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New Report: Virginia's School Suspension Crisis Worsened in 2015-16

Charlottesville, Virginia (October 17, 2017) – Virginia schools continue to suspend students at an alarming rate—an ongoing crisis that harms students of color, students with disabilities, and elementary school students most profoundly.

An update to the Legal Aid Justice Center's *Suspended Progress* report reveals that, during the 2015-16 school year, Virginia schools issued over **131,500** out-of-school suspensions to over **70,000** students, marking an increase in the Commonwealth's suspension rate after four years of a downward trend.

In this update to *Suspended Progress*, the Legal Aid Justice Center finds that:

- Students with disabilities were suspended at rates **2.6** times higher than that of non-disabled students; African-American students were suspended at rates **3.8** times higher than Hispanic and white students.
- The short-term suspension rate increased in 2015-2016 after years of significant steady decline.
- Virginia schools continue to suspend very young students at an astonishing rate, issuing over **17,300** short-term suspensions and at least **93** long-term suspensions just to children in pre-K through 3rd grade.
- The vast majority of all suspensions were issued for minor offenses, with approximately two-thirds of all suspensions issued for behavior offenses like: possession of cell phones, minor insubordination, disrespect, and using inappropriate language.

“Exclusionary discipline is myopic and harmful—we cannot continue to use access to education as a punishment for student conduct and expect positive results from either students or schools,” said Amy Woolard, Legal Aid Justice Center attorney and author of the report. “When children are suspended from school, they are more likely to experience academic failure, drop out of school, have substance abuse issues, have mental health needs, and become involved in the justice system.”

The report points to proven alternatives to school exclusion that keep students connected to academics and provide tailored interventions when needed. Those alternatives include restorative practices, multi-tiered systems of supports, and social and emotional learning programs as positive steps local schools can implement in lieu of exclusion.

The Legal Aid Justice Center's report provides policymakers with immediate steps to take during the 2018 General Assembly session to begin to reverse this crisis. It also offers local school boards and communities a framework for ensuring student codes of conduct promote positive school climate and keep students on track toward graduation. "The good news is we know what works better for students and for schools," said Woolard. "Alternatives to exclusion like restorative practices emphasize accountability while strengthening students' relationship to their education, their teachers and administrators, and their peers."

To read the report, visit: www.justice4all.org/suspension.

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About the Legal Aid Justice Center

The Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) fights injustice in the lives of individual Virginians while rooting out exploitative policies and practices that keep people in poverty. LAJC uses impact litigation, community organizing, and policy advocacy to solve urgent problems in areas such as housing, education, civil rights, immigration, healthcare and consumer finance. LAJC's primary service areas are Charlottesville, Northern Virginia, Richmond and Petersburg, but the effects of their work are felt statewide.

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