

Top Teacher!

How an educator at a juvenile detention center became National Teacher of the Year

BY ALEXANDER CARRIGAN

As National Teacher of the Year, Rodney Robinson will spend the next year touring the country and speaking about education at various events.

It's Monday morning and Rodney Robinson has just switched into "adapter mode." With only 45 minutes each morning to assess an entire classroom situation, Robinson has somehow mastered the ability to know quickly what each of his students needs, wants, fears and desires. It is a gift that comes in handy when you are committed to changing lives at Virgie Binford Education Center in Richmond, Virginia, and it is a gift that has resulted in Robinson being named the 2019 National Teacher of the Year.

On April 24, 2019, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) honored Robinson with the title out of hundreds of applications from teachers all across the country. According to the CCSSO's website, the award program "identifies exceptional teachers in the country, recognizes their effective work in the classroom, engages them in a year of professional learning, amplifies their voices and empowers them to participate in policy discussions at the state and national levels." This year, the council has chosen to recognize Robinson for his work at the juvenile detention center and the effort he puts to understand each individual student and help them achieve their academic goals in the limited time he has with each of them.

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Robinson has been working as an educator for nearly 20 years. He was inspired to become a teacher because of his adoration for his mother, who ran an in-home daycare while he was growing up. She always wanted to be a teacher but was unable to finish high school due to experiencing segregation and poverty in rural Virginia. It was by watching her earn her GED while he was in high school that really inspired him to pursue education as a career, according to Richmond Public Schools.

"She always taught [Robinson and his siblings] that every child deserves the proper amount of love to get where he or she needs, and that was my first lesson in equity," said Robinson. "And so, I try to treat my students with whatever they need to be successful. Some need more, some need less. But I'm going to be there to give you what you need."

Robinson also says his mother taught him and his siblings to "pay it forward and bring it down to the next generation."

According to a statement from Richmond School Superintendent, Jason Kamras, Robinson "sees the hope, promise and potential in every single one of the young people he teaches and gives his entire self to them, in and out of the classroom. He represents everything we stand for: boundless love for our students, a fierce commitment to equity, and an unyielding pursuit of excellence. There is simply no one more honorable and more deserving of this recognition than Mr. Robinson."

Upon receiving the recognition from the CCSSO, Robinson also received the key to Richmond from Mayor Levar Stoney. According to the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Stoney said, "Each and every student deserves a teacher like Rodney Robinson. ... There are no lost causes in Rodney's heart."

Virgie Binford Education Center

In an exclusive interview with Corrections Today, Robinson spoke about how he made the switch from teaching in public schools to a juvenile detention center. He explained that he was offered the chance to teach at Virgie Binford Education Center around the time the Center for Public Integrity published a report that found Virginia "led the nation in referrals of students to law enforcement." After years of working at Armstrong High School, he gladly accepted the offer and began teaching at Virgie Binford in 2015.

Robinson believed there was "no better way to learn about the school-to-prison pipeline than to go into an actual jail or prison and teach the children," and held the ideal that he could "work backwards and talk to the kids and see what their issues were and how they ended up there."

Virgie Binford Educational Center is described as "a collaborative community that empowers each child academically, socially and emotionally," according to their

website. Virgie Binford’s principal, Ta’Neisha Ford, said the school’s goal is to make “students fall back in love with school,” and that Robinson “allows students to really shine and [he] gives them the tools to succeed.”

Robinson spoke about how Virgie Binford was “raising the bar” for juvenile detention centers. The center closed for a few years to undergo massive reforms before it reopened in 2015, including changing the name of the education center. The school was named after Dr. Virgie M. Binford, who, according to the school’s website, was a “37-year veteran of Richmond Public Schools where she had been a teacher, supervisor and director of various early childhood and elementary education programs.” According to Robinson, the name change was because Principal Ford “wanted [students] to know this is a school mindset” instead of a detention center.

“In the past, there wasn’t a lot of expectation in education in juvenile detention,” Robinson said. “We’re starting to push those changes throughout the whole state of Virginia. We’re all on subject advisory board for juvenile detention and we’re really fighting hard to raise expectations around the state.”

Since he arrived at Virgie Binford, Robinson sought to make sure that students feel appreciated and that their self-esteem improves. Robinson decorated the walls with pictures of icons like former President Barack Obama and philanthropist and former talk show host Oprah Winfrey. He also hung various college banners around the classroom. For his students, these decorations let them know that the juvenile detention center is “just a temporary spot.”

