



Former Republican State Legislators,
Senator AJ Griffin of Oklahoma and
Delegate John Ellem of West Virginia,
Call for Bipartisan Comprehensive
Criminal Justice Reform Focused on
Protecting the Human Rights of Children

January 20, 2020

Dear Friends & Fellow Lawmakers,

We are excited to share a new publication entitled, *The Fight for Our Soul: A Legislative Blueprint for Changing the Way the Criminal Justice System Treats Children*, by Human Rights for Kids (HRFK). We are two of eleven current or former state legislators who serve on the Board of Directors of HRFK, which is working to advance human rights protections for children in the U.S. and around the world. One of the remarkable characteristics of our Board of Directors is the bipartisan coalition of Republicans (6) and Democrats (5) from every region of the country that have come together to speak with one unified voice on behalf of our most vulnerable children.

Perhaps nowhere is such bipartisan collaboration more needed or more important than when it comes to how we treat children in the U.S. criminal justice system. Whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, we should all be able to agree that children are different from adults and need to be treated differently in our justice system, even when they commit serious crimes. That does not mean that we minimize the harm caused by children or that we don't hold them accountable. It does mean, however, that we need to take child status into account at every phase of the criminal justice process. As the Supreme Court has repeatedly said, "age is more than just a chronological fact."

Because children's brains are still developing we cannot simply treat them as if they were miniature adults, no matter what they've done. Allowing young teens, or preteens in some states, to be prosecuted as adults and placed in adult correctional facilities, says as much about our own moral failing as it does about theirs.

In addition to introducing policymakers to these important human rights issues, *The Fight for Our Soul* includes model language on everything from right to counsel issues to mandatory minimum sentencing reform to voting rights restoration for formerly incarcerated children. As we make clear: this is not a red or a blue issue, it is an American issue, and one that we all must fight for.

Thank you for taking the time to read this important publication. We hope to hear from and work with you on advancing human rights protections for children in the justice system.

Sincerely,

AJ Griffin
Fmr. State Senator

John Ellem
Fmr. State Delegate