

Mike Favor, Principal Extraordinaire

Written by Titilayo Bediako
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Considered by many to be the best principal that North High School ever had, the Northside community of Minneapolis was shocked when Mike Favor announced that he was leaving to become principal of Cooper High School in the Robbinsdale School District. Favor is credited for turning a plethora of North's failures into successes.

With the beginning of his fourth year in Robbinsdale, Mike Favor has used his same magic at Cooper. At a school where many students lacked discipline and struggled academically, Favor came to demonstrate that all children could be successful in school.

Favor is a former offensive lineman, who has been called the greatest player in North Dakota State football (1985-1988). Mike Favor played in three national championship victories. He graduated from North Dakota State in 1989 with a degree in social work. He also earned a Master's degree in Education from Hamline University. Favor was a teacher and administrator at St. Louis Park High School and then assistant principal at Minneapolis North High before being promoted to principal.

Favor goes the extra mile to assure that students at Cooper succeed. During Favor's tenure at Cooper, tremendous changes have taken place that benefit students. A record number of students of color are graduating, the achievement gap is decreasing and all students know that the expectation of Cooper is academic excellence. Favor has also promoted males, including African Americans, to leadership positions, in a female dominated profession. His motto is "Listen, tell the truth and hold people accountable." He allows nothing to get in the way of student success.

Insight: This is the beginning of your fourth year at Cooper High School. What were some of the challenges coming into Cooper?

Favor: I really missed North High School and I have missed the Northside. Everyday I wonder if I made the right decision coming here. Yet, when I saw children at Cooper underachieving, I knew I could help make a difference. Helping to change the mindset of the learning community and helping them see that even our most difficult students can and will be successful, and showing them plenty of examples has been so rewarding.

Insight: What are you proud of at Cooper?

Favor: I am proud that we are getting better and better every year. We have become much more intentional, much more data focused and better at listening to the students. We have become better at setting the expectations and holding everyone accountable. I have high expectations for everyone in the building. My motto is, "If it's not working, fix it. If it's a water fountain or children not learning; fix it."

Insight: How are things going at the school with the teachers and all the changes you have put in place?

Favor: I think it's working. They all know how to use assessments to improve learning. We have identified that once something needs to be fixed, we do it. Once we have improved a problem, I make sure it continues to work. If staff development isn't helping us reach our expectations, if it doesn't serve our school or our students, again we fix it. I believe that No Child Left Behind has a purpose; it gives us a way to look at education with a common lens. When I see a large number of students behind and dropping out, and a large number of children of color in special education, it makes me question if the system is truly serving all children. Accountability measurements are imperative; be it administrators or teachers, all of us who touch the lives of children must be accountable; this includes me. If I am ever underperforming I shouldn't be in this job.

Insight: How many African American and children of color attend Cooper?

Favor: Almost fifty percent of our students are of color. Students come from Robbinsdale, Crystal, Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, New Hope, Plymouth and Golden Valley. This doesn't include the 200 Choice is Yours students, who are students throughout Minneapolis who have chosen Cooper because they feel we can do a better job of educating their children than the schools where they came from. Our student numbers are at 1880 and students keep coming. We have what we call the "The Cooper Way." We are very intentional, from our support staff to our discipline teachers; the conversation starts with academics. We keep the main focus on learning, and we are constantly looking for evidence of it. Education works here. All kids are working at a higher level but still, it has to get better. Students and teachers know that we are about education and learning. All male administrators wear a shirt and tie. They model excellence. Staff needs to see it and parents need to see it; I think it's important.

Insight: What have you been able to accomplish in the last three years?

Favor: Cooper has been one of the top 1,500 high schools in the United States for the last two years. More students of color are taking IB courses. I have developed a relationship with Anoka Technical College. All juniors and seniors are allowed to take classes there, regardless of their grades. I want all students at Cooper to know that college is for them and that it is within reach. Being on a college campus helps them see that. Kids feel that they belong at Cooper. No student feels invisible to staff or to administrators. My students know Mr. Favor loves them.

They need to know it and they need to hear it. Sometimes its tough love; I may not always do what they want me to do, but students feel they are listened to by their principal.

Insight: Cooper High School has a lot of Black males working here, why?

Favor: A large part of my leadership is about training the next generation of principals and leaders. I'm every student's principal and the other African American males at Cooper are men that students can trust and look up to. All students feel this. Far too many stereotypes of Black males dominate our society. Our children need to see Black males as educational leaders; this happens at Cooper. This institution is a training ground for male leaders. These men are helping to change the conversation at Cooper. We are asking students to be part of that change. Rather than talking about basketball, these men are asking students how their classes are going and where they are going to attend college. Having Black males as models has been tremendous for all students at Cooper. Black males haven't always been on the scene for our children, especially children of color.

Black male leadership at Cooper is not going to be invisible and we are going to be constant examples of excellence. Jerald Hickman is an example of this. He was a principal in Minneapolis and mentored me at North High and he is still mentoring me. He is an example of African American men at our best. I am following Hickman's example and mentoring other brothers to be positive examples for all of our students.

Insight: What do you want the readers to know?

Favor: I want to tell everyone thank you for trusting me with your children; whether you are at North or Cooper High School. It's an amazing responsibility and I am trying to live up to your trust in me. I have appreciated people trusting that I will do the right thing educationally with and for their children. Working with our children, being a principal has been one of my greatest honors.