Jen Walsh:

From the American School Counselor Association, this is I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, director of education and training here at ASCA.

Today, we're joined by Rodney Robinson, one of the keynote speakers at this year's ASCA annual conference. Rodney is a 21-year education veteran, working with marginalized black and brown communities in Richmond, Virginia. He has received numerous awards for his accomplishments in and out of the classroom. Most notably, the 2019 National Teacher of the Year. He was also named 2019 HBCU Male Alumnus of the Year by hbcudigest.com. He was listed in Root Magazine's top 100 influential African-Americans of 2019, and was also named 2019 Richmonder of the Year by Richmond Magazine and the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

His current role is as a senior policy advisor with Richmond public schools in charge of teacher pathways with a specific focus on the RVA, Men Teach program, to recruit and retain male teachers of color in Richmond public schools.

Welcome, Rodney. We are so happy to have you today. I hear that you became a teacher to honor your mother who wanted to also become a teacher but struggled to receive an education as a child due to segregation and poverty in rural Virginia.

Rodney Robinson:

Oh, my mother, she wanted to become a teacher, but she just never got the opportunity because growing up as a young black child in poverty in rural Virginia, those opportunities didn't exist, but she didn't let that deter her. She ran an in-home daycare where she took care of me, my siblings, and anybody else. She would tell people in the neighborhood, if you need childcare, just drop your child off, something to eat if you got it, and come pick them up in the afternoon. And so, any day there'd be five to 15, 20 kids in my household running around just having fun, and watching my mother just take care of everybody, nurture everybody, push everybody to be their best, it was just really inspiring to see that. And then those lessons of community just stuck with me. She would often just be like, "Oh, Rodney, ride your bike down and check on Mr. Johnson. Make sure he has enough wood to keep warm tonight." Or she'd tell my brother to go up the street and make sure that Miss Smith grass is cut. And just those types of lessons just naturally formed in my siblings and I. And so, I would just wanted to continue her legacy and just pass that on and take care of community by becoming an educator.

Jen Walsh:

Wow. She sounds like an amazing woman and just someone who always had others at the forefront of her mind. And yeah, I think that that's definitely, like you said, something that educators really have to always have. So, you became a teacher, and after teaching for 15 years, you took a position at Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Virginia Juvenile Detention Center. What motivated you to take this position, especially after teaching for 15 years?

Rodney Robinson:

It's a weird situation. I tell people I was motivated by burnout. I had worked 15 years in high-need schools in Richmond, Virginia, and just working with 1,000 to 1,500 kids every day, all of them suffering from the failures of society, from poverty, economic and racial segregation, trauma, it was really starting to take a toll on me. And you work so hard in these schools, and then you have organizations whether they be your state agency or outside people who tell you that you're failing and that you're not doing a good job when you know the kids are working hard, you're working hard, and everybody's doing the best they can. It just let to a level of burnout.

And so I was looking for something different. And I got a call from an old friend of mine, she had just become the principal down at the juvenile detention center, and it was kind of a funny call because she called me and she said, "Do you know any teachers who want to come down here?" And I started thinking, and I was rattling off some names, and she's like, "All right, I'm calling to ask you. Do you want to come and work down here?" And I was like, "Hmm, I don't know about that." Because, number one, I'm claustrophobic, so going into a jail ... And I just want to emphasis, this is juvenile jail, detention center is one of these nice names we put on things to make it seem not what it is, but this was the Richmond Juvenile Jail, and so being claustrophobic, going into that environment just wasn't for me. And plus, I didn't believe in seeing kids locked up, and it was such a change for me.

But in 2015, when I made the switch, that's when the US Department of Education released their first comprehensive report on the school-to-prison pipeline, and Virginia was the number one state in referring students to juvenile detention, and so that, to me, was sort of a sign. I'm a little bit of a religious person, and sometimes I feel you get signs, and that was a sign for me, hey, go down, teach, found out what's happening, what's going on, what's taking place, what has led students to end up in this situation.

And so, that was really my motivating factor. I just wanted to learn more about the system, what failures took place in the system that allows students to be locked up, and what could I do to change the system, or get rid of the system. I just wanted to make things better for the students who had had just bad experiences with society, with education, and going to the detention center was my motivation. And it was funny because I said burnout, but and I wanted smaller numbers, but those 60 kids at the detention center some days felt like teaching in a school of 1,000 or 1,500 kids because their needs were so heavy, and so even though that was my motivation at first, I'm really happy that I took the opportunity because those kids are so awesome down there, and society is failed them, and we need to do a better job of taking care of our children.

