

# Governor Spanberger Signs Landmark Child Rights Bill Into Law in Virginia

*New law protects young children from prosecution; continues national trend away from criminalizing kids in elementary school*

RICHMOND, VA, UNITED STATES, April 14, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Governor Abigail Spanberger has signed SB 18 into law, marking a major child rights victory in Virginia and a significant step toward a more developmentally appropriate and rehabilitative legal system for children.

The new law will ensure that Virginia's youngest children are not pushed into the juvenile justice system and will disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Between 2019 and 2025, 413 children aged 10 or younger were arrested and had delinquency petitions filed against them in the Commonwealth. This included children as young as 6 years old.

SB 18 establishes a minimum age of 11 for delinquency adjudication in Virginia, helping protect very young children from prosecution and instead directing them toward community-based, developmentally appropriate services and supports.

"The signing of this bill is a critical step in acknowledging that all children, but especially our youngest, who come into contact with the justice system must be treated differently. Establishing a minimum age of prosecution ensures that the youngest members of our communities are diverted away from punitive processes and given access to meaningful supportive services," said Senator Mamie Locke.

The signing is especially significant because it comes after similar minimum age legislation was vetoed the last two years, underscoring the persistence of Virginia lawmakers, advocates, and directly impacted leaders who continued pushing for reforms grounded in child development, public safety, and basic fairness.

"Today, Virginia took an important step toward a more just and humane legal system for children," said Teresa Kominos, Senior Policy Counsel at [Human Rights for Kids](#). "By signing SB 18 into law, Virginia has recognized a fundamental truth: very young children should not be prosecuted in court. This reform reflects what research, lived experience, and common sense have made clear for years - children are different, and the law must treat them that way."

Human Rights for Kids applauded the leadership of the bills' sponsors and the lawmakers who helped advance both measures through the General Assembly. The organization said the enactment of these laws reflects growing recognition that policies rooted in child development, accountability, and rehabilitation are more effective than punitive approaches that ignore age, trauma, and the capacity for change.

"For five years, RISE for Youth has stood alongside impacted children, families, advocacy partners, and legislative champions to say clearly and consistently: elementary-aged children do not belong in the criminal legal system," said Valerie Slater, Founder and Executive Director of RISE for Youth. "The passage of SB18 is a powerful affirmation that Virginia is ready to treat children like children. We are deeply grateful to Senator Locke and Delegate Hope for their leadership this year, and to Delegate Watts and former Senator Edwards for their steadfast partnership over the years as well. After bills in the immediate previous two years were vetoed despite bipartisan support, this moment feels especially meaningful. Establishing a minimum age protects children, strengthens families, and ensures young people who make mistakes are connected to appropriate care instead of a courtroom. Our legislature said it clearly with their votes, Virginia's children deserve care, not court."

With the signing of SB 18, Virginia is taking an important step toward aligning its laws with what science and human rights principles have long shown: children must be treated as children at every stage of the legal system.

The enactment of SB 18 follows a national trend away from criminalizing childhood misbehavior by elementary school-aged children. Virginia joins Arkansas, Hawaii, and Vermont as states that have prohibited the prosecution of children under the age of 10 in the past year.

Human Rights for Kids urges state leaders to build on this momentum with additional reforms that protect children from harm, strengthen families, and promote lasting public safety.

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#### About Human Rights for Kids

Human Rights for Kids is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of the human rights of children. Through research, public education, coalition building, grassroots mobilization, policy advocacy, and strategic litigation, Human Rights for Kids works to protect children from harm and advance laws and policies that uphold their dignity, safety, and rights.

Johanna Olivas

Human Rights for Kids

[jolivas@humanrightsforkids.org](mailto:jolivas@humanrightsforkids.org)

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