

## 2019 National Teacher of the Year Finalist



### **Rodney Robinson**

2019 Virginia Teacher of the Year  
*Virgie Binford Education Center*  
*Richmond, Virginia*

Subject: Social Studies  
Grade: 6-12

School Location: Urban  
School Type: Detention Center

Years in Teaching: 18  
Years in Position: 3

District Size: 24,000  
School Size: 60

**Rodney Robinson** is a 19-year teaching veteran. He became a teacher to honor his mother, who struggled to receive an education after being denied an education as a child due to segregation and poverty in rural Virginia. In 2015, Robinson started teaching at Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center, in an effort to better understand the school-to-prison pipeline.

Robinson uses the whole child approach to education to help the students who are most vulnerable. His classroom is a collaborative partnership between himself and his students and is anchored in him providing a civic centered education that promotes social-emotional growth. Robinson uses the knowledge he has gained from his students to develop alternative programs to prevent students from entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Robinson has been published three times by Yale University and has received numerous awards for his accomplishments in and out of the classroom, most notably the R.E.B. Award for Teaching Excellence. He is a member of Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney's Education Compact Team, which includes politicians, educators, business leaders, and community leaders, and is working with city leaders and local colleges to recruit underrepresented male teachers into the field of education. He has also worked with Pulitzer Award winning author James Foreman on developing curriculum units on race, class, and punishment as a part of the Yale Teacher's Institute.

Robinson earned a Bachelor of arts in history from Virginia State University and a master's in educational administration and supervision from Virginia Commonwealth University.

## Application Questions

*1. Describe a content lesson or unit that defines you as a teacher. How did you engage students of all backgrounds and abilities in the learning? How did that learning influence your students? How are your beliefs about teaching demonstrated in this lesson or unit?*

The lesson or unit that defines me as a teacher is a unit I developed for the Yale National Institute to strengthen teaching in urban public schools. The lesson was Understanding the System: A History of Prison and the Virginia Juvenile Justice System. This lesson influences my students because it is relevant to their lives and their current situations as a part of the juvenile prison system, and it increases student engagement. My beliefs about teaching are reflected because the lesson involves relevant material and project-based learning which increases student engagement and output.

My students' life experiences have led to bad choices, which have caused their incarceration. Most are in survival mode 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The students do not have the vision to understand the juvenile justice system because they are too busy trying to survive the system. This unit allows the students to step outside of

themselves, examine the system and the circumstances that led to their incarceration, and better understand how to avoid future incarceration.

Students examined the historical roots of America's prison system. The students learned and analyzed public economic and social policies that led to the creation of the prison system and how these policies were born through a system of economic and racial segregation. They understood the role of the federal government in promoting policies that contributed to the growth of the prison system.

The unit was taught over three weeks. The major text was a *Race to Incarcerate: A Graphic Retelling*. I chose a graphic novel because the majority of my students are below reading levels and graphic novels are a strategy my school uses as a part of our literacy plan. Students used cloze reading strategies along with review and discussion questions for each chapter. Each day included a hands-on activity to further their understanding of the prison system.

The unit followed one basic research question, How can students develop an understanding of the prison system? There are several guiding questions for the lessons as we move through the unit--What is the purpose of prison?, What is the history of the prison system in America and Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice (VDJJ)?, and How do modern police policies contribute to the prison industrial complex?.

The students read and analyzed selected excerpts from other books, such as *Slavery by Another Name*, *Race to Incarcerate*, *Locking Up Our Own*, and *Chokehold*. The students also examined and studied trends in juvenile justice in Virginia by reading the VDJJ Data Resource guides from 2006-2016.

I chose several movies, music, and visual clips because teens are spending more than one-third of their days using media such as, online video or music, nearly nine hours on average, according to a new study from the family technology education non-profit group, Common Sense Media. The students watched and analyzed clips from the movie *13th* and *Slavery by Another Name*. The students also analyzed various poems and hip-hop songs used to describe the prison system in America. Songs included "America" by Nas, "Reagan" by Killer Mike, "Letter to the Free" by Common, and various other songs that describe the conditions in which they live as young Black men and women in America. The students created a visual timeline of the juvenile prison system in Virginia, including major events that contributed to the growth of the prison system in Virginia and America. The students also completed a statistical breakdown of Virginia's current prison population by race and gender by analyzing and studying trends in the prison population. They created charts and graphs that predicted future trends based on their statistical analysis, and created a journal of diary entries full of advice to distribute to other students to help them avoid the pitfalls that led to incarceration. This journal is based on the articles of a popular online blog, the NBA Player's tribune called, "Letters to my Younger Self."

