

RODNEY ROBINSON was named 2019 Teacher of The Year by the Council of Chief State School Officers. He teaches social studies and history to students in grades 6-12 at Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center in Virginia. He also works to develop alternative programs to prevent students from entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Robinson has been recognized for his culturally responsive and civics-focused teaching that includes engaging students in conversations about racism and the history of incarceration. He cites some of his proudest moments as seeing his students learn to advocate for themselves.

Learning Forward recently asked Robinson to share his insights and advice about professional learning.



Rodney Robinson, 2019 Teacher of the Year, says his advice to teachers is to “take control of your professional development.”

# WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO REACH AT-RISK STUDENTS

Q&A with RODNEY ROBINSON

**Q: How has professional learning influenced your career?**

A: Professional learning has been my key to growth in my years as an educator. Pedagogy has always been a strength of mine, so I sought professional learning opportunities that built my content knowledge. The most meaningful professional learning experiences I have participated in were the Teaching American History Academy and the Yale Teachers

Institute because they were both content-based. At the Yale Teachers Institute, teachers are treated as leaders who partner with Yale faculty to create curriculum units unique and specific to their student population. It also creates a nationwide network of teachers who share, communicate, and advocate for what is best for their students and the profession. When you get a group of like-minded teachers in a room together, problem-solving happens organically.



Rodney Robinson with students in his classroom at Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center in Virginia.

**Q: How would you suggest improving professional learning, especially for teachers of traditionally underserved populations?**

A: Administrators must abandon the one-size-fits-all model of professional learning and partner with teachers to give them voice and choice in their professional development. Teachers are the professionals who know what works best for their students. Allow them some autonomy to make decisions that will best benefit their populations.

My biggest piece of advice to teachers is to take control of your professional development. Constantly look in the mirror and assess your weaknesses, then find professional learning opportunities that build up your weaknesses in the classroom.

**Q: What does it mean to you to personalize learning, and how is it important for your classroom at the juvenile detention facility?**

A: Personalizing learning is all about making those connections that enhance or engage student learning and achievement.

My students have had bad experiences with school in the past, so it is imperative that I personalize the learning to create a positive experience that will empower them to make personal and communal change.

**Q: What knowledge and skills do you need to personalize learning for students, especially students like yours who face a lot of challenges or may feel marginalized?**

A: You need empathy and the ability to magnify your students' voices. This can be best accomplished by listening to your students without judgment or condemnation.

Create a safe space where the student voice is heard and valued. Once you establish the safe space, students will open themselves to learning, which will allow you to build on their experiences to create an engaging classroom environment.

The best piece of advice I can give comes from a teacher I know named Ben Talley. He says the only magic pill to dealing with reluctant or difficult learners is to love them. No matter what they do, keep loving and empathizing with them, and, eventually, the students will buy into their learning. ■