

May 3, 2021

*Via Email Only*

Richmond City School Board  
c/o Cheryl Burke, Chair  
Richmond Public Schools  
301 North Ninth Street  
Richmond, VA 23219  
[cburke2@rvaschools.net](mailto:cburke2@rvaschools.net)

Jason Kamras, Superintendent  
Richmond Public Schools  
301 North Ninth Street  
Richmond, VA 23219  
[jkamras@rvaschools.net](mailto:jkamras@rvaschools.net)

**Re: School Pushout & School Policing in Richmond Public Schools**

Dear Chairwoman Burke, Vice-Chairman Young, Superintendent Kamras, and Members of the Board,

The Legal Aid Justice Center<sup>1</sup> writes this letter in solidarity with students, parents, and community members asking for the removal of School Resource Officers (SROs) from Richmond Public Schools (RPS).

Last summer, RPS convened two listening sessions with [students](#) and community partners, respectively, to discuss the role of police in RPS. In both sessions, both students and partners spoke of the harm school policing perpetuates in public schools and asked that RPS end its use of SROs. During the meeting with students, Superintendent Kamras voiced his support for the removal of SROs from RPS, and RPS entered a ninety-day review period to consider whether to remove SROs.<sup>2</sup> We ask the Board and the administration to follow up on this review and, ultimately, to end school policing in Richmond.

---

<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 Updates from RPS Board meetings regarding the MOU: June 15, 2020, [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BQKMJP5B7FB9/\\$file/RPS-RPD%20MOU%20Overview%20for%206-15-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BQKMJP5B7FB9/$file/RPS-RPD%20MOU%20Overview%20for%206-15-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf); July 20, 2020, [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BRMKQO530201/\\$file/RPS-RPD%20Update%20for%207-20-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BRMKQO530201/$file/RPS-RPD%20Update%20for%207-20-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf); August 17, 2020, [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BSGSNT738808/\\$file/RPS-RPD%20Update%20for%208-17-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/richmond/Board.nsf/files/BSGSNT738808/$file/RPS-RPD%20Update%20for%208-17-20%20Board%20Meeting.pdf).

The use of SROs in Virginia is a local choice, and SROs are considered to be invitees of each school division. Virginia law contains no requirement for divisions to employ SROs in public schools; Va. Code § 22.1-280.2:3 states only that if school divisions employ SROs, they must have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place. The Richmond School Board (hereinafter “the Board”) has the authority to terminate [the MOU between RPS and the Richmond City Police Department \(RPD\)](#).

**Research shows that removing SROs is beneficial for all students, but particularly students of color, students with disabilities, and students who identify as LGBTQ+.** 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, there is scarce research evidence about the impact of school police on crime or external threats to school buildings.<sup>5</sup>

While many MOUs between schools and police departments dictate that SROs should not be involved in routine disciplinary matters, recent research suggests that SROs still involve themselves 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 student codes of conduct mirror criminal codes. Also, 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>

Data from the Virginia Department of Education shows that RPS continues to disproportionately suspend students of color more than white students.<sup>8</sup> During the 2018-2019 school year, Black students made up 66.1% of the total student population in RPS but 90.7% of all students receiving short-term suspensions, 92.9% of students receiving long-term suspensions, and 100% of students expelled.<sup>9</sup> 38% of students at Armstrong High School in Richmond received at least one short-term suspension in 2018-2019; 34% of students at MLK Middle School in Richmond received at least one short-term suspension in 2018-2019.<sup>10</sup> Over 94% of Armstrong’s students are Black; over 96% of MLK’s students are Black.

---

<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://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> Id.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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> Id.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Department of Education, <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Department of Education, <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Department of Education, <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>.

Data from across the state also suggests that SROs contribute to increased policing for more minor offenses in Virginia, and SROs contribute to the over-policing of younger children. Across offense severities, a higher percentage of juvenile intake complaints from SROs (62.6%) were for youth under 16 years of age compared to other complainants (43.7%).<sup>11</sup> This disparity is also reflected in Richmond City, where youth of color are far more likely to be referred to law enforcement at school for minor offenses. In Richmond, youth of color made up over 90% of intake complaints for actions at school, with Black youth making up over 85% of intake complaints. White students made up less than 10% of intake complaints.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, SROs file more misdemeanor offenses when compared with other complainants (such as police in the community). In Richmond, SROs file more misdemeanor offenses and far less felony offenses when compared with other complainants (such as police in the greater community).<sup>13</sup> In Richmond in 2019, SROs filed only 1.2% of juvenile intake complaints in the City, none of which were for felony offenses.<sup>14</sup>

We ask the Board to likewise review the role of School Security Officers (SSOs).<sup>15</sup> **During two listening sessions held with community members regarding the role of police in schools last summer, multiple community members expressed concerns with the way security personnel escalate conflicts with students and inflict harm on students.** Community members expressed that SSOs often created even more problems for students than SROs do. Because SSOs are employed directly by the school division, their duties are not covered by state-level police reforms such as the MOU requirement. RPS must consider the ways in which other practices and policies, like its SSO policies, unnecessarily push students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

We were thankful to see RPS create opportunities for student input on this issue last summer, and we applaud Superintendent Kamras' recommendation that SROs be removed from schools. We do not need police to keep our students and educators safe. Instead, we should employ a holistic approach that includes hiring trained restorative justice practitioners, behavior interventionists, school aides, counselors, or other support staff to help prevent and address safety concerns and conflict, monitor entrances and ensure a welcoming environment, respond to the root causes of behavior, and address students' needs.

