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NEWS RELEASE

Budget Cuts Coincide With Widening Achievement Gap

Report Urges General Assembly to Restore Budget Cuts that Disproportionately Harm High-Poverty Schools

Richmond, January 8, 2015—State per-pupil funding has decreased since 2009, while the achievement gap between low-income students and other students, as measured by scores on national testing, has widened substantially during that span, according to a new report by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, also known as the Nation’s Report Card), periodically administers nationwide standardized testing in grades 4, 8, and 12. While overall NAEP scores have increased in Virginia since 2009, low-income 4th and 8th grade students experienced smaller gains than students not classified as low-income. As a result, the achievement gap between low-income and other students has increased since the start of state budget cuts.

Gaps have widened in both reading and math, and for both 4th and 8th graders. The gap in reading scores for 4th and 8th graders is now at its largest in over a decade, reversing Virginia’s progress in narrowing the gap between 2003 and 2009. On 4th grade reading and math tests, the gap between low-income students and other students increased 20% from 2009 to 2013. For 8th grade students, the gap increased 19% on the reading test and 8% on the math test.

“A widening achievement gap is an alarming trend, suggesting that budget cuts may be having a disproportionately negative impact on low-income students,” according to the report’s author,

policy researcher John Morgan. “This threatens to undo previous progress and to stall Virginia’s efforts to raise achievement levels of low-income students and struggling schools.”

This news follows a report released by the Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis indicating that high-poverty school divisions suffered more severe funding cuts than more affluent school divisions, 21% compared to 11% respectively.

In September 2014, Governor McAuliffe announced his plan to prioritize and address the needs of struggling schools in high-poverty school divisions. The Governor’s proposed budget does not cut K-12 education; however, the existing cuts might already be negatively impacting the Governor’s efforts to raise the achievement of high-poverty schools.

“While ‘no new K-12 cuts’ may seem like an acceptable fall-back option to restoring previous cuts, these data suggest it could be a ‘fall behind’ option for students in high poverty schools,” cautions Morgan. Angela Ciolfi, education attorney and director of the JustChildren program at the Legal Aid Justice Center, adds that “Unless budget cuts that have fallen disproportionately on high-poverty schools are restored, the achievement gap may continue to widen. That’s an option that Virginia, and her low-income students, cannot afford.”

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The JustChildren Program of the Legal Aid Justice Center offers civil legal services to low-income families throughout Central Virginia in the areas of education, juvenile justice, mental health, and foster care. Through legal representation, statewide advocacy, community education and organizing, JustChildren works both to eliminate the immediate symptoms and to address the underlying causes of poverty in Virginia.

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