

May 3, 2021

*Via Email and Upload*  
Mayor Justin M. Wilson  
301 King Street, Room 2300  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
[justin.wilson@alexandriava.gov](mailto:justin.wilson@alexandriava.gov)

**Re: Alexandria City Council Final Add/Delete Budget Work Session**  
**Letter in Support of *Tenants and Workers United Campaign for Police-Free Schools***

Dear Mayor Wilson, Vice Mayor Bennett-Parker, and Alexandria City Council Members:

The Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC)<sup>1</sup> writes this letter in support of the youth from Tenants and Workers United (TWU) in their student-led campaign for police-free schools in Alexandria. When you vote today, we urge you to carefully consider the students' stories and heed the national and local data demonstrating the harms that police can cause in schools.

Across the nation, youth of color and their allies are coming together to demand equity and justice in their lives and education.<sup>2</sup> Consistently, one of their demands is the removal of School Resource Officers (SROs) from their schools. Local youth in Alexandria have taken up this issue, and they are asking that the City Council *divest* from the SRO program and *invest* in programs that support their mental health and well-being.

**Research shows that removing SROs is beneficial for all students, but particularly students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students.** The presence of SROs is associated with increased arrests in school and increased suspension rates, particularly for students of color and LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>3</sup> Generally these arrests are for minor offenses, such as simple assault, resulting in greater numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the criminal legal system.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, while many community members and educators are understandably concerned about security and safety in school buildings, there is scarce research evidence about the impact of school police on crime or external threats to school buildings.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) is a non-profit organization that provides free civil legal assistance and advocacy on behalf of low-income individuals and families across Virginia. We partner with communities and clients to achieve racial, social, and economic justice by dismantling systems that create and perpetuate poverty.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., North Carolina: <https://southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/LiberateToEducate-YJP-Policy-Platform.pdf>; California: <https://humanimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HIP-Health-and-Cultural-Wealth-Student-Perspectives-on-Police-Free-Schools-in-Fresno-California-March-2021.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9133.12512#:~:text=Research%20Summary&text=We%20found%20that%20increased%20SROs,for%20students%20;https://gsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/LGBTQ\\_brief\\_FINAL.pdf;https://www.endzerotolerance.org/single-post/2019/03/11/Research-on-the-Impact-of-School-Policing](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9133.12512#:~:text=Research%20Summary&text=We%20found%20that%20increased%20SROs,for%20students%20;https://gsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/LGBTQ_brief_FINAL.pdf;https://www.endzerotolerance.org/single-post/2019/03/11/Research-on-the-Impact-of-School-Policing).

<sup>4</sup> *See id.*

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/single-post/2019/03/11/Research-on-the-Impact-of-School-Policing>.

While many Memoranda of Understanding between schools and police departments dictate that SROs should not be involved in routine disciplinary matters, recent research suggests that SROs still become involved in school discipline in subtle and informal ways.<sup>6</sup> What is “criminal” in nature versus what is routine discipline is a blurry distinction because school codes of conduct can mirror criminal codes. Even when SROs are not directly involved in school discipline, their presence can shift schools’ practices in subtle ways that make exclusionary discipline more likely.<sup>7</sup>

Research shows that even well-intentioned SROs can still influence schools to be somewhat more focused on law and order and less focused on students’ social and emotional well-being.<sup>8</sup> There is anecdotal evidence in Alexandria that SROs intimidate some students, which negatively impacts those students at school, even while other students, teachers, and principals like the SROs and enjoy their support. When we speak to community members, we hear that relationships between youth and adult mentors are of paramount importance for youth development and safety. **Tonight’s vote is an opportunity for schools to remove SROs and instead hire actual counselors, coaches, and mentors, who are specifically trained and equipped to focus on student well-being—not law enforcement officers who unnecessarily criminalize students.**

These issues are important for Alexandria to confront and correct, especially given the racial disparities. **Data shows that Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) disproportionately suspend students of color more than white students, and disproportionately refer students of color to law enforcement, even for similar offenses.**<sup>9</sup> During the 2018-2019 school year in ACPS, Black students made up 27% of the student population but 44.8% of all students receiving short-term suspensions and 41.7% of students receiving long-term suspensions; Hispanic students made up 36.2% of the student population but 44.9% of short-term suspensions and 50% of long-term suspensions. However, white students made up 28.2% of the student population, but only 7.2% of short-term suspensions and 8.3% of long-term suspensions.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, during the 2019-2020 school year, of the 57 instances where students were referred to law enforcement, 23 referrals to law enforcement were for Black students, 25 were for Hispanic students, and only 9 were white students.<sup>11</sup> There were also glaring disparities in which students were referred to law enforcement for certain offenses. Importantly, of the 18 students who received a suspension for fighting without injury, the *only one who was referred to law enforcement was a Black female student*. Disparate treatment based on race and gender is all too

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<sup>6</sup> See Kupchik, Aaron (2016) *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>7</sup> See *id.*

<sup>8</sup> See Kupchik, Aaron (2016) *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>9</sup> See Virginia Department of Education, <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>; Data from Alexandria City Public Schools, as analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Data from Alexandria City Public Schools, via FOIA request, as analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

common in policed spaces and has no place in the Alexandria community, especially not in schools.

