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### Keep an Eye on Northern

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## **KEEP EYE ON NORTHERN, ACADEMY**

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Monday, September 12, 2005

Author: Richard Day

The school year has started in Fayette County with an innovation: the new Booker T. Washington Academy. This is a laudable and ambitious collaborative effort involving the merger of two low-scoring, high-poverty schools -- the Academy at Lexington and Booker T. Washington Elementary -- with help from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the University of Kentucky.

Will Fayette County schools Superintendent Stu Silberman achieve his goal to make the academy one of the highest-achieving schools in the state without changing its demographics?

In January, Silberman told parents that much of their children's low-test-score problem could be attributed to the principals and their ability to motivate their staffs. He said principals -- one at a high-scoring school and one at a low-scoring school -- could be switched, and that the scores would flip-flop in two years. He subsequently selected Principal Peggy Petrilli to lead the new academy.

Petrilli had received acclaim in recent years as principal of Northern Elementary. She showed a flair for innovation, emphasized the arts and found more instructional time by starting Saturday programs. She created a more inviting atmosphere in the school, and her students made significant progress in academics.

Since 2000, test scores rose 20 points on the state assessment, into the low 70s, while the number of "novices," the lowest performers, was cut in half. Much of the school's success has been credited to Petrilli's leadership.

But what happens to Northern Elementary now? Northern has lost its leadership and seven key faculty members who transferred to the academy with Petrilli. As Northern children returned to school this year, they were greeted by 15 faculty members who were new to Northern (almost half the total), including first-year principal Jennifer Flinn.

There is a need for sustainable student achievement growth in every Fayette County public school. The question is how the district gets there.

Silberman told the Herald-Leader last November, "We don't want to come in and change everything and make that the cause of the increase in student achievement. We want to take the current population and faculty and staffs that we have in place and provide them with supports and resources to show what can happen."

The goals for the academy could not be higher. The task of moving low-scoring students into the upper echelons will create a high-pressure environment for the adults involved, and some teachers expressed the desire to transfer out of the spotlight.

Silberman extended the time frame allowing teachers to do so. In the end, 14 teachers left the

former Booker T. Washington and nine teachers left the former Academy at Lexington. Despite the superintendent's desire to minimize the amount of change, Petrilli got an opportunity to hire a lot of new teachers.

A typical elementary principal might expect to hire a handful of new teachers in his first year; perhaps another handful in the second. Principals consider some amount of turnover to be a positive thing as the principal slowly begins to build a faculty that reflects his philosophy.

Most principals prefer to hire teachers with successful track records. But Petrilli seems to choose promising rookies; the academy started the year with 20 first-year teachers out of a total faculty of 40. Well-motivated young teachers can become proficient and loyal. They are also easier to fire if their performance comes up short.

Taking a school from 40 to 70 on the state accountability system is a great thing. Going from 70 to 100 is even better. The state goal is to get every school to 100 by 2014. Getting there may require other schools to engage in the kind of effort that can now be seen only at the academy.

Citizens should continue to monitor the progress of these and all public schools. We should support their efforts and provide adequate resources. They are vitally important to our community's continued prosperity.

Caption: - **Richard Day** of Lexington is a retired elementary school principal.

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