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| Organization teaches parents their rights |
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RALEIGH - School suspension is a known contributor to the achievement gap because suspended students receive inadequate or no alternative education services, according to Advocates for Children's Services.

Research shows that N.C. has the fourth highest suspension rate in the nation, and eastern Wake County has some of the highest suspension rates in the state. Toshiba Rice believes that informing students about their rights could help to decrease these rates. Rice founded a new grassroots organization dedicated to closing the achievement gap called Track My Steps, which will be having a student's right's party.

"Our goal is to help students comply more to the policies and procedures of Wake County Public School System to avoid suspension so they'll understand how not to get suspended," she said.

The event will take place Dec. 18 at the Life Center of Abundant Life Christian Center in Raleigh in the form of a holiday pizza party with music, games and trivia for middle and high school students to understand their rights in the school system as well as break-out sessions with legal representatives and student advocates.

"We want to teach these students what to do so they won't continue to feel helpless," Rice said. "A lot of times students will continue to talk back because they're in a defense mode, but what they don't realize is they are digging a ditch that leads to suspension and ultimately could lead up to repeating a grade. Because of lost instructional time, they're behind academic wise."

Rice said they will be sending e-mails to principals and asking them to distribute flyers to parents or students who have already been suspended twice or who have high absentee rates. "Oftentimes, if parents don't know, they won't automatically ask for a Personal Education Plan because their child is now at risk of suspension. Parents don't understand a lot of times it has to be appealed within two to four days, and, if parents don't know this, it ultimately leads up to criminal charges."

The slogan of the new group is "You may know where I've been, but look where I'm going." Track My Steps "dedicated to closing achievement gaps one county at a time."

Rice, who is a local minister, parent and chair of the District 1 Board Advisory Committee for WCPSS, said she is passionate about her new grassroots organization. "Because of all the things I've gone through with my own children, I never wanted another parent to suffer with lack of resources like I had to get things done," she said. "My kids are not exempt from being African-American males and being suspended. My kids have been suspended even though I'm a strong advocate. The difference is, because I'm an advocate and because I do understand, I've been able to advocate for my kids."

Goals for the new group range from developing partnerships, to increasing the graduation rate by 35 percent by 2017, to having a liaison for children who have working or unengaged parental support, to providing a model for a healthy family.   
Track My Steps is partnering with health and child care providers in January to go into prenatal clinics before the baby is even born to begin sharing with mothers the different steps they need to do at home to prepare the child to be kindergarten ready.

The organization is currently working on its Race to 100 campaign to get students to a 100 percent graduation rate by 2014. The staff is currently seeking volunteers, particularly in the eastern Wake County area. Call (919) 295-0595.