



June 16, 2020

To: Members of the House Education Policy Committee
RE: HF 18
HF 33
HF 36

Dear Chair Youakim and Members,

Thank you for your leadership during this special session. Legal Services Advocacy Project writes in support of three bills on your agenda for Tuesday, June 16. Legal Aid's mission is to advocate for the legal rights of our clients so they may enjoy safe, healthy, and independent lives in strong communities, including and especially in school. To this end, we strongly urge you to support proposals to end suspensions for pre-kindergarten students (included in HF 33 and HF 36), adopt a comprehensive set of changes to the Pupil Fair Dismissal Act to promote non-exclusionary discipline (included in HF 36), and to protect students from lunch shaming (HF 18 and included in HF 36).

Pre-Kindergarten Dismissals (HF 33, HF 36)

Legal Aid is part of the Solutions Not Suspensions coalition, which has been working for years to end racial disparities in student discipline. For some Minnesota students, the impact of racial disparities in discipline begins at very young ages—3 and 4 years old. Students of all ages, but especially young children, need support when they are presenting challenging behaviors, not to be excluded from school altogether. LSAP strongly supports the provision in HF 33 (Article 5, section 2) and HF 36 (Article 6, section 1) to prohibit suspensions of pre-kindergarten students and limit expulsions and exclusions to only after efforts have been made to connect the student and family with support. It is time for Minnesota to take the common-sense step of ending suspensions for our youngest learners.

Non-Exclusionary Discipline (HF 36)

HF 36 includes several provisions that are likely to have a significant impact in reducing racial disparities in discipline. Our attorneys who represent children being sent home from or excluded from school know well that almost all behavior is a communication of an unmet need. When a student presents with challenging behavior, schools should work to meet the student's needs, not punish or exclude the child. HF 36 includes several provisions that would push schools to rely less on exclusionary discipline (which we know is used disproportionately against students of color) and more on providing supports that students need. We support the Solutions Not Suspensions Coalition in their support of these important provisions.

Ending Lunch Shaming (HF 18, HF 36)

LSAP also supports the meal policy provisions in HF 36 (Article 5, section 1) and HF18 that protect students from lunch shaming practices. As more Minnesota families experience extraordinary economic uncertainty, the possibility of rising school meal debt will create new pressures for Minnesota school districts and lunch rooms. The Legislature and Minnesota Department of Education must provide guardrails against any lunch service practices that harm the health and wellbeing of students experiencing financial hardship.

Thank you for your leadership on behalf of Minnesota's students and for considering these important steps to ensure that all students have access to welcoming, supportive school environments, including nutrition.

Sincerely,



Jessica Webster
Staff Attorney



Maren Hulden
Staff Attorney