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RISE for Youth Celebrates Passage of SB18 Establishing Minimum Age for Charging Children in Virginia

Richmond, VA — RISE for Youth celebrates the passage of SB18 during the 2026 Session of the Virginia General Assembly, marking a major milestone in the effort to ensure elementary-aged children are not treated as criminals in the Commonwealth.

For five years, RISE for Youth has worked alongside youth, families, advocacy partners, and legislative champions to establish a minimum age in Virginia before a child can be charged with a crime. Over that time, legislation led by Delegate Vivian Watts, the previous Senator John Edwards, Senator Mamie Locke, and Delegate Patrick Hope steadily built bipartisan support in the General Assembly. Although similar bills passed both chambers in the previous two years, they were vetoed by the former governor.

This year, SB18, patroned by Senator Mamie Locke and Delegate Patrick Hope, passed both chambers with bipartisan support — reflecting a growing recognition that young children should be supported, not criminalized.

“It is time that Virginia clearly establishes that elementary-aged children should never be treated as criminals,” said Valerie Slater, Executive Director of RISE for Youth. “For five years, RISE for Youth has stood alongside impacted children, families, and legislative champions to say clearly and consistently that children do not belong in the criminal legal system. Establishing a minimum age protects children and ensures youth are connected to appropriate services, because Virginia’s children deserve care, not court.”

“In passing this bill Virginia joins the growing number of states that have recognized the effectiveness of policies that divert young children away from the criminal justice system and instead offer developmentally appropriate, community-based supports,” said Teresa Kominos, Policy Counsel at Human Rights for Kids. “Policies like this strengthen communities by ensuring young children are not criminalized for their behavior but supported and offered opportunities for growth.”

“The criminalization of elementary-age conduct harms youth and their families and contradicts our societal and scientific understanding of youth development,” said Amy Walters, Senior Attorney at Legal Aid Justice Center. “We are grateful to RISE for their community presence and persistent leadership on behalf of Virginia’s families.”

Establishing a minimum age for prosecution helps keep families stable and ensures children who are struggling are connected with services and supports rather than entering the court system.

RISE for Youth now urges the Governor to sign SB18 into law and looks forward to continuing its work to ensure every child in Virginia has the opportunity to grow, learn, and thrive.

About RISE for Youth

RISE for Youth is a Virginia-based advocacy organization working to transform the youth justice system by centering the voices of impacted youth and families and advancing policies that prioritize care, healing, and opportunity over incarceration.

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