My teaching style is reflected in this lesson in several ways. Research-based best practices suggest students learn more through active learning and project-based assignments. The project changed my role from a teacher to a facilitator of learning by

guiding the students to generate a finished product that is specific to their interests. The letters to their younger self personalizes the lesson to increase student engagement. This lesson encouraged them to take ownership of their project while developing their critical thinking and historical analysis skills.

*2. Describe a project or initiative you have been involved in which contributed to the improvement of overall school culture. What was your role, how did you collaborate with others, and what is the status of this project today?*

When I started working at Virgie Binford Education Center inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center, I was extremely disturbed by the institutional look and feel of the building. The walls were white and dull throughout the building. The environment was depressing and felt nothing like a school. It had the look of a maximum security adult prison without the bars. The school only had two assemblies throughout the year, a Christmas program and a Black history program. My goal was to improve the morale of the students and create a thriving positive school culture by decorating the building with motivational displays and increasing the number of positive student interactions. First, I asked the students to name some of their heroes. They researched those people and created displays of motivational quotes by their heroes to cover some of the walls. We also created several murals dedicated to the struggle of minorities, mainly African Americans because 99 percent of my students are African American. A pictorial timeline of African American history is displayed as they exit with a motivational sign challenging them to make positive contributions as they enter back into society. The students and I also added colorful displays of places around the world they wanted to travel to, as well as Black Lives Matter, Black Girls Rock, and Black Girl Magic displays.

I collaborated with and challenged my coworkers to improve the school culture. Change became our school motto. We adopted a growth mindset in all subjects. We have monthly assemblies with motivational speakers to honor students and inspire them to overcome their current situations. An annual career day was added with colleges, businesspeople, government agencies, and celebrities who recruit students and create relationships to help them become productive citizens when they are released. We also ordered college banners to hang on every window throughout the building. The students researched colleges and universities and created posters advertising each university. These posters are displayed outside the gymnasium. The teachers and detention staff also created posters advertising their college alma maters.

We entered our students into local and state contests, such as the Richmond Public Schools History Fair and Oliver Hill Day Essay Contest. Each year my students have placed in the History Fair, including two first- place finishes. We had students place in the art and essay contest during the Oliver Hill Day ceremony honoring Richmond's biggest social justice hero. The students' artwork is also featured in the annual calendar created by Virginia State Operated Programs.



More importantly, we created a positive school culture and environment. Since we began this project to improve school culture, student discipline violations in the detention center have decreased. Students' confidence in their academic abilities has increased along with the number of students earning diplomas and GEDs. The biggest compliment we have received was from a student earlier this year who said, "I love this school. I wish I could go here, but wish I didn't have to be in detention to attend."

*3. How do you ensure that education transcends the classroom? Describe specific ways in which you deliberately connect your students with the community.*

My primary responsibility as a social studies teacher is to create politically and culturally responsible citizens. I want to create lifelong scholars who use the lessons and skills learned to foster positive change. The majority of my lessons focus on overcoming long odds to succeed. My lessons always contain a local reference or connection to inspire my students to change their surroundings and themselves. My most important duty to students is to inform them of their legal rights and responsibilities. One of the proudest moments is when my students are able to legally advocate for themselves, resulting in a positive outcome in their legal case.

Every year I ensure that all students are active members of their community. Each student is registered to vote by the time he or she graduates high school. The students also learn how to get their voting rights restored if they have lost them due to a felony conviction. This is extremely important for my students because the majority have felonies on their legal record. They share this information with the community by holding voter registration drives. My students have partnered with civic organizations and the Richmond Registrar Office to ensure citizens in their neighborhoods are politically active. I embolden my students to be the change element in the community. Several lessons throughout the year detail the history of activism and methods of protest. My students have written letters challenging everything from school funding to demanding better treatment for juveniles in the prison system in Virginia.