Jen Walsh:

I appreciate you talking about your interest in learning and figuring out what is going on with this school-to-prison pipeline. You're a history major. When I look at history, it's really interesting to kind of think about what has happened to cause these systems, right, that are currently in place, and was there any connection there-

Rodney Robinson:

Oh, yeah.

Jen Walsh:

... as a history major in studying the past and what that looks like now?

Rodney Robinson:

Yeah, I always tell my students, every question you have can be answered through history. Things don't just randomly happen. Everything that happens is a result of decisions that were made weeks, years, sometimes centuries ago, and that's why we're in this situation that we're in. When I got there, one of the main things I wanted them to do was understand the history of prison in America. The history of juvenile detention. I actually when to Yale University and took a course under their teachers initiative ... Not a course, excuse me, a seminar under James Foreman, Pulitzer Prize Winner and author of the book Locking Up Our Own, which was about the history of the prison system.

And I created a curriculum unit about the Virginia prison system and how the decisions that were made years and years ago affect them every day, and learn about the system, and how to beat the system. I tell them all the time, this is a system. This is a game to them. You need to learn the rules of the game and how to play the game if you want to be successful. And I think I did a good job of teaching my students how to advocate for themselves when they go to court, how to advocate for themselves in the detention center, whether it be things like getting extra meals or getting more time, rec time, just the proper way to go about having your needs met by the people in charge, and so I feel like history always plays a role.

But at the same time, in history, there have always been dissenters. There have always been people who've made change and you can be that person to make a change. I mean, they can lock up your body, but they can never lock up your mind or take away your voice, and always use that to advocate for what you want and need.

Jen Walsh:

Absolutely. That's such a valuable lesson. Throughout your career, you've used the whole-child approach to education to help students who are most vulnerable. What does the whole-child approach mean and look like to you?

Rodney Robinson:

Well, to me, the whole-child approach means just taking care of all the needs of the child, and when I say that I go back to the basic Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I often say you have to meet the learning conditions and the learning condition, one of the basic needs, no food, clothing, shelter, comfort, are those the needs that are being met, because a lot of our students don't have those needs being met outside of school. You can't learn if you're hungry. You can't learn if you don't feel safe. And so that's where it starts.

And then you talk about the social-emotional growth of the students. The student has to feel loved, wanted, and appreciated, and that's where the cultural affirmations come in where you have to teach the students about who they are and help them discover who they are, and how society has either uplifted or denigrated who they want to be, and know their history, and learn about just what does it take for me ... I'll give you an example, what does it mean to be a black man? What does it mean to be a black woman? What does it mean to be a gay person in today's society, and just understand that no matter who you are or what you bring to the table, you are valued. And then once you take care of that, then it's all about the academic needs, whether what do you want to be in life and what kind of education is necessary to get you to where you want to be in life? And that's taking care of the whole child is building the child up to where they can see their dreams, and then helping them academically and socially achieve their dreams.

Jen Walsh:

Often educators express how they learn just as much from their students as their students learn from them, what have you learned from your students throughout your years as a teacher?

Rodney Robinson:

Patience. But no, but on a serious note, it's just you learn so much from these students. Just something simple like I grew up in rural Virginia then moved to urban Virginia, you learn just a lot about what does it mean to be an urban teacher, what does it mean to live in an urban environment, what does it mean to live and work in neighborhoods that aren't necessarily the safest. And you learn so much from your students just about life and so many lessons. And to give you one specific example, I learned how I was toxic when it come to my masculinity from my students. I grew up in an environment that was not necessarily accepting of people, one that didn't really accept anyone from the LBGQ community, and then having my students and seeing them just be such wonderful people. It's sort of like in society, you have these preconceived notions, and then when you meet people who just shatter all of those preconceived notions and beliefs you have, you can either just lean harder into your beliefs, or say, "Oh, I was completely wrong," and grow as a person. And that's one area where I've learned so much from my students, and I'm such a better person for having been around them, for them exposing me to my biases, to my ignorance, and so I'm so happy that my students are able to call me out on it.

One thing I often say, if I'm wrong as a teacher, as a student, you should have a right to call me out. And I never wavered from that thing. And sometimes it requires some hard conversations with students. They've called me out on some of my biases, some of the things that they felt were unfair that I said or done, and so I've learned so much from them by having those open lines of communication. I think one of the worst things we do as educators is we pretend to know it all or pretend to have it together. Now, we're far from perfect. We're struggling as is, and so to have students who can see that and see you grow, kind of opens up their mind, so okay, life is about growth, even though this is an adult in front of me telling me what to do, they're still learning the process, and so they're more open to new ideas, and they're kind of okay with hey, I need to get my stuff together because this person is being vulnerable, this person is being open. And so, I feel when you have those open lines of communication with students, you can learn so much from them, and they can learn so much from you. It just makes it a better culture of learning all around.

