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NEWS RELEASE

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County Attorney releases Safe Schools Task Force report to community *Recommendations address action steps across all segments of community*

Saint Paul, MN – Today, Ramsey County Attorney John Choi released the final report of the Community Task Force on Safe Schools to stakeholders across Ramsey County, complete with targeted recommendations to promote safe schools and address underlying factors that contribute to conflict and disrupt learning environments. The County Attorney convened the task force beginning in June of 2016 in response to increasing reports of incidents of physical aggression by youth toward teachers and other school staff.

“I want to thank this dedicated group of educators, school staff, parents, caregivers, youth workers, social workers and others with firsthand knowledge of the challenges youth and adults face for coming together to propose solutions for our entire community to embrace,” said Choi. “These challenges are complex and multi-faceted; solving them will require each of us - as community leaders, parents, and system professionals – to step outside of our silos and be more intentional about how we invest in and engage children and families, particularly across the possible barriers of race, class, culture, and exposure to trauma.”

At the outset, the County Attorney emphasized that youth violence is not simply a “school problem,” but rather a challenge that plays out in homes, communities, and schools, so it’s all of our responsibility, as a community, to come together to solve it. To tackle this challenge, the task force, led by two community co-chairs, established guiding principles, including: meeting the needs of students/children; addressing racial and cultural disparities, inequities and awareness; emphasizing policy changes over procedural/programmatic changes; and emphasizing community-based solutions. School and community leaders are encouraged to use the same framework as they consider implementing the final task force recommendations.

“Each task force member brought their unique perspective to the table, identifying actionable recommendations to inform our community members and leaders as they make decisions going forward,” said Task Force Co-Chair Jeremiah Ellis.

After reviewing numerous data reports along with a wide-range of community input, the task force engaged in facilitated conversations as a team to identify the underlying factors that contribute to conflict and behavior challenges which disrupt the learning environment. Data revealed that the students involved in these disciplinary incidents are disproportionately youth of color, particularly African American youth. Task force members agreed that, in order to truly address safety of children and adults in schools and in the community, we need to collectively

better understand and address the underlying factors creating the situations where students reportedly “act out,” including:

- Adults who are challenged to relate to and understand the experiences of students and families with a different racial and/or cultural background than their own
- Parents and caregivers who are committed to their children’s success, yet need more support and skills about child development and de-escalation and conflict resolution techniques to help their children effectively learn how to process their emotions
- Acknowledging and embracing community and faith-based leaders as an integral part of family systems
- The increasing need for youth mental health services in the absence of a mental health system to support children

“We believe safe and effective learning environments have a positive effect on the lives of students, staff and families,” said co-chair Suzanne Kelly. “We hope this report generates intentional conversations among community-based organizations, faith-based institutions and other non-profits about how they can support parents who want their children to succeed but are not currently in a place to help them achieve that success with wrap-around supports.”

The centerpiece of the report focused on five key recommendations. Each recommendation identifies a primary challenge to be addressed at the community, school or systems level:

1. Build Healthy Relationships With Youth
2. Enhance Proactive, Positive Approaches to Prevent and Respond to Conflict and Challenging Behavior
3. Share and Improve Data Across Systems
4. Increase Parent/Guardian Support, Education and Relationships
5. Improve Training, Hiring, Development and Learning of Adults Working and Living with Youth

The County Attorney is mailing the report out to 275 community leaders in Ramsey County, including elected and appointed officials and leaders from faith-based, youth-serving and philanthropic and educational organizations with a request to consider the recommendations and how they may seek to implement them. He has already engaged a handful of stakeholders, including community foundation leaders, elected officials and superintendents from across Ramsey County, to begin developing strategies for local action based on the task force recommendations.

The 39 member task force members, comprised of parents, teachers, students, school resource officers, youth workers and school administrators, met over the course of 7 months to tackle the challenge of understanding and addressing the struggles youth face in our community and in school settings. Members were selected because of their diversity of personal and professional experience, direct involvement with youth, and commitment to finding actionable solutions. Co-chairs included Jeremiah Ellis, director of partnerships at Generation Next, and Suzanne Kelly, formerly with Minnesota Philanthropy Partners and now Chief of Staff for Minneapolis Public Schools. Christine Wroblewski, a senior consultant from TeamWorks International, facilitated

the group through a series of structured conversations and created the final report for public review.

In addition to the final report, we are releasing a file that includes data prepared for and presented to the task force over the course of the 7-month effort. All materials will be available on our website at: www.ramseycounty.us/safeschools

Note: Ramsey County Attorney John Choi and co-chair Jeremiah Ellis are available to discuss the work of the task force. Please contact Dennis Gerhardstein if you would like to arrange for an interview.