

# PA Principal and Philadelphia School Leader Named NASSP National Principal of the Year

*Richard Gordon of Paul Robeson High School for Human Services announced as  
2021 honoree during National Principals Month*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Reston, VA**—Richard Gordon, principal of Paul Robeson High School for Human Services in Philadelphia, PA, has been named the [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#) (NASSP) 2021 National Principal of the Year. The surprise announcement, part of the 2020 celebration of [National Principals Month](#), took place during a virtual meeting of Philadelphia principals earlier today.

Gordon won the award for successfully leading Robeson High School from the brink of closure to what is now considered Philadelphia’s premiere high school.

“Any school turnaround is hard, and it takes a special leader to sustain it,” said NASSP President Robert Motley in his presentation of the award. “But Mr. Gordon led Robeson High School’s turnaround under extraordinary political and social pressures, and at no point did he lose focus on the students. Under Mr. Gordon’s leadership, Robeson High School models what personalization was always meant to be. Personalization begins not at the data or at test targets, but at the person--with all their interests, needs, traumas, and dreams. His leadership makes that happen.”

In 2013 Gordon assumed the reins of Robeson High School, a school in a converted garage in the poverty-stricken area of West Philadelphia that was slated for closure. By 2019, Gordon’s led Robeson off the Pennsylvania High Needs/Academically Low Performing List and onto the list of High Progress Schools with a graduation rate of 95 percent. At the heart of Gordon’s success is the school motto “Build Your Own Brand,” which is realized by his meeting with each of the school’s 315 students to build an educational pathway around their interests. To help students reach their goals, Gordon established countless business, community, and dual-enrollment partnerships specific to student needs. In one illustrative case of a student who dreamed of working on the

NASCAR circuit, Gordon leveraged partnerships to secure the student an internship with the nationally renowned all-female Philadelphia mechanic shop Girls Auto Clinic. They plugged him into the NASCAR circuit in the Pocono Mountains, and he drove in his first professional NASCAR-sponsored race this past summer. This case is the norm, as all students are connected to mentors and a business coach to define actionable steps for achieving their desired outcomes.

“Richard doesn’t see obstacles, only opportunities,” commented Kerensa Wing, the 2020 National Principal of the Year who served on the committee that selected Gordon. “His passion for working with kids and helping them succeed is impressive.”

Finding opportunities is a hallmark of Gordon’s leadership. When two Black men were falsely arrested at a West Philadelphia Starbucks in an incident that made national headlines and resulted in a financial settlement with Starbucks and the City of Philadelphia, the men dedicated \$200,000 for seed money to launch Project Elevate through their Action Not Words Foundation. Gordon convinced the men and city leaders to select Robeson for the pilot program to equip the most vulnerable Philadelphians with the financial tools, resources, and access needed to break the cycle of generational poverty. Through this partnership, student entrepreneurs are learning how to write and execute business plans to launch businesses in their communities.

Yet, Gordon recognized early that achievement was possible only on a foundation of student safety and wellness. To that end, he created the Safe Corridors Program, a collaboration between Robeson and the University City District (a partnership of the business community, universities, community-based organizations, Philadelphia police, University of Pennsylvania Security Officers, and West Philadelphia residents) to provide extra supervision for students traveling to and from school. Partnerships with mental health therapy programs provide trauma supports for students and build a trauma-informed school environment. Truancy rates have dropped precipitously to near 10% (-22.6%), suspension rates fell below 5%, and bullying has been eliminated, with zero reports in the past 5 years-- transforming the school into a safe harbor and making Robeson one of the safest schools in Philadelphia.

Gordon holds a bachelor’s degree from Lincoln University, and master’s degrees from both Coppin State University and Lehigh University.

School District of Philadelphia Superintendent William R. Hite, Jr., Ed.D. said Gordon’s commitment to serving children and families is the driving force behind his success at Robeson.

“From the moment he arrived at the District, Principal Gordon’s enthusiasm for creating a positive learning and instructional environment has yielded wonderful results,” Hite said. “We are thrilled to see him receive this recognition and look forward to even greater success for his students and the entire school community.”

“The PA Principals Association is proud that one of our very own school leaders has been named NASSP’s Principal of the Year,” said Paul Healey, the group’s executive director, who identified Gordon as the 2020 Pennsylvania Principal of the Year. “Richard Gordon exemplifies the qualities of an effective principal and demonstrates his leadership skills, passion, dedication, and an outstanding commitment to his students and school community on a daily basis. We are proud of his accomplishments and join in the well deserved congratulations from across PA and the nation.”

The NASSP Principal of the Year (POY) program recognizes outstanding middle level and high school principals who have succeeded in providing high-quality learning opportunities for students as well as demonstrating exemplary contributions to the profession. Each year, NASSP honors State Principals of the Year from each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of State Office of Overseas Schools, and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity. Out of these exceptional school leaders, three are selected as finalists and one is ultimately selected for the National Principal of the Year award. The 2021 finalists include Adam Clemons of Piedmont High School in Piedmont, AL; and Michelle Kefford, formerly of Charles Flanagan High School in Pembroke Pines, FL, now principal of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL.

**Gordon is one of only three principals from Pennsylvania ever to receive this national distinction, along with Kevin McHugh of the Pennsbury School District in 2002 and Michael Pladus of the Interboro School District in 1999.**

For more information on the POY program, please visit [www.nassp.org/poy](http://www.nassp.org/poy).

## **About NASSP**

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student’s potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the [National Honor Society](#), [National Junior Honor Society](#), [National Elementary Honor Society](#), and [National Student Council](#).