Jen Walsh:

Definitely. And you kind of got at this, but being able to model how to have that open dialogue and have the lens of I'm not always right, I can improve, that in and of itself is such a valuable lesson for your students.

Rodney Robinson:

Yes.

Jen Walsh:

I know a lot of your work involves equity. What does the word equity mean to you, and what does it look like in education?

Rodney Robinson:

Equity to me is just giving children what they need to fulfill their dreams. It's meeting students where they are, understanding that some students don't have some students weren't intended to have, and you have to do the job to make sure they get what they need. I'm a firm believer is that when all students are on level playing fields, the game is even, and no student is better than anyone. But the reality is, so many of our students come from situations where the playing fields aren't level, whether the school that lacks physical resources to help those kids, whether the community lacks those resources, or in other words, whether the school lacks the cultural resources for kids to be their best. So many of our students of color grow up in society or in buildings where they aren't viewed as normal. They aren't viewed as the standard. And so, when that happens, a lot of doubt creeps into their minds. And so, my goal is to uplift you, not only with resources, but also, culturally, to give you the equity you need.

And in our schools, the one thing I hate about our school system is that it's such a bureaucracy, and everybody comes up with here's my plan for equity. Here's my plan for equity. There's no plan for equity. Equity is seeing a child that needs something and giving it to them. And it's something you can't quantify that. You can't quantify, hey, this kid needs a ride to school, let me as a teacher go given them a ride to school. You can't quantify this student doesn't believe in themselves, so I'm going to give them some books and give them some resources to help them believe in themselves. And that may be on an individual basis, and so when we try to grand scale everything from an equitable point of view, that's where we make such big mistakes as whenever you grand scale something, it tends to move from equity to equality, and that's not what we're talking about. Equity says, hey, this kid needs this. I'm going to make sure they get it.

But then when you try to make it grand scale it's like well if that kid got this, then what about these kids, what about ... It's not a what about these kids, it's what does this kid need. And in education we need to really stop looking at everything from a big picture lens. We need to say hey, this is what the kid needs, let me make sure that we give it to them. That is what equity is. It's not equality, it's not a grand scheme, it's just taking care of the needs of the learner who's in front of you at that moment.

Jen Walsh:

Right. So, getting down to that individual level.

Rodney Robinson:

Yes.

Jen Walsh:

Yeah, exactly. We're now going to pause for a quick word from our sponsor Xello. Xello is a modern career, college, and future-readiness program that empowers your students to develop self-awareness, explore pathways, and build a meaningful plan for the future, featuring age-appropriate lessons and activities for students in kindergarten through high school. Xello helps students of all backgrounds and abilities build the essential tools they need to succeed, no matter what pathway they choose to pursue. Visit xello.world/asca. That's X-E-L-L-O .world/ A-S-C-A, to learn why over nine million students and school counselors have chosen Xello to reach their future-readiness program goals.

And we're now back with Rodney. What is one way school counselors can help in education inequities and make a lasting difference in their schools?

Rodney Robinson:

Oh, wow. School counselors are just it's such an important role that I don't think that people outside of education understand the need for them. School counselors can place such a big role in ending so many of the issues in education when it comes to just the whole achievement gap. Seeing students, and understanding students, and putting them in situations to be successful. Not seeing students as just a number, actually getting to know the students and making decisions that are best for the student and best for the family. School counselors, in a sense, are gatekeepers, when it comes to some of the education inequities, and they provide access to so many programs, to so many students, and sometimes if they don't have the ability to see the giftedness in all of our students, then they're only going to exasperate the current inequities that we have in education. I would not be here today if it wasn't for some of the things my school counselor did for me from guiding me through the school, the college application process, to helping me with scholarships, to helping me understand college in general, pushing me when I didn't have that push in the other areas.

And so sometimes, school counselors can ... Not sometimes, but all the time, school counselors are the difference between success and failure for a lot of our students when it comes to life. School counselors set them on the right track to be what they want to be to achieve their dreams, and I think we need to make sure we have school counselors in every building. It just blows my mind when I think about the fact that some schools don't even have counselors, or that some schools have counselors who are handling 1,000 student caseload, or some schools have counselors who aren't even allowed to be counselors. They're busy covering classes, doing test prep, and doing other things that aren't related to the core of the job. The school counselors is one of the most important jobs in the building, and we as educators, we need to do a better job of lobbying for more support, or lobbying for more school counselors because they mean so much to our students.