The students were upset and did not agree with the center's meal policy. They felt the food's nutritional value failed to meet their developmental needs. They wrote letters demanding change from detention supervisors. After a meeting, the City of Richmond changed the center's meal policy. The meeting opened lines of communication between both sides, allowing them to address issues in the detention center and in their neighborhoods.

As a result of my students' community service, I was honored by receiving the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Citizenship Education Award for our work in the neighborhoods of Richmond. We also received the National Association of University Women Richmond Branch Award for Community Service.

Several of my former students have created mentorship programs. One program partnered police, the business community, and Richmond youth to use the whole child approach to mentorship. The program mixes a combination of academics, athletics, and positive social interactions with professionals in the field of public service. One of my proudest achievements is having five of my former students work as Richmond Public Schools teachers. They are not only great teachers, but several have been awarded and received recognition for their youth development programs. They are not only mentors but parents for their students. When I asked Doron Battle, a former student and exceptional education teacher at George Mason Elementary School, why he runs a mentoring program, he said, "I am just trying to do for the next generation what you did for me and my classmates."

*4. What do you consider to be a major public education issue today? Describe how you demonstrate being a lifelong learner, leader, and innovator about this issue, both in and outside of the classroom walls.*

The number one issue is the national dropout crisis. America has a serious problem. A lack of a high school diploma closes doors of opportunity. The dropout rate is much higher in urban and rural areas, where it is nearly one in two students. The dropout crisis can be dealt with by building and maintaining proper relationships with all stakeholders. These stakeholders include students, teachers, administrators, staff, and community members.

Dropping out of school can be caused by various issues in a student's life, including academic struggles, an immediate need for money, boredom, pregnancy, or drug/alcohol abuse. The school must meet the needs of students to prevent them from dropping out. A school must have the essential components in place to handle the challenges of multiple students and their various needs.

Most high school dropouts travel along a path filled with truancy, suspensions, and academic struggles. Early intervention is an essential component to lowering the national dropout rate. The classroom teacher is the first line of defense in preventing school dropouts. The student-teacher relationship is the most important in promoting academic growth and meeting the social and emotional needs of a student that may conflict with the process of getting an education. An understanding of trials and tribulations a student is experiencing creates a bridge of trust to help the relationship grow. A good teacher must have a sense of empathy for students and provide an environment where they feel safe and relaxed enough to focus on the assigned tasks.

Another essential component to solving the dropout crisis is understanding that it is not only the job of the school to prevent dropouts, but the job of the whole community. Mentoring programs, social services, and job internships are some of the ways the community can help the school meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students to prevent dropouts.



To build the relationships necessary to attack the dropout problem, I volunteer, coach, and officiate Little League, middle, and high school sporting events in the City of Richmond. I also support booster clubs and community activities. The volunteer activities create a bond with students, parents, and the community to promote student engagement and achievement. It makes me aware of neighborhood and student issues. Together, we meet with the student and develop a goal-oriented plan to eliminate the issues that could lead to a student dropping out of school.

A report from the United States Department of Education states, "Student engagement and learning are fostered by a school climate characterized by an ethic of caring and supportive relationships, respect, fairness, and trusts; and teachers' sense of shared responsibility and efficacy related to student learning." To prevent a student from dropping out, one must have positive relationships from which to build support. The chance that a student will stay in school increases when students are able to live and learn in safe place and when supportive adults are available in the form of neighbors, teachers, and parents.

*5. As the 2019 National Teacher of the Year, you serve as a spokesperson and representative for teachers and students. What is your message? What will you communicate to your profession and to the public?*

September 9, 1993, was an important day. I finally turned 15 and could go to the local teen club. I was excited I could finally hang with my older brothers and friends in a new environment. They had been going since they were 15. My mother destroyed my hopes at the time by not letting me go. I was devastated because it wasn't fair. In my disappointment, I made the decision to sneak out and go to the club. It was the worst experience of my life. Later that week, consumed by guilt, I admitted to my mother what I had done. She didn't punish me severely because she said I had learned my lesson. When I asked her why she didn't let me go, she gave me the most important piece of advice that I carry with me to this day. She said, "A good parent knows her children and what they need and are ready for in life, and you are not ready for that type of environment. When your brothers were 15, they could handle it. It may not seem fair, but it's what is right for you."

