

# NASSP'S 2021 NATIONAL PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR

## Richard M. Gordon IV

By Christine Savicky • Principal Leadership Article • January 2021



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—Excerpt from Page 4

Sometimes your calling may be bigger than you imagine. In the case of Richard M. Gordon IV, NASSP’s 2021 National Principal of the Year, no matter how many times he tried to sidestep his destiny, it kept catching up with him.

Swayed by his 12th-grade history teacher, Richard J. Sia, Gordon earned a bachelor’s degree in education thinking he’d be a history teacher. But at his first job, Gordon not only spent seven years teaching in one of the most dangerous inner-city schools in Baltimore, he also earned his master’s degree in special education. That experience, combined with his next career move as discipline/truancy liaison and regional director of Alternative Educational Services in

Philadelphia, shaped his future more than he would've imagined. He had a gift for empathizing with and relating to students, and that gift evolved from empathy to action. His mission became to help resolve his students' issues so that personal roadblocks wouldn't interfere with their education.

At Alternative Educational Services, he developed a system where the administration would respond to student crisis and resolve that crisis within three days. His system worked so well that the central office in the School District of Philadelphia (SDoP) loaned Gordon out to other regional offices in the city to assist with their rising case numbers and update their own disciplinary actions process.

Gordon spent the next couple of years doing what he had a natural knack for—strengthening a positive school culture and climate as assistant principal at George Washington High School in Philadelphia. While pursuing a second master's degree in Educational Leadership, Gordon had met Principal Kathy Murphy—his supervising principal during his internship—who became one of his closest mentors. She requested that he join her at George Washington High School as her assistant principal. In a school that, at times, had issues with angry students and parents, Murphy and her staff were always surprised to find that after a conversation with Gordon, those same angry students and parents walked away satisfied and happy. Others began to notice as well.

Arlene Ackerman, the SDoP's former superintendent, wanted Gordon to lead his own high school. Gordon was reluctant. He turned down their first offer of a school with 1,500 students due to family considerations, but in April 2011 he accepted the principal position at a smaller initiative school, the Roberts Vaux High School (RVHS) in North Philadelphia, as a part of Ackerman's "Promise Academy Initiative."

While at RVHS, Gordon increased the graduation rate by 5 percent in the first year—10 percent by the time of his departure. During his second year, Gordon noted that he had a great team of teachers and support staff in place, and he saw increases in every level of preliminary demographic data. Then, on December 12, 2012—despite RVHS' improvements—the district announced the school would close, along with 23 other low-performing schools. Gordon was devastated, but still managed to increase attendance, decrease discipline, and keep morale relatively positive until the final closure in the spring of 2013.

However, this turn of events left Gordon disenchanted with school leadership, at least in the way it was being applied in his school district. So, he took a monumental step—and asked to be demoted to an assistant principal position.

No one could believe his request. Surely, someone who was a principal would never want to return voluntarily to the assistant principal position!

Gordon was adamant that there was a more effective way to run a school, but he felt limited by budgetary realities that, at times, minimized the quality of education for children. But

several district offices, colleagues, and his own union insisted that Gordon remain a principal and participate in the school reassignments taking place with displaced SDoP principals. Having interest in only one position, Gordon applied to be principal at George Washington High School where his friend and mentor, Kathy Murphy, was retiring. He knew the school intimately and thought it would be a good fit. Central administration had other ideas and hired someone else for the position. At that point, Gordon says he threw up his hands and said, “God, put me where you think I will do the most good.” In July of 2013, he ended up at Paul Robeson High School for Human Services (PRHS) in Philadelphia.

### **Battling Toxic School Culture**

When Gordon took the helm at PRHS, it was a school that was expected to be permanently closed due to the toxic, traumatic school climate. He found an overpowering negative attitude rooted in a deeply conflicted relationship between all of the stakeholders. Almost 100 percent of his students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and most came from a one-parent, low-income household. “There was generally a negative attitude hovering over the school with despondent staff members questioning their belief in their students’ ability to succeed, and students who did not feel academically, psychologically, emotionally, or physically safe,” he says.

