

July 6, 2018

Re: Increasing School Safety by Investing in Student Supports

Dear Members of the House Select Committee on School Safety:

One of the Commonwealth's most critical functions is to honor its constitutional charge to ensure a high-quality public education for every child. Within that obligation, our schools are also committed to providing a safe, supportive environment for students to learn academic material, build social skills, and strengthen interpersonal relationships—all of which prepare children and youth for both the workforce and civic life.

Recent tragedies involving gun violence inside schools, however, have sparked a different conversation about how our schools function and how our students can safely achieve their goals within the school building. Recently, in response to the tragic events in Parkland, FL, we've had public discussions about renovating infrastructure, bolstering security measures at entrances and exits, and increasing law enforcement personnel. Sadly, these discussions aren't covering new ground—in 2012-2013, we addressed many facilities-based considerations after the devastating violence in Sandy Hook, CT.

To improve school safety, Virginia needs to make investments in the kinds of school supports and services that address the needs and improve the strengths of students well before behavior reaches a point of violence. **We strongly urge the General Assembly to take action to improve school safety in the following ways:**

Increase School Support Staff:

School counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists address the social and mental health needs of students in ways that improve safety for all members of a school community. The General Assembly should lift the arbitrary, recession-era cap on school support positions, following the Virginia Board of Education's 2017 recommendations to revise the Standards of Quality.

- According to data from the 2015-2016 Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services School Safety Audit, half of the 9,238 school threat assessments conducted that year involved suicide or self-harm.
- One in five children and youth has a mental health condition, and people with mental health conditions or needs are much more likely to have violence inflicted upon them than to commit violence themselves.
- Implementing trauma-informed practices, which school support staff play a vital role in assuring, improves safety and school climate—not just for students but for staff, as well.

Short of lifting the entire support position cap, the General Assembly should begin to make progressively incremental improvements to staffing levels, either by position or by student-to-staff ratio.

Improve School Policing Accountability:

According to the Va. Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) 2017 data, 87% of all high schools, 85% of all middle schools, and 34% of all elementary schools employ either full-time or part-time School Resource Officers (SROs), with the great majority staffing at full-time levels. While DCJS offers many types of trainings for SROs, and a number of SROs have attended one or more of these trainings at some point, Virginia currently does not require its SROs to be trained specifically in working with children and youth before serving in schools or on an ongoing basis to assure sustained knowledge.

Emphatically: The Commonwealth does not need to place more law enforcement officers in schools.

If localities are going to maintain any existing law enforcement in schools, however, the General Assembly should mandate that all SROs receive initial and ongoing training relevant to working with children and youth, including but not limited to:

- Child and adolescent development and psychology
- Working with students who have disabilities, mental health issues, and experience with abuse and trauma, including training regarding the manifestations of disabilities (for example: Youth CIT and Mental Health First Aid)
- Safe and age-appropriate responses to behavior including de-escalation techniques
- Implicit bias and cultural competency training
- Conflict resolution techniques, including mediation and restorative practices
- Relevant school discipline and delinquency laws, and the short- and long-term consequences of school exclusion and justice system involvement
- Relevant school and community resources, including mental health services and other supports

Localities should strongly encourage the development of a Memorandum of Understanding between local school divisions and law enforcement governing the use of SROs in schools and provide specific training to SROs on the contents of such an agreement.

Additionally, Virginia should provide detailed, accessible data and reports on SRO interactions with students, so that youth, parents, and communities better understand the scope and activities of any police presence in their local schools.

Invest in Positive School Discipline and School Climate:

The General Assembly should provide adequate resources for all localities to implement proven and developmentally appropriate strategies for improving school climate, preventing student behavior issues, and productively intervening when inappropriate behavior occurs.

Programs and methods such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, restorative practices, systems of care, Social and Emotional Learning, and trauma-informed schools are able to improve school

climate while addressing root causes of student misbehavior. At the heart of each of these approaches is ensuring struggling students do not become isolated or marginalized, but rather—when necessary—receive non-punitive, tailored interventions that help to keep students connected to peers and school staff, and potentially prevent escalating behavior issues. Each of these methods also improves academic achievement school-wide.

Broaden Accessibility of Supports and Services:

The General Assembly should increase and improve access to supports and services under relevant funding streams such as the Children’s Services Act (CSA) to address the needs of students a) who have mental health needs; b) who are at-risk of long-term suspension or expulsion; and/or c) who are at-risk of justice system involvement. The Children’s Services Act is a braided fund designed to function within a Systems of Care framework, but too often only becomes available to youth and families after a substantial point of crisis has already occurred. If services and supports were made available to children and youth in need at an earlier stage, such prevention and early intervention would have the added effect of improving school safety.

This reform should include a provision that allows CSA to waive the local matched contribution when a locality’s inability to meet their required match is the sole barrier to children and youth receiving the service. Increasing access to prevention and early intervention will also likely result in *decreasing* costs of later, more expensive interventions, such as private placements.

We strongly encourage the House Select Committee, the General Assembly, and Governor Northam to make thoughtful investments in school safety initiatives by focusing most intently on the student supports that keep children and youth healthy and connected to their education, both academically and socially. These types of investments pay long-term dividends toward increasing school safety and health for students, families, staff, and communities. The organizations listed in the attachment following this letter stand in solidarity with the contents & recommendations of this letter as co-signatories. Please let us know if we can provide you with any additional information as you determine recommendations for the 2019 General Assembly session and beyond.

Sincerely,

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The Legal Aid Justice Center is dedicated to battling poverty and injustice by solving critical legal and policy problems for individuals and communities. Through a combination of direct representation, organizing and community education, and policy advocacy, we identify, investigate, and attack systemic injustices in multiple subject areas, including: housing, employment, immigration, consumer, education, and civil rights issues.

The following organizations are co-signatories of this letter with the Legal Aid Justice Center:

Advocates for Richmond Youth

Alliance for Unitive Justice

American Academy of Pediatricians, Virginia Chapter

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia

Arc of Northern Virginia

Arc of Virginia

Children's National Health System

The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis

Disability Law Center of Virginia

Mr. Clarence M. Dunnaville, Jr., Esq.

Mr. Michael Farley, CEO of Elk Hill

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Virginia

New Virginia Majority

RISE for Youth

Side by Side (formerly ROSMY)

Support Richmond Public Schools

Virginia Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance

Virginia Association of School Nurses

Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

Virginia Civic Engagement Table

Virginia Counselors Association

Virginia Organizing

Virginia Poverty Law Center

Virginia Sexual & Domestic Violence Action Alliance

Voices for Virginia's Children