---

<sup>11</sup> Data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019-2020, analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

<sup>12</sup> Data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019-2020 for Richmond, analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

<sup>13</sup> Data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019-2020 for Richmond, analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

<sup>14</sup> Data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019-2020 for Richmond, analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

<sup>15</sup> According to Va. Code § 9.1-101, a School Security Officer (SSO) is an employee of the local school division and does not have the authority of police, but is tasked with "maintaining order and discipline, preventing crime, investigating violations of the policies of the school... and detaining students violating the law or policies of the school." SSOs are also certified by the Department of Criminal Justice Services, but not as law enforcement officers—they are certified as Security Officers.

We further note that the removal of SROs alone is not sufficient to end the pushout of students of students from RPS. As noted in the [civil rights complaint LAJC filed against RPS in 2016](#), which remains pending, there are many policies and practices that RPS could implement in order to end school pushout in Richmond. An extensive culture change, led by impacted youth and community members, is crucial to ensuring an end to the harm that is experienced by Black, Latine/Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students, as well as students with disabilities, as a result of RPS's practice of excessive pushout. We therefore ask the Board and the RPS administration to immediately:

- End the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Richmond Police Department and remove School Resource Officers (SROs) from RPS;
- Divest the approximately \$4.6 million RPS currently spends on school security services, including School Security Officers (SSOs), and invest that money in mental health supports and restorative practices as imagined by communities;<sup>16</sup>
- Continue to make significant changes to the Student Code of Responsible Ethics (SCORE) to ensure meaningful interventions are practiced whenever possible as opposed to suspension and expulsion, and;
- Undertake authentic, engaged, and intentional community and youth-led processes to inform the above decisions and to develop additional details.

We believe the pandemic, in forcing the need for virtual learning, creates a unique and urgent opportunity for RPS to fundamentally change its culture of pushout. When students return to school, we can expect that students will need more social and emotional support than ever before. The time to make these changes is now. Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the Legal Aid Justice Center at [rachael@justice4all.org](mailto:rachael@justice4all.org).

Sincerely,

/s/

LEGAL AID JUSTICE CENTER

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

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

Cc: Shadae Thomas Harris, Chief Engagement Officer, Richmond Public Schools

---

<sup>16</sup> See the RPS FY2021 Budget, p. 34, at <https://www.rvaschools.net/cms/lib/VA02208089/Centricity/Domain/2074/FY21%20SCHOOL%20BOARD%20ADOPTED%20BUDGET.pdf>. Note that RPS plans to spend 15% more on security services in FY2021 from FY2020.

(Via Email to [sharris1@rvaschools.net](mailto:sharris1@rvaschools.net))  
Michelle Hudacsko, Chief of Staff, Richmond Public Schools  
(Via Email to [mhudacsko@rvaschools.net](mailto:mhudacsko@rvaschools.net))  
Elizabeth Doerr, Richmond City School Board, First District  
(Via Email to [edoerr@rvaschools.net](mailto:edoerr@rvaschools.net))  
Mariah White, Richmond City School Board, Second District  
(Via Email to [mwhite4@rvaschools.net](mailto:mwhite4@rvaschools.net))  
Kenya Gibson, Richmond City School Board, Third District  
(Via Email to [kgibson@rvaschools.net](mailto:kgibson@rvaschools.net))  
Jonathon Young, Richmond City School Board, Vice-Chair, Fourth District  
(Via Email to [jyoung7@rvaschools.net](mailto:jyoung7@rvaschools.net))  
Stephanie Rizzi, Richmond City School Board, Fifth District  
(Via Email to [srizzi@rvaschools.net](mailto:srizzi@rvaschools.net))  
Shonda Harris-Muhammed, Richmond City School Board, Sixth District  
(Via Email to [smuhamme@rvaschools.net](mailto:smuhamme@rvaschools.net))  
Dawn Page, Richmond City School Board, Eighth District  
(Via Email to [dpage2@rvaschools.net](mailto:dpage2@rvaschools.net))  
Nicole Jones, Richmond City School Board, Ninth District  
(Via Email to [njones6@rvaschools.net](mailto:njones6@rvaschools.net))  
Jonell P. Lilly, Esq., School Board Attorney  
(Via Email to [jlilly@hclawfirm.com](mailto:jlilly@hclawfirm.com))  
Nicole Thompson, Esq., School Board Attorney  
(Via Email to [nthompson@hclawfirm.com](mailto:nthompson@hclawfirm.com))