

October 28, 2020

Alexandria City School Board
1340 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA 22314

**Re: Public Comment in Support of Tenants & Workers United Campaign for
Police-Free Schools**

Dear Chairwoman Anderson, Vice Chairwoman Nolan, Members of the Board, and
Superintendent Hutchings:

On October 5, 2020, the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) Youth Justice Program submitted a letter to the Alexandria City School Board (the “Board”) in support of the Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) students from Tenants & Workers United (TWU) in their campaign for police-free schools. (*See Attachment.*) We continue to urge the Board to listen to the perspectives of students in ACPS, especially students of color who are disproportionately impacted, and ultimately vote to terminate the relationship between ACPS and the Alexandria Police Department (APD).

We appreciate the shared desires of the ACPS Administration and Board to provide additional transparency and gather information regarding the interactions between School Resource Officers (SROs) and students. However, we note that such data collection, above and beyond what is indicated in the new form attached to the revised MOU, is required by law. As of July 1, 2020, school divisions must comply with Va. Code § 22.1-279.10, which provides that the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) shall collect and report

“data on the use of force against students, including the use of chemical, mechanical, or other restraints and instances of seclusion; detentions of students; arrests of students; student referrals to court or court service units; and other disciplinary actions by school resource officers involving students. Such data shall (i) be published in a manner that protects the identities of students and (ii) be disaggregated by local school division and by student age, grade, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, if such data is available.”

We note that the new ACPS form does not provide for information regarding the student’s race, ethnicity, gender, or disability.

Additionally, we note that several Board members indicated during the work session on October 15, 2020, that SROs are not involved in school suspensions and have no relationship to ACPS’ disproportionate suspension rates of students of color. We reiterate that while many Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between schools and police departments dictate that SROs *should not* be involved in routine disciplinary matters (as the Alexandria MOU provides), recent research

suggests that SROs still involve themselves in school discipline in subtle and informal ways.¹ 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.² In short, this research suggests that the ongoing presence of SROs in school can alter a school's climate and move its entire culture away from the supportive environment children need to a more punitive one overall—even in situations where SROs are not involved.

Finally, we note that in 2019-2020, APD spent \$868,528.96 on SROs—**24% more than what they originally budgeted.**³ Additionally, ACPS plans to spend **\$1.31 million** on upgrading and maintaining security systems and implementing and maintaining safety procedures in fiscal year 2020.⁴ Our children need counselors, social workers, and robust restorative justice programs, not police.

We urge the Board to listen to the students, teachers, parents, and community members who are asking the Board to remove SROs from schools. We note that although the survey by ACPS regarding this issue did not include an option to remove SROs, a third of survey respondents nonetheless took the time to indicate a desire that SROs be removed, and only a fraction indicated a desire for no changes to the MOU. We also note that the perspectives of students of color—who are more likely to face punitive disciplinary actions and school-based arrests—should be paramount in this conversation.

We urge you to listen to the students from TWU and end the ACPS relationship with APD tomorrow. Thank you in advance for your consideration of these comments.

Should you need to speak with me about this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me at (434) 328-0515 or by email at cassie@justice4all.org.

Sincerely,



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

Attachment: October 5, 2020 Letter to ACPS Board from LAJC

¹ Kupchik, Aaron (2016) *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

² *Id.*

³ Budget documents from APD, available upon request from LAJC.

⁴ Alexandria City Public Schools, FY 2020 Final Budget 468, 464, 122, 127 (July 2019)

<https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/803/FY%202020%20Final%20Budget%20BOOK.pdf>.

October 5, 2020

Via Emily Only

Cindy M. Anderson, Chair
Alexandria City Public Schools Board
1340 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA 22314
cindy.anderson@acps.k12.va.us

Re: Letter in Support of Tenants & Workers United Campaign for Police Free Schools

Dear Chairwoman Anderson:

The Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) writes this letter in support of the students from Tenants & Workers United (TWU) in their campaign for police-free schools in Alexandria. 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. Our Youth Justice Program, formerly known as the JustChildren program, is committed to ensuring that all children have the tools they need to succeed in school and in their communities.

Last week, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) held a hearing on police in ACPS during which many students from TWU spoke powerfully in favor of ending the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Alexandria City Police Department. I urge you to listen to their perspectives and ultimately vote to terminate the relationship between ACPS and APD. Their voices must lead the way in this effort to ensure equity for all students at ACPS.

We at LAJC wanted to provide some additional information to supplement the stories and experiences shared by the ACPS students and parents from TWU. First, we note that Virginia law contains no requirements for divisions to employ School Resource Officers (SROs) in public schools—Va. Code § 22.1-280.2:1 specifically states only that school boards “may” employ SROs. This means the ACPS school board has the complete authority to terminate the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between ACPS and APD.

The best research shows that removing SROs is beneficial for all students, but particularly students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students. Research shows that SROs increase arrests in school and suspension rates, particularly for students of color and LGBTQ youth.¹ Generally these arrests are for minor offenses, such as simple assault, resulting in greater

¹ [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9133.12512#:~:text=Research%20Summary&text=We%20found%20that%20increased%20SROs,for%20students%](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1745-9133.12512#:~:text=Research%20Summary&text=We%20found%20that%20increased%20SROs,for%20students%20)

numbers of children than necessary being exposed to the criminal justice system.² Additionally, there is no research evidence to suggest that School Resource Officers (SROs) prevent school shootings. Some school shootings have not had armed security present, such as Newtown, while others, such as Columbine, Parkland, and Santa Fe, had armed security present but did not prevent the shooting from occurring.³

Also, 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 involve themselves in school discipline in subtle and informal ways.⁴ What is criminal in nature versus what is routine discipline is a blurry distinction because 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.⁵ Data from the state education department shows that ACPS disproportionately suspends students of color more than white students.⁶

Data from across Virginia 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%).⁷

We do not need police to keep our students safe. Students and teachers can be kept safe in schools by 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.

Our children need counselors, social workers, and robust restorative justice programs, not police. We urge you to listen to the students from TWU and end the ACPS relationship with APD. Thank you in advance for your consideration of their stories and for all you do.

; 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>.

² Id.

³ <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/single-post/2019/03/11/Research-on-the-Impact-of-School-Policing>.

⁴ Kupchik, Aaron (2016) *The Real School Safety Problem: The long-term consequences of harsh school punishment*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Virginia Department of Education, <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/>. During the 2018-2019 school year in Alexandria City Public Schools, 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.

⁷ Data from the Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019-2020, analyzed by the Legal Aid Justice Center.

Should you need to speak with me about this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me at (434) 328-0515 or by email at cassie@justice4all.org.

Sincerely,



Cassie A. Powell, Esq., MSW
Attorney, Youth Justice Program
Legal Aid Justice Center

Cc: Dr. Gregory Hutchings, Superintendent, Alexandria City Public Schools
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