I remember one time I had a student in my classroom. She came into my classroom and she said, "I want to pay attention, Mr. Robinson, but the voices in my head today are too loud." And as a teacher, I was floored. I had no idea what to do with that situation, and so, I, "Okay, let's go down to the counselor for a minute and see what we can do." But then an hour, the school counselor had the whole situation diagnosed, had a plan together, and this young lady's, she's doing well now. I stay in contact with her, but I just remember, what would've happened that day if I didn't have that school counselor who knew the young lady, who knew her situation, and provided immediate supports and interventions to help the child. I don't know what would've happened. That child could've went home and harmed themselves that day. And so, that's the importance of a school counselor. It's literally life or death to some of our students. And like I said, as educators, we don't do a good enough job of advocating for school counselors in our buildings, and I think this is an area where we need to step up.

Jen Walsh:

What an example of how school counselors can make an impact. If you were talking to a school counselor who was struggling with how to provide an equitable environment in their building, what would be one strategy they could use based on your experience?

Rodney Robinson:

One strategy is know who you are. Far too often when it comes to equity, we reflect out and saying what do I need to know about the system? What do I need to know about my kids, my community, my parents? No, you need to know about yourself. You need to know who you are, what are your biases, what are your limitations when it comes to just seeing the world. It's so hard to understand situations when you don't understand yourself. And what I say about that is when you walk into a building or when you walk into a meeting with a student, you need to know what privileges are you bringing to the table? What biases are you bringing to the table? What are the things that are within you that may prevent you from understanding this student, this parent, this situation? Because far too often, we put the onus on the kid. We put the onus on the parent, when it's really about us, our biases, our privilege prevents us from understanding the situation from seeing the student.

And those are hard, hard questions, you have to ask of yourself, and you have to be completely honest because when we don't, when we fail to see the complete humanity of our students and our parents, we are failing them, and then naturally, our biases will creep in. Like do you truly think that all students can be successful? Do you truly believe in your heart that this parent has the child's best interest in mind? And the reality is, studies show that sometimes you don't. There's a Vanderbilt study that talks about that where sometimes we don't have the highest expectations for students of color. Sometimes we have low expectations for parents and communities, and we really need to check our biases at the door if we want to provide a truly equitable educational experience for our students.

Jen Walsh:

Like many education professions, school counseling does not have adequate representation as far as adversity goes where school counselors are often do not look like the students that they serve. ASCA is working hard to address this through various avenues, but how have you used your time as teacher of the year to advocate for cultural equity, to make sure students have teachers or administrators who look like them and value their culture?

Rodney Robinson:

Oh, boy, so this is only a half hour podcast, right?

Jen Walsh:

Yeah.

Rodney Robinson:

Yeah. No, I was just joking. But no, seriously, that is my work, that's the area and that's the lane where I'm most comfortable, but the best thing we have to do, we have to be intentional. We have to be intentional about our outcomes. We have to be intentional and say, hey we need more counselors of color. How do we go about doing it? And so, we really need to create policies. For example, let's start off with high school students and with middle school students who want to get and education, and show them that counseling is an option. Let's go into these colleges, into the people who are interested in social work and show how easy it is to move over to a school counselor's job. Let's go where the people are. Let's be intentional about this work. We really need to make sure that number one, people see counselors of color.

We often talk about you never see teachers of color, well, it's even less when we get into counselors. We need to do a better job of making sure that students and teachers, and everybody see counseling as a viable career option. We need to be intentional about the pipeline. What ways can we enable teachers to move to become counselors and be intentional about growing out the teachers of color when we're trying to get counselors. We need to publicize. We need to advertise. We need to get in front of people and show them the importance of school counselors and counselors of color. When I would think back to my own year as teacher of the year, one of the most frustrating things was I went to New Orleans and I met Brian Coleman, everybody who's in the council already knows Brian. Brian's a rockstar. But he was this counselor of the year the same year I was teacher of the year. Why did we only meet once in a room? You had two black males, one is the school counselor of the year, another is the teacher of the year, and we only were in a room together one time. We should've been on tour together talking about the importance of having black male counselors and black male teachers.

And then I got even more upset when I found out the superintendent of the year and turning 19, Kurt Jones, was a black man. Let's be intentional about this. Let's say, hey, let's get these guys in a room and show people that hey, this is a viable profession. You have three men, black men, in this profession at the top of their game at the same time. Let's put this on a platform and let people see that hey, this is an option. Hey I could be a superintendent. I could be a teacher. I could be a school counselor. You could never be what you can't see in life, and I think you need to be really intentional about making sure people see kids, see teachers of color, see counselors of color, see superintendents of color, because that's where it all starts, when you see that person and say, hey, that far-fetched dream I had of being a counselor or being a superintendent, these guys let me know that it's possible. And so, we really, really need to be more intentional about what we're doing. We say we want counselors of color, but what are we actually doing to get the counselors of color other than just saying we need more counselors of color. Let's be more intentional. Let's come up with a plan. Let's work through it, and let's make sure that we're meeting our goals.