As principal, Gordon vowed that he would be an innovative, possibly unconventional, principal. He focuses on an ideal, not a conventional process. He listens to his team and then tries to find innovative means to fulfill their needs.

He learned this method of attack from Edward Monastra, a mentor and a rebel principal under whom Gordon served as an assistant principal. Monastra always told the truth and spoke up about what was right. He was always visible in the hallways between classes and jogged after students if they weren’t heading to the right classroom. He knew his students by name. From this example, Gordon has built his own brand of principalship, a formula he has passed on to his students.

### **Build Your Own Brand**

Every PRHS student who comes through the doors is evaluated individually. Gordon encourages everyone during their freshman year to “build your own brand” and start defining their postsecondary path. They may change their mind, but they must establish a goal. Over the next four years, Gordon and his staff help that student achieve their goal by whatever means necessary. “We are known as the ‘Robeson Family,’” states Makayla Harris, former student and Gordon’s niece. “Principal Gordon built a school culture whereby he and every teacher makes it their mission to know every student by name, know our families, our friends, and what we are interested in.”

Take Avaunte Walker, class of 2019, for instance. As a freshman, Walker said that he wanted to work on the NASCAR circuit, an interesting challenge in inner-city Philadelphia. However, through Gordon’s connections with the Future Project, Project L.Y.F.T (Leading Youth for Tomorrow) and Ebony Suns Enterprises, Walker earned an internship with the nationally renowned “Girls Auto Clinic”—an all-girls auto shop in Philadelphia with NASCAR affiliates.

With them, he was able to work in the pit with the Patriots Motorsports Group. This past September, Walker learned that he had earned a full-ride scholarship to the NASCAR Technical Institute in Mooresville, NC, where he will begin later this year.

Because PRHS supports many first-time college families, Gordon has partnered with several colleges and universities near the Philadelphia area—The Community College of Philadelphia, Harrisburg University, Drexel University, the University of the Sciences, the University of Pennsylvania, Pierce College, and West Chester University—to provide dual-enrollment classes for students. The University of Pennsylvania has led the way, creating on-campus coursework just for PRHS students. By attending on-campus classes, the students get a real feel for how college classes are run and the expectations of the professors. By the time they graduate and head off to their own school, they're armed with a number of college credits and/or college experiential learning.

Students at PRHS who are not interested in a four-year college degree are connected to a mentor or business coach from Ebony Suns Enterprises LLC. The mentor helps design actionable steps toward achieving the students' goals, including business startups, essential employment skills coaching, financial literacy, and job placement.

### **Empowering Students and Adults**

Another one of Gordon's main goals as principal is to empower his students (and their adult family members) to help break the cycle of poverty and inequities.

Gordon has teamed up with various community and government partners to expand the same workforce development training programs offered to his students and extend them to their families, assisting them with opportunities to increase employment skills and income potential. Philadelphia has the lowest minimum wage of any city in the United States when adjusted for the cost of living, according to a study released in May by The Pew Charitable Trusts. For cities like Philadelphia, where deep generational poverty rates have remained steady at approximately 26 percent for several years now, it is necessary to break the cycle of poverty in order to stabilize households.

Many PRHS students feared walking to and from school in a city laden with violence. Gordon created the "Safe Corridors Program"—a collaboration between PRHS and the University City District that's a partnership of renowned anchor institutions, including the business community, colleges/universities, community-based organizations, police, university security officers, and residents. These organizations work together to create a safe space for students traveling to and from the school. Gordon reports that since instituting this program, the safety in the surrounding neighborhoods has improved greatly.

Gordon has also created a partnership with The Consortium, a mental health therapy program that provides trauma support for students and helps to build a trauma-informed school environment. With the implementation of the "Safe Corridors Program" and the mental health therapy provided by The Consortium, truancy rates dropped from 22.6 percent to 10 percent, graduation rates improved to 95 percent, school suspension rates fell below 5 percent, and bullying has been completely eliminated—with zero reported incidents in five years—making PRHS one of the safest schools in Philadelphia.

