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## New Report

### School Achievement Increases as Suspensions Decrease, New Study Shows *School Districts Urged to Address Achievement Gap and Reduce School Suspensions*

#### Lexington, KY:

A new report, "*Northern Lights: Success in Student Achievement and School Discipline at Northern Elementary School*," highlights that school achievement can be increased dramatically without resorting to out-of-school suspensions. Both of these accomplishments occur in an elementary school where fair and reasonable discipline is maintained in an environment where all children can learn. The case study focuses on Northern Elementary School in Lexington, where 70% of the school population is low-income students.

Northern Elementary's success is particularly important for the achievement gap. In Kentucky and across the nation, public educators are confronting two critical concerns: the achievement gap between white students and students of color, and discipline policies that result in increased numbers of suspensions and expulsions of students for relatively minor misbehaviors. A February, 2003, study of Kentucky schools found that out-of-school suspensions in the state fall disproportionately on students of color. When students are excluded from school, they inevitably fall behind in their studies. Thus, exclusionary school discipline policies fuel and perpetuate the achievement gap.

The author of *Northern Lights*, Dr. David Richart of the National Institute on Children at Spalding University, said, "For far too many students, school suspensions and referrals to court are the first steps in a 'school- to-prison pipeline.' It's time to disrupt that pipeline and give all students a fair chance to achieve."

Over the course of four years, Northern Elementary School in Fayette County dramatically changed from one of the worst schools in the public school system to one of the best:

- During the 1999-2000 school year, only 15% of the students were reading at grade level. This increased to 32% the next year, to 48% the next, to 62.5% in 2002, and to 81% in 2003.
- The number of incidents leading to suspensions dropped from 29 in 2000-2001 to 12 in 2002-03, a decline of almost 60%.
- The total number of children suspended from school went from 16 in 2000-01 to 7 in 2001-2002, a 56% reduction.

The approach taken at Northern Elementary School demonstrates the importance of outstanding leadership, a different vision for students based on the adoption of core values, and a team of administrators and teachers with a passion for teaching children who had experienced repeated failure in school. The Northern Elementary staff wrote grants to secure small investments of state and private funds to support academic and support services for those children most at risk. The school program carefully combines old-fashioned disciplinary techniques with more modern methods of providing child and family support programs.

“We know there are random acts of excellence in schools throughout Fayette County, but why isn’t there a *systemic, focused effort* to close the achievement gap while keeping our kids in schools where they all can learn? We applaud Northern Elementary and we encourage Fayette County schools to fully embrace this approach to creating an environment where all children can learn,” said Reverend Bob Brown, Vice Chair of One Community, One Voice, a community coalition monitoring Fayette County’s efforts to close the achievement gap.

*Northern Lights* is a follow-up to a statewide report issued last year, “*Unintended Consequences: The Impact of ‘Zero Tolerance’ and Other Exclusionary Policies on Kentucky Students*,” which can be downloaded at [www.buildingblocksforyouth.org](http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org). The report found that, in some schools in Kentucky, African-American students are suspended two to seven times as frequently as white students for “board violations” such as “defiance of authority” or other class disturbances. That report also found that, although there were less than 40 weapons violations in schools across the state in the 2000-2001 school year, there were 68,000 suspensions for school board violations.

*Northern Lights* sets forth principles and strategies that can be adopted by other schools that seek to create safe, respectful, and academically successful learning environments in the district, throughout the state, and across the country.

*Northern Lights: Success in Student Achievement and School Discipline at Northern Elementary School* can be viewed and downloaded at [www.buildingblocksforyouth.org](http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org) any time after 12:01AM EST on April 22, 2004.

**For more information on Northern Elementary School, and the achievement gap and school discipline in Fayette County, contact:**

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