Jen Walsh:

Yes. You are absolutely correct. And I know that school counseling, I mean we as an organization are really starting to be intentional about this because it is so important, and I am hoping that other education professions are starting to look at that with more intentionality as well. Since 2019 when you were teacher of the year, what you said about not being able to be what you can't see, so really gets to the root and the core of this issue, so thank you for that.

So, it sounds like you form extremely close relationships with your students, many of whom have experienced extreme traumas, and you become very invested in their success, how has this impacted on your personal wellbeing?

Rodney Robinson:

Oh, man, that's probably the roughest part about working just in education in general, but definitely working in the juvenile jail is that the reality is I can talk about success all day with my kids, but the reality is, the majority of them don't experience success. Two-thirds to three-quarters of kids who go into the juvenile jail never graduate high school. And so, sometimes you absorb so much secondary trauma from the students. And counseling. You got to get into therapy. You got to talk it out or else it's going to come out in some sort of negative way. You absorb so much from these students, and then detention is just constant heartbreak, after heartbreak, after heartbreak with so many of our students. And it's not because it's the students, it's because of society. So much of our students is so many of their crimes or their issues is just something from the failures of society, not giving them the proper upbringing, not providing the resources they need or a foster care system that is completely broken. I tell teachers all the time, especially when I'm talking to new teachers and college students, now check out their healthcare plan. What is the mental health side look when you're applying to districts because you're going to need it as an educator because you can't absorb all of the secondary trauma that goes on with these students.

And the reality is when we have success, we celebrate it because I mean, their success is my success, and it's the success of the community, but there are a lot of failures, and those failures tend to lean on, tend to weigh on you, and some of those failures you can never get over. I have students, deaths of students, tragedies, deaths stick with you, and now I know I would never get over it, but you need to go to therapy. You need to work it out because it's going to haunt you if you don't. We need to get over the stigma, especially in the black community, that therapy is bad. We need to take full care of our mental health because we can't ... I'll put it this way, it's hard to tell a students to take care of their mental health when you're not doing it for yourself, and so we have to set the example. We have to model the behavior, and we need to talk about it, because if not, then we're going to damage more people. A friend of mine said, he always says, hurt people, hurt people. And then you're absorbing so much of that secondary trauma, eventually it's going to come out in some form of hurt, whether that's you or somebody else. And so, get that therapy. Feel better. Talk about it.

Jen Walsh:

Definitely. That compassion fatigue is a real thing and it's important to take care of yourself for sure. So, what inspires or motivates you?

Rodney Robinson:

What inspires or motivates me? What inspires or motivates me is children. I mean, it's a cliché answer as an educator, but children, they have so many hopes and so many dreams, and as an educator, to see them work towards that, and to put the things in place to help them achieve their dreams, that's what gets me going every day, knowing that that kid who wants to be a doctor, I can give them some extra work or something that puts them on the path to be successful. Give them a book or just motivate them. And kids, I mean, kids are amazing. Kids make mistakes, but our job as adults is to never judge them for their mistakes, is to honestly just push them to be their best person because sometimes dealing with adults it gets really ... I don't know how to say this.

It's frustrating dealing with adults because we think that they should know better, and so to deal with students and watch them be better people than adults really gets me going. When I see all of these anti-CRT, anti-LGBTQ laws and legislations being passed and seeing the students stand up and say, "No, we're not going to take it. This is our school. You're not going to do these things to us." That gives me hope. That gives me hope not only as an educator, but hope for this world and hope for society that our students are better people than us. And I know that's kind of a lazy answer sometimes because we as adults we could to work on ourselves to make things better, but knowing that we have students who say, "No. No way. This is not going to go. We are going to be a better society. We're going to live in a better society. Even if I had to stand up for it." That really inspires me every single day.

And so, the kids are what keep me motivated. The kids are what wake me up on a long day. I just love working with children and inspire them just to meet their needs and fulfill their dreams.

Jen Walsh:

Well, thank you so much, Rodney, for joining us today. And thank you all for listening. We hope to have you back on our next episode, but until then, be sure to check out our website, schoolcounselor.org for school counselor resources. We also love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook @theamericanschoolcounselorassociation, Twitter @ascatweets and Instagram @weareasca. Thanks and hear from you soon. I am Jen Walsh, and this has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counselor Association.