To help with food insecurity, especially now that the students are not physically in the building and cannot get the breakfast and lunch provided by the school, Gordon has partnered with Rebel Ventures—a youth-driven healthy food business focused on addressing youth hunger and providing students with healthy food options during breakfast and lunch. In an effort to empower parents, Gordon also coupled Rebel Ventures with the “Action-Not-Words” program. “Project Elevate” strives to equip the most vulnerable Philadelphians with the financial tools, resources, and access needed to break the cycle of generational poverty.

Professionally, Gordon empowers his teachers as well. Elena Evans, special education teacher and teacher leader at PRHS, states, “In 2017, I sought the opportunity to work with Principal Gordon after hearing numerous stories about Robeson’s inclusive, family-like learning atmosphere.” After working at PRHS for even a short amount of time, Evans could feel the culture and climate difference in the school. “Gordon is so committed to fostering a learning environment that is both student-centered and focused on teachers’ personal/professional well-being,” Evans states. “He is always transparent, seeks input, is ever-present and highly visible, and celebrates everyone’s success. Most importantly, [he has] an amazing ability to build relationships. I have never seen such a genuine relationship of trust between administration, teachers, students, and parents.” His teachers believe that Gordon truly understands the imperative of culturally sustaining leadership as an innovative practice to promote and advance equity, and he works tirelessly for students to have access to the most effective and culturally responsive teachers. He has compiled a diverse staff that includes 6 percent Hispanic males, 12 percent Black females, 6 percent Black males, 6 percent biracial, a Black male principal, a Black male building engineer, and a Black female therapist.

### **Innovation and Creativity**

Gordon describes his leadership style as “entrepreneurial,” and that term certainly fits. When one of his students nearly died in a hail of bullets in Southwest Philadelphia, Gordon implemented a schoolwide Homebound Remote Learning program in December 2019 to ensure the student did not miss school. (He didn’t realize at the time that the same program would help teens weather the storm of COVID-19.) Staff focused on three strategies for this program: quick transition to remote learning, building confidence on any technological device, and keeping students engaged. Their success shows: PRHS boasts a 96 percent rate of graduating seniors and 90 percent rate of grade 9–11 students remaining on track through the pandemic.

Gordon is quick to point out that this award is not just for him. He strongly believes in distributed and relational leadership, and he encourages his teachers and his students to think outside the box, and then gives them the freedom to explore their ideas. Gordon has become a father figure to many of his students. In his virtual celebration announcing this award—where every teacher and student surprised him in a Zoom call congratulating him—he told them, “This award is really about all of us. I want you to see in yourselves what I see in you. My name might be on the award, but everything we ever accomplish has to do with the fact that we have tremendous students and the best staff in the city of Philadelphia.”

### **Sidebar: History in Education**

Richard Gordon began his post-high school career by getting his bachelor's degree in education with a social studies concentration at Lincoln University in Lincoln University, PA. After he graduated in 1994, he accepted a position teaching in Baltimore at one of the most dangerous inner-city schools while he attended Coppin State University pursuing a master's degree in special education. In that time, he also earned two Mayor's Citations for Teaching Excellence from former Baltimore City Mayor and former Governor Martin O'Malley.

With that background, he moved forward serving as the discipline and truancy liaison and regional director of Alternative Educational Services in Philadelphia, gaining attention and accolades for his student crisis resolution program.

The central office in the School District of Philadelphia (SDoP) sent Gordon to other regional offices in the city to help them update their own disciplinary actions process. The administrative staff at SDoP then encouraged Gordon to get his leadership degree, so he attended Lehigh University for a second master's degree in educational leadership. From there, he joined mentor Kathy Murphy at George Washington High School as her associate principal and started his journey toward the principalship, particularly in struggling schools.

Today, as a trained leader, Gordon himself is a mentor serving on the PhillyPlus Residency program—a two-year, practice-based principal certification program that prepares teachers and aspiring school leaders to transform schools into high-performing learning environments. He prioritizes equity, diversity, inclusiveness, belonging, and cultural responsiveness by emphasizing the need for principals with a social political consciousness, positive views of students with diverse backgrounds, and an intrinsic responsibility for social justice.

#### **Original Source:**

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