That conversation turned out to be the advice that changed my life and influences everything that I do in my classroom and that should be done in education. That was my first lesson on equity. Equality said I was old enough to go to the club. Equity said I needed to grow and mature more before I would be ready to go to the club environment. This is what our schools need. We need equity. We need to understand that not every child in America starts at the same place in life and that some need more help to achieve. A one-size-fits-all model of equality does not work in education and education funding. Equity ensures that the students suffering from multi-generational poverty in the public housing communities of Richmond and Chicago, along with children in the mountains of West Virginia and the Dine Nation in Arizona and New Mexico, receive adequate



resources to get the same quality education as those in the suburbs of Northern Virginia, Connecticut, and Silicon Valley.

We can ensure that every student in America receives a high-quality education by restoring educational funding to pre-recession levels. The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world, but our funding cuts to public education since the Great Recession of 2008 have crippled education in this country. This has disproportionately impacted the schools and the children who need the most resources and are the most vulnerable. The national economy has recovered from the Great Recession and is surging at record highs. It's time the children of America received their fair share of the nation's resources. We must increase our funding and make equitable changes to education funding to ensure every student and teacher get the proper resources to guarantee success for all of them. The United States needs a Marshall Plan for education similar to the plan that rebuilt Europe after World War II. The nation needs a multibillion-dollar investment in education that addresses teacher shortage and retention and school infrastructure concerns, and promotes a whole child approach to education that measures more than standardized test scores. The first part of the plan involves creating financial stability for teachers that allows them to dedicate themselves 100 percent to educating students. The second part is a multimedia teacher recruitment campaign, a campaign that includes internet and television ads stressing the importance and value of teaching to recruit new teachers to the field. The third part is creating programs that address the problem of teacher burnout and improving teacher morale to keep current teachers in the classroom. Lastly, the Marshall Plan for education will help pay for more wraparound services and provide modern schools and infrastructure to address the social emotional needs of the students in and out of the classroom.

Teachers are overworked and underpaid and need help. The Marshall Plan for education will help by alleviating the financial burden and the workload of teachers to help them stay in the classroom and bring more highly qualified teachers into the classroom. More importantly, it will treat teachers like true professionals. Every student in America deserves a high-quality education from highly trained teachers in 21st century buildings. They can only get that with equitable resources from the nation that addresses the individual needs of each child in the varying school districts across the country.

## Resume

### Education

School	Virginia Commonwealth University
Degree	Masters
Major	Educational Administration and Supervision
Years Attended	2011

School	Virginia State University
Degree	B. A.
Major	History





Years Attended	2000
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### Certification

Certification	Virginia Post Graduate Professional License
Year Obtained	2016

Certification	Department of Juvenile Justice Mental Health Certificate
Year Obtained	2015

Certification	Department of Juvenile Justice Handle with Care Restraint Certification
Year Obtained	2015

### Experience

Title	Teacher-History
Organization	Virgie Binford Educational Center
Years in Position	3

Title	Teacher-History
Organization	Armstrong High School
Years in Position	11

Title	Teacher-History
Organization	John F. Kennedy High School
Years in Position	1

Title	Teacher-History
Organization	George Wythe High School
Years in Position	2

Title	Teacher-History
Organization	Lucille Brown Middle School
Years in Position	1

### Leadership

Position	RVA Education Compact Team, Team Member
Organization	City of Richmond
Years in Position	2

Position	Metropolitan Education Research Consortium (MERC), Team Member
Organization	Virginia Commonwealth University
Years in Position	5

Position	Virginia Department of Education Social Studies Committee, Trainer
Organization	Virginia Department of Education
Years in Position	5

Position	Yale Teacher Institute, Fello
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Organization	Yale University
Years in Position	7

Position	Virgie Binford Education Center, Department Head
Organization	Richmond City Public Schools
Years in Position	9

### Awards and Other Recognitions

Award/Recognition	Richmond Public Schools Teacher of the Year
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Award/Recognition	Virgie Binford Education Center Teacher of the Year
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Award/Recognition	Veterans of Foreign Wars National Citizenship Education Post Recognition Award
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Award/Recognition	R.E.B. Award for Teaching Excellence
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Award/Recognition	Armstrong High School Teacher of the Year
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