**We also note that the [budget memo](#) responding to the City Council’s questions does not include the above information about *student referrals to law enforcement* and gives the impression that SROs are only apprehending adults who come into the building and never arresting or filing complaints on students.** However, as the above data shows, the data from ACPS that is reported to the U.S. Department of Education indicates there are cases of students being referred to law enforcement. **The budget memo also does not appear to include student cases that involved a juvenile intake complaint but were later diverted.**

We do not need SROs to keep our students safe. Students and teachers can be kept safe in schools by hiring more trained restorative justice practitioners, behavior interventionists, school aides, counselors, and other support staff to help prevent and address safety concerns and conflict, monitor entrances, ensure a welcoming environment, respond to the root causes of behavior, and address students’ holistic needs. Additionally, ACPS plans to spend **\$1.46 million** on upgrading and maintaining security systems and implementing and maintaining safety procedures for in fiscal year 2022, and therefore ACPS is already making a significant investment in school security.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we note that Virginia law contains no requirements for divisions to employ SROs in public schools—Va. Code § 22.1-280.2:3 simply provides that if school boards employ SROs, they must have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the police department. Nonetheless, the budget for the police department is within the purview of the Alexandria City Council; the City Council may vote to remove the funding for this program without violating the authority of the school board under Virginia law.

In sum, we urge the City Council to pass the add/delete proposal regarding reappropriating funds from SROs to mental health services and supports for school-aged children. Such mental health resources would better serve students, especially youth of color, who have been dealing with (1) the ongoing trauma of racial bias and disparities in policing at school and in the community plus (2) the COVID-19 pandemic and the related losses of loved ones, parental income, housing stability, food security, and academic learning for over a year. As students return to school for in-person learning, we can expect that students will have more extensive social and emotional needs than ever before. The time to make these changes is now.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter in support of TWU’s police-free schools campaign and for your continued commitment to ensuring educational and mental health equity

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<sup>12</sup> Alexandria City Public Schools, FY 2022 Final Budget, 101 (January 2021), <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/803/FY%202022%20Proposed%20Budget%20Book%20v2.pdf>.

for all ACPS youth to the benefit of “All Alexandria” in line with Resolution No. 2974.<sup>13</sup> If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact LAJC’s Youth Justice Program attorneys.

Sincerely,

LEGAL AID JUSTICE CENTER

/s/

Rachael C. Deane, Esq.  
Legal Director, Youth Justice Program

Cassie A. Powell, Esq., MSW  
Attorney, Youth Justice Program

Ashley Moore, Esq.  
Attorney, Youth Justice Program

Cc: Vice-Mayor Elizabeth B. Bennett-Parker  
(Via Email to [elizabeth.bennettparker@alexandriava.gov](mailto:elizabeth.bennettparker@alexandriava.gov))  
Councilman Canek Aguirre  
(Via Email to [canek.aguirre@alexandriava.gov](mailto:canek.aguirre@alexandriava.gov))  
Councilman John Taylor Chapman  
(Via Email to [john.taylor.chapman@alexandriava.gov](mailto:john.taylor.chapman@alexandriava.gov))  
Councilwoman Amy B. Jackson  
(Via Email to [amy.jackson@alexandriava.gov](mailto:amy.jackson@alexandriava.gov))  
Councilwoman Redella S. “Del” Pepper  
(Via Email to [del.pepper@alexandriava.gov](mailto:del.pepper@alexandriava.gov))  
Councilman Mohamed E. “Mo” Seifeldein  
(Via Email to [mo.seifeldein@alexandriava.gov](mailto:mo.seifeldein@alexandriava.gov))

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<sup>13</sup> Alexandria City Council Resolution No. 2974, adopted January 23, 2021, addresses “All Alexandria” as “Committing to Race and Social Equity.” The Resolution states that the City Council will “[r]educe and eliminate racial and social inequities in the allocation of City resources through the use of a budget equity tool which may entail adjustment of budgets and funding reallocation... to advance the City’s racial equity goals informed by additional community engagement[.]” Available at <https://www.alexandriava.gov/uploadedFiles/manager/equity/ALLAlexandriaResolution2974.pdf>.