Robinson said teaching from a place of love can be particularly difficult when one commits an offense against



Photo courtesy Council of Chief State School Officers

Rodney Robinson, an educator at Virgie Binford Education Center, is named National Teacher of the Year for his work at the juvenile detention center.

another. He said when that happens “having to compartmentalize that and still give that kid a quality education, that’s hard.”

“[Students] should all look at detention as a life-changing experience, so let’s make it a positive life-changing experience instead of a negative one.”

Robinson also spoke of the challenges that came from transitioning from a public school environment to a detention center. As he told *Corrections Today*, “the detention rules were the number one challenge.” Unlike at Armstrong High, Robinson was only allowed to have one student out of their seat at a time and wasn’t allowed certain school supplies, such as scissors, in the classroom for safety reasons. Robinson, who previously used a lot of project-based learning in his teaching, had to find a way to adjust his teaching style for the new environment, saying it was more of a strategic adjustment than a pedagogical adjustment.

It was also in this new teaching environment that Robinson began to understand the need for individual focus. Virgie Binford is a short-term detention center, and many students rotate in and out in a matter of days or weeks, requiring Robinson to be flexible with his students and to use the most of his potentially limited time with each student.

“I think it’s important to teach them about the situation and the system,” Robinson said. “A lot of my students are on survival mode on the streets. And when they get to the juvenile detention center, they’re too busy trying to sort

out life to have long-term visions.”

Because of this, Robinson found that a juvenile education program primarily needs “high expectations and individuality.”

“You have to understand that all these kids are on different paths and there’s no one set pathway. You have to work to make sure every kid has their own individual path to success,” he added. “Some kids may come in and need to catch up to their grade level so that they can come back to school. Some kids need to graduate as soon as possible because of their situation. It’s really about having a system in place that fits all the individual needs of your kids. A one-size-fits-all model doesn’t fit in juvenile education because the kids have so many needs.”

Among Robinson’s suggestions for changes in juvenile education is the need for a universal credit recovery program. He noted that some students change so many facilities and jurisdictions that their education credits can get lost, so there needs to be something in place to ensure that no student loses their credits amidst their transfers.

Robinson closed his interview with *Corrections Today* by stating that anyone who teaches at a juvenile center should “be flexible. Be very, very flexible.”

“[Students] should all look at detention as a life-changing experience, so let’s make it a positive life-changing experience instead of a negative one,” he cheerfully explained. “We’re going to give you the resources you need, the academic ability, the social and emotional growth to be successful. We want you to graduate to get a good job and not graduate into the adult prison system. We’re trying to use juvenile detention to reset, refocus and get back on the right path.”

Going forward

Now that he is recognized as National Teacher of the Year, Robinson will spend the next year traveling the country advocating for “economic and cultural equity” for all students, as well as recruiting more black and Hispanic men as teachers. →



“By economic equity, we need to make sure all students receive the resources to achieve what he or she deserves,” Robinson explained. “And cultural equity, we need to make sure that all students have teachers and people who look like them, who are relevant to their culture and can inspire them to do whatever.”

“Helping kids channel all that energy and dreams into something positive to where they can see an outcome and a result, that is what I love most about teaching.”

Robinson also said that one of his goals would be to work closely with the Trump administration to ensure reforms in the adult correctional system are also being implemented in the juvenile system.

“I want my voice at the table so we can get some of those changes in juvenile justice,” he proudly declared.

According to CNN, he will also be using this time to work on programs to reduce high school dropout rates, as students who drop out of high school are more likely to be incarcerated. But most of all, Robinson is excited to use this time to use this opportunity to tell stories about his students. He told the Associated Press that some of the students he taught, who were academically a few years behind, were able to catch up and graduate on time. Others improved their reading levels in a matter of months, while one former student now works for an organization that advocates alternatives to youth incarceration.

“My kids have overcome some tremendous odds and been through some traumatic, horrific circumstances, yet they still triumph, they still have dreams, they will want to be doctors and lawyers and everything you can think of,” he praised. “Helping kids channel all that energy and dreams into something positive to where they can see an outcome and a result, that is what I love most about teaching.”

Alexander Carrigan is an assistant editor at the American Correctional Association.



Photo courtesy Council of Chief State School Officers

Robinson's classroom is full of students between the ages of 12-19 who are incarcerated for a variety of crimes.