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How Richneck Elementary failed to stop a 6-year-old from shooting his teacher

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February 10, 2023 at 6:30 a.m. EST

Abigail Zwerner was frustrated.

It was Jan. 4. A 6-year-old in her first-grade class at Richneck Elementary School had stolen her phone and slammed it to the floor, apparently upset over a schedule change, according to text messages Zwerner sent to a friend.

Administrators, she wrote, were faulting her for the situation.

The 6-year-old “took my phone and smashed it on the ground,” Zwerner wrote in a text message obtained by The Washington Post, “and admin is blaming me.”

Two days later, the 6-year-old told classmates at recess he was going to shoot Zwerner, showed them a gun and its clip tucked into his jacket pocket, and threatened to kill them if they told anyone, according to an attorney for the family of a student who witnessed the threat, offering the first account of events leading to the shooting from someone in Zwerner’s class.

That afternoon, the 6-year-old did as he promised, authorities said — firing a bullet through Zwerner’s upraised hand and into her chest as she was midway through teaching a lesson.

Zwerner’s lawyer and other educators at the Newport News, Va., school have alleged the shooting came after school administrators downplayed repeated warnings from Zwerner and other teachers about the boy. The incident sparked a staffing shake-up at Richneck and the ouster of Superintendent George Parker III.

The Washington Post interviewed 34 people — including teachers, parents and children at Richneck — and obtained dozens of text messages, school emails and documents to reconstruct what happened inside Richneck that day and in the days and weeks before the shooting, revealing new details about the administration’s failure to manage the 6-year-old’s disciplinary issues and to respond to other reports of troubling student behavior.

The Post learned that the 6-year-old was moved to a half-day schedule due to poor conduct in early September, and was suspended for a day after slamming Zwerner's phone. But educators had long been vexed by the student, who previously attempted to strangle his kindergarten teacher, according to two school employees and records obtained by The Post.

Diane Toscano, Zwerner's lawyer, has said teachers relayed several warnings to administrators on the morning of the shooting, including at least three reports that the boy had a gun. The Post interviewed a kindergartner who said the boy threatened to punch her at lunch that day and that she informed a staffer — but that the staffer did little more than give the boy a verbal warning.

In the direct aftermath of the shooting, two second-grade classes were left briefly wandering the hallways in search of a safe place to hide because their classroom was not equipped with doors and they had not rehearsed safety drills, according to one second-grade teacher, one fifth-grade teacher and a parent of a second-grade student, as well as text messages obtained by The Post. A second-grade teacher told The Post she had asked to have doors installed but administrators refused, saying the doors would be too expensive.

Many people interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity because the district has asked teachers not to talk with reporters or because they wanted to protect their families' privacy.

James Ellenson, an attorney for the family of the 6-year-old boy, declined to comment directly on the new reporting but said in a statement that Newport News schools "had a duty to protect all the parties involved, especially the child who needed to be protected from himself."

Newport News school district spokeswoman Michelle Price declined to comment for this story, as did Parker, the former superintendent, and Toscano, Zwerner's attorney.

'We were scared'

Teachers' fears about the 6-year-old date back to his kindergarten year, when he tried to strangle his teacher, according to a letter Zwerner's attorney sent to the school system Jan. 24 announcing her intent to sue. The letter was first reported by [the Daily Press](#).

"The shooter had been removed from the school a year prior after he choked his teacher until she couldn't breathe," says the letter, obtained by The Post through a public records request. It was not immediately clear how a boy so young could have choked an adult. The Post was not able to learn other details of the incident and authorities have not released information about the boy.

Early this fall, as Richneck teachers sought to settle their new crop of students inside the low-slung red-brick building nestled amid trees, news of the 6-year-old's troubled history circulated swiftly among the staff, according to text messages between teachers.

Less than a week into September, officials switched the 6-year-old to a half-day schedule due to misbehavior — but administrators were already lagging in efforts to accommodate the student, according to Toscano's letter and to text messages sent between Zwerner and a friend of hers who teaches at the school.

It was not clear what specific incident triggered the schedule change. Toscano wrote in her letter that the 6-year-old “constantly cursed at the staff and teachers and then one day took off his belt on the playground and chased kids trying to whip them.”

On Sept. 5, Zwerner wrote in a text message to her friend that officials were being slow to offer updates on how to handle the child.

“I still haven’t gotten any info about [the student’s] half day schedule,” Zwerner wrote.

The Richneck Elementary shooting: What we know

- Richneck Elementary’s former principal was unaware that the 6-year-old had a gun, according to her lawyer.
- Administrators were warned multiple times that the 6-year-old had a gun, the Virginia teacher’s lawyer alleges.
- Richneck Elementary downplayed educators’ warnings about the 6-year-old’s behavior, according to staffers.

The friend wrote back that the 6-year-old “needs to be half days ... They better stick to that for your sake.” The friend added that administrators’ “communication and accountability aren’t good again this year.”

As the year progressed, concerns did, too.

Though the 6-year-old was a particular challenge, teachers alleged that administrators’ response to discipline issues was generally lackluster, both for Zwerner’s class of roughly two dozen students and elsewhere in the building.

Harold Belkowitz, an attorney for Richneck parents with a child in Zwerner’s class, said his clients’ child was physically and verbally bullied by classmates during the current school year. He said his clients raised concerns with Richneck and Newport News school officials “numerous times” but that administrators took no action to stop the behavior.

Text messages and a photo shared between teachers show that a student in Zwerner’s class reportedly hit a teacher so hard with a chair that her legs became dotted with green and purple bruises — and that, at another point, a kindergartner was accused of pushing a pregnant teacher to the ground and kicking her in the stomach so hard that she feared for her unborn child, two weeks shy of giving birth. It was not immediately clear how administrators responded to those episodes, although one educator wrote in a text this fall that the bruised teacher had “heard nothing from admin.”

On Nov. 9, the second-grade teacher wrote in a text message to a colleague that she was applying to work in another district because of “how bad the first graders are right now put together with the fact we don’t have doors.”

The second-grade teacher added, referencing administrative failures, “It’s only gonna get worse.”

‘Again nothing was done’

About two months later, on the morning of Jan. 6, the 6-year-old slipped his mother’s gun into his backpack before heading to school, Newport News police have said. Ellenson, the lawyer for the boy’s family, has said the weapon was kept in the mother’s closet under a gun lock. It remains unclear how the boy was able to obtain the weapon.

The boy arrived on campus around 11 a.m., passing a school sign that still wished students “Happy New Year” in capital letters. He was accompanied by his mother, according to a second-grade teacher who said she spoke with the mother in the hallway.

Before that day, due to an unspecified disability, the boy followed a special schedule in which his parents shadowed him to and during class, the family said in a statement last month. On Jan. 6, for unknown reasons, the parents discontinued that plan: “The week of the shooting was the first week when we were not in class with him,” the statement said.

Around 11:05 a.m., the boy was slated to leave Zwerner’s classroom and head along the gray-tiled hallway to lunch, which is held jointly for kindergartners and first-graders, according to a copy of a Richneck schedule obtained by The Post.

Inside the lunchroom, which a Richneck teacher said has white walls lined with posters advising students how to behave respectfully, a kindergarten student was sitting at her lunch table when she spotted the boy, she said in a video call with The Post this month. The girl was interviewed beside her mother; both spoke on the condition of anonymity to protect their privacy.

The kindergarten student said she had long wanted to become friends with the 6-year-old. When she saw him that day, she said, she looked steadily in his direction to attract his attention.

Noticing her gaze, she said, the boy walked close to her table and asked, “What are you looking at, little girl?” before jumping forward and shoving himself close to her. He raised his