



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **New Report: Virginia’s School Discipline Crisis—Racial Disparities Widened in 2016-17; Suspended Students Across the Commonwealth Received Inadequate (or No) Education While Out of School**

**Charlottesville, Virginia (October 25, 2018)** – Virginia schools continued to use school exclusion as a consequence for student behavioral concerns at an alarming rate during the 2016-17 academic year—an ongoing crisis that harms Black students and students with disabilities most profoundly.

A 2018 update to the Legal Aid Justice Center’s *Suspended Progress* report series reveals that, during the 2016-17 school year, Virginia schools issued over **127,800** out-of-school suspensions to over **73,000** students, marking an increase over the prior year in the number of students in the Commonwealth subjected to exclusionary discipline.

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

- Black students were suspended at rates **4.5 times higher** than Hispanic and white students, a significantly wider gap over the prior year;
- Students with disabilities were suspended at rates **2.3 times higher** than that of non-disabled students;
- Virginia schools continued to suspend very young students at an astonishing rate, issuing nearly 18,000 short-term suspensions and at least 111 long-term suspensions just to children in pre-k through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade—a marked increase over the 2015-16 year;
- Once again, 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; and
- Students excluded from their home school—if they continue to receive education at all—are often funneled into inadequate alternative programs that operate without accountability to academic goals or the Commonwealth’s high educational standards.

“Too often in Virginia schools, we use ‘suspension’ and ‘accountability’ as synonyms,” said Amy Woolard, Legal Aid Justice Center attorney and author of the report. “When students exhibit behavioral issues, we can and should look to alternatives to school exclusion that can hold students accountable if needed, while also continuing their education and addressing underlying

needs, such as physical and mental health supports, trauma-informed care, disability services, and mentoring.”

The report points to proven alternatives to school exclusion that keep students connected to academics and provide tailored interventions when needed. Those trauma-informed 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 2019 General Assembly session to continue their work in pushing forward on positive reforms of the disciplinary system. 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—all of which, in turn, increases school safety for students and school staff alike.

“We must address our constitutional duty to provide a high-quality public education to *all* students, and particularly to Black students and students with disabilities, who have been bearing the devastating brunt of school exclusion practices for far too long,” said Woolard. “Our response to behavioral issues cannot continue to drive students out of the classroom and away from the positive connections and critical supports they need to thrive and successfully reach graduation.”

To read the report, visit: [www.justice4all.org/suspension](http://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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