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Multi-Racial Group of Thomas Jefferson Students, Family, and Alumni Denounce Appeal to Supreme Court to Overturn School's Fairer Admissions Policy

Today, a multi-racial group of students, family, and alumni of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ) denounced a petition filed by the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative legal advocacy group, on behalf of plaintiff Coalition for TJ, asking the Supreme Court to review a federal appeals court's ruling that a 2020 race-neutral change to the school's admissions policy is permissible under the United States Constitution.

The Virginia NAACP, Hamkae Center, Asian American Youth Leadership Empowerment and Development (AALEAD), CASA Virginia, Hispanic Federation, and TJ Alumni for Racial Justice were represented by the Legal Defense Fund, Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC, LatinoJustice PRLDEF, and Arnold & Porter as amicus curiae as the case has made its way through the federal appeals court. These groups, with multiracial constituencies across Northern Virginia, applaud the 2020 changes made by the school board, which expanded access to the specialized, publicly-funded high school for students from a wider range of economic, racial, and geographic backgrounds in the district.

The admissions changes put in place to ensure all area students have a fair shot at the educational opportunities available at TJ include the elimination of a cost-prohibitive application fee, the introduction of a holistic review for qualified eighth graders from eligible locales, and the consideration of students' socio-economic status, whether they have disabilities, and their degree of English language proficiency. The number of applications for TJ's class of

2025 increased by nearly 1,000 students after the policy change, and the mean grade point average among the applicants was higher than it had been in five years.

In May, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that the admissions policy is constitutional, highlighting that – rather than being discriminatory against Asian American students, as alleged by the plaintiff – it has resulted in increased numbers of low-income Asian American students being admitted to TJ. The plaintiff now seeks to reverse this ruling with a groundless claim that the new admissions process discriminates against Asian Americans. In essence, the plaintiff seeks to cement pre-existing inequalities by prohibiting school districts from trying to remedy any unfairness in the admissions process that may change the racial makeup of accepted students. If successful, such arguments would distort the meaning of the Equal Protection Clause by manipulating it to prevent school districts from advancing equal access to educational opportunities.

“A publicly-funded educational resource, like TJ, should be equally available to all qualified students from eligible middle schools,” **said Robert N. Barnette Jr., President of the Virginia NAACP.** “The school district’s more equitable admissions policy increases opportunities for all students, which the numbers bear out: more low-income Asian American students were accepted to TJ, and more sorely underrepresented Black and Latino students were able to apply to the school. We reject the shameful effort to have the Court cement a status quo that would have continued to under-identify students with fewer resources, who nevertheless deserve the same fair shot at educational advancement.”

“Allowing school districts like Fairfax County to build a more equitable and inclusive school community by implementing an admissions process that provides all students with fair opportunity to compete is beneficial to all,” **said Ingrid Alvarez, Vice President for Policy and Strategic Engagement, Hispanic Federation.** “We hope SCOTUS rejects this brazen attempt by appellant to undercut the Fourth Circuit’s decision upholding equal educational opportunity for Latino and other students of color.”

"As we continue to see significant resistance towards racial justice and a wave of attacks directed at our education system, we stand firmly with our belief that a diverse learning environment enriches educational experience for our students” **said Luis Aguilar, Director of Virginia region, CASA, Inc.** “The Fourth Circuit’s correct interpretation of the law affords all students- regardless of their background- access to a highly sought after education at TJ by removing biased admissions criteria. Our highest court should deny this unjustified attempt to roll back racial justice, equity, and fairness in our educational system.”

Akil Vohra, Executive Director of AALEAD said, “We need our children to see that the door to educational opportunity is open, for each of them. We don’t believe that public education is a zero-sum game. Each applicant class at TJ is unique and each applicant class should be drawn from a pool that is made up of qualified students whose merit is judged on standards attainable by all, not those that are based on privilege. We support policies that create equal educational opportunities for all.”

Sookyung Oh, Director of Hamkae Center shared, “Every parent wants to know their child will not be disadvantaged in our public education system no matter their personal wealth or language abilities. It is imperative that students from communities of color, including Asian Americans, will not be disadvantaged by an unfair admissions process and will have the same access to educational opportunities only previously afforded to those with the wealth and privilege to get their children into schools like TJ.”

Daniel Morales, a member of the TJ Alumni for Racial Justice’s Board, said “The Fourth Circuit confirmed what should be obvious: diversity, excellence and opportunity go hand in hand. The TJ I graduated from in 1998 drew most of its students from the most privileged precincts of Fairfax County. But talent isn’t limited to a handful of rich zip codes. Today’s TJ finds talent of every color, creed, and household income percentile.”

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Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) is the nation’s first civil rights law organization. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights.

About Advancing Justice – AAJC

[Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC](#) has a mission to advance the civil and human rights of Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all.

About Arnold & Porter

[Arnold & Porter](#) combines sophisticated regulatory, litigation, and transactional capabilities to resolve clients’ most complex issues. With over 1,000 lawyers practicing in 14 offices worldwide, we offer deep industry experience and an integrated approach that spans more than 40 practice areas. Through multidisciplinary collaboration and focused industry experience, we provide innovative and effective solutions to mitigate risks, address challenges, and achieve successful outcomes.

About LatinoJustice

LatinoJustice PRLDEF works to create a more just society by using and challenging the rule of law to secure transformative, equitable and accessible justice, by empowering our community and by fostering leadership through advocacy and education. For 50 years, LatinoJustice PRLDEF has acted as an advocate against injustices throughout the country. To learn more about LatinoJustice, visit www.LatinoJustice.org

