



# People & Places

MEET THE PEOPLE MAKING NEWS IN EDUCATION.

## Meet the 2019 Teacher of the Year!

EVERY STUDENT DESERVES A TEACHER LIKE MR. ROBINSON

**T**his year I hope to be the voice for my students and all students who feel unseen, unheard, unappreciated, and undervalued in America,” says Rodney Robinson, a Virginia teacher who was named the 2019 National Teacher of the Year by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) this spring.

Robinson, a 19-year veteran of Richmond Public Schools, and proud Virginia Education Association member, knows well the students that many others would like to forget. Every day, he inspires, motivates, and teaches 10- to 18-year-olds at the Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center.

Using a curriculum that he designed with Pulitzer Prize-winning author James Forman, Jr. at Yale University, Robinson centers their social studies lessons on juvenile justice and the prison system, allowing “students to step outside of themselves and examine the system and the circumstances that have led to their incarceration and a better understanding of how to avoid future incarceration,” Robinson wrote in the introduction.

CCSSO praised Robinson’s ability to create “a positive school culture by empowering his students—many of whom have experienced trauma—to become civically minded social advocates who use their skills and voices to affect physical and policy changes at their school and in their communities.”

As the 2019 National Teacher of the Year, Robinson says he hopes to lead a national conversation about the students he calls the “most vulnerable in society,” and about how the nation can address the school-to-prison pipeline.

Robinson is standing up for students who are too often overlooked, says NEA President

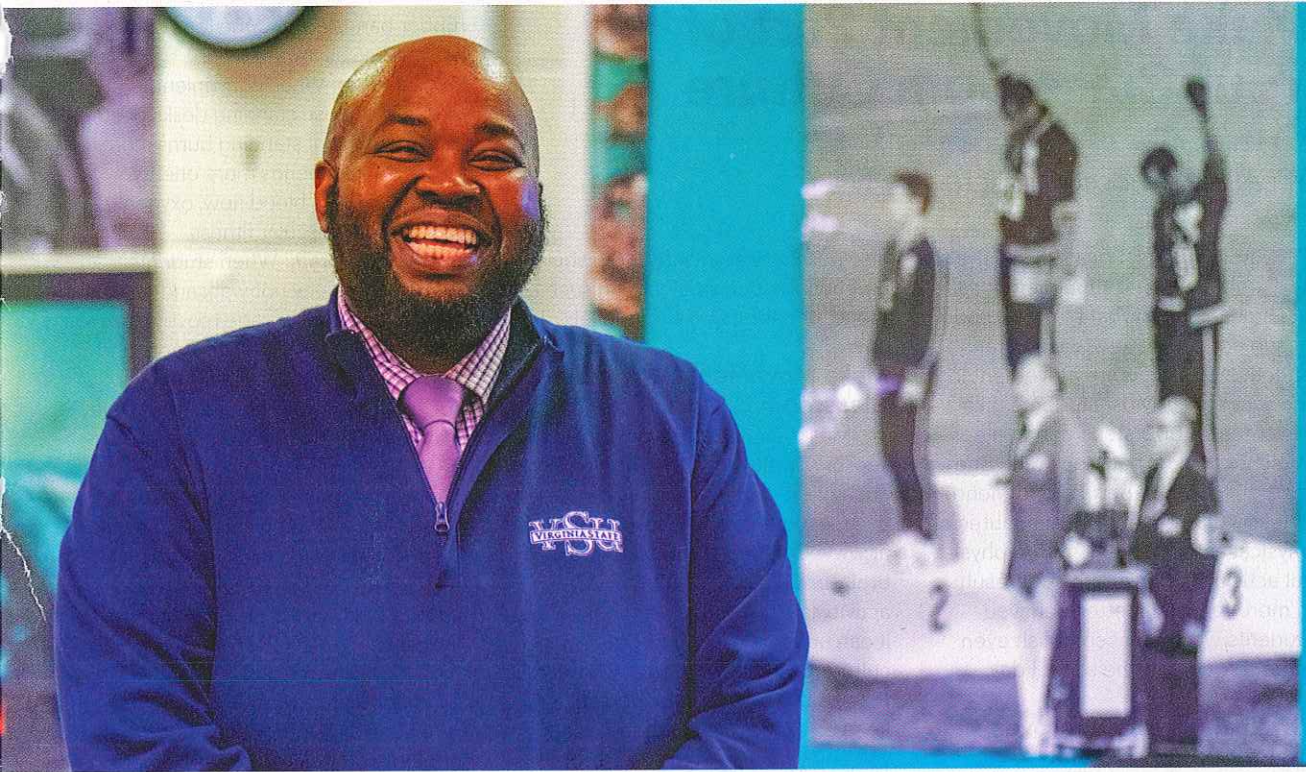
National teacher of the year Rodney Robinson, of Virginia, is using his national platform to fight for racial and social justice in education.

members and other education leaders to develop student-centered learning opportunities aligned with the...  
It doesn't matter to me...  
and the best we can do for our students...  
says Forman. Who better to know...  
PCC standards for coursework and...  
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Lily Eskelsen Garcia. “He is not only a beacon of light but also a mentor, a leader and a role model in the fight for racial and social justice in education ... Every student in every public school in this country deserves a teacher like Mr. Robinson no matter their ZIP code or their circumstances.”

Robinson, 40, has been inspired by his mother, who grew up during segregation and never was able to graduate from high school. He told CNN that he remembers sitting in the back of his mom’s GED classes, waiting for her to take him home from football practices. She wanted to be a teacher, but instead ran a day care



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RICHMOND PUBLIC SCHOOLS



center where she demonstrated for her son that “every child deserves the proper amount of love to get what they need. That was my first lesson in equity,” Robinson told CBS This Morning.

Robinson, who has been teaching for 19 years, chose to teach in the juvenile detention center because he wanted to understand the school-to-prison pipeline. He also wants his students to understand, he says, that “jail is only a temporary setback.”

“I want them to know that] you’re important and you have a place in this world, and you can achieve your goals,” he told CNN.

As teacher of the year, Robinson will have a heightened platform to advocate for the students who are being left behind by state budget cuts, or pushed out by racially biased practices and systems that emphasize punishment over preventative and rehabilitative measures, including mental health care.

“I want school counselors, I want conflict mediators, I want restorative justice, I want people to come in and actually work with the kids and not just put a kid in handcuffs whenever there is a minor disagreement,” Robinson told WCVB Radio in Richmond.

In January, Robinson spoke at VEA’s Fund Our Future rally at the state capitol, calling for leaders who are guided by integrity and good judgment, and who won’t glibly “say they love kids” but also will “write the checks their mouths are cashing every day.”

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—RODNEY ROBINSON, VIRGIE BINFORD EDUCATION CENTER, A SCHOOL INSIDE THE RICHMOND JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER

In addition to his mother, Robinson was inspired by Calvin Sorrell, his band director—the only Black male educator in the district at that time—at Virginia’s King William County High School in the 1990s. Today, only 15 percent of Virginia teachers are people of color.

“It’s important to have role models of all races and ethnicity—especially for students of color,” says Robinson.

After graduating high school, Robinson set his sights on becoming the kind of educator many students who have made mistakes desperately need.

“Most are in survival mode 24 hours a day, seven days a week ... but they still persevere and strive for success. They are my inspiration, and I will fight to my last heartbeat for them,” Robinson says. ✨

—MARY ELLEN FLANNERY AND TIM WALKER