dr. Roberts,” “ICE takes which of the following? A. Educators B. Olympians C. Innocents D. All of the above,” and “I prefer my country ‘neat,’ no ICE.”

In an interview with the local CBS affiliate, a protester at the Friday rally said Roberts was targeted “because he won’t give ICE access to arrest our kids.” After President Donald Trump removed “sensitive location” restrictions on ICE agents, allowing them to conduct raids in public schools, churches and hospitals, Roberts sent a letter to parents saying the district would do “everything we can within our legal and moral authority to support students, which is always our top

priority.”

Roberts said the district would comply with a “proper subpoena or warrant” if presented, but that the schools would not disclose personal information to ICE/DHS without “appropriate consent.”

Roberts became superintendent of the Des Moines school district in 2023. ICE is accusing him of overstaying a student visa issued in 1999. In a statement issued after the kidnapping, Sam Olson, ICE enforcement and removal operations St. Paul field office director, said, “This should be a wake-up call for our communities to the great work that our officers are doing every day to remove public safety threats.”

As the outpouring of anger over Roberts’ detention underscores, far from a “public safety threat,” he is a highly valued member of the community. The public response demonstrates the real, organic class anger Trump’s mass deportation operation is fueling across the country.

Following Roberts’ kidnapping, Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) chair Jackie Norris described him as an “integral part of our school community.” She said that ICE accusations against Roberts were “very serious” and that the district “still does not have all the facts.” After Roberts’ arrest the school board voted to place him on paid administrative leave.

Roberts, 51, a former Olympic athlete and immigrant from Guyana in South America, grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He earned his Bachelor’s degree from Coppin State University in Maryland in 1998, and he obtained Master’s degrees from St. John’s University and Georgetown University. He earned his Doctorate in Urban Educational Leadership from Trident University.

Prior to taking the position as Des Moines Public Schools superintendent in July 2023, Roberts held the same position in the Millcreek Township School District in Erie County, Pennsylvania from August 2020 to June 2023. Before that he was a principal at Anacostia High School in Washington D.C. and a teacher.

In statements after the kidnapping, Department of Homeland Security agents claimed Roberts was in the country “illegally” and had a deportation order from July 2024. As of this writing, the exact circumstances around his case are unclear, although there is no dispute that Roberts has been living and working in the US for over three decades.

Phil Roeder, a spokesperson for Des Moines Public Schools, told the Associated Press that the district performed a background check on Roberts before hiring him and that there was “nothing that would suggest that he’s not a citizen.” Roberts completed an I-9 form for the district, which is used to validate work status.

According to ICE agents, Roberts fled from agents before he was eventually apprehended with assistance from the Iowa State police.

In an attempt to smear Roberts as a dangerous fugitive, ICE claimed it found a loaded pistol in his vehicle. Even if true, Iowa’s gun laws are extremely permissive: as of July 1, 2021, Iowa is an “open carry” state that does not require a permit. This means anyone over the age of 18 is allowed to legally possess a handgun, including in their vehicle, as long as they are not a felon or have a prior domestic abuse conviction.

However, under federal immigration law, someone who is considered to be in the country “illegally” is not allowed to possess any firearm, regardless of state laws. As of this writing, Roberts remains in ICE custody at the Woodbury jail. Dozens of protesters gathered outside the jail on Saturday, located in far northwest Iowa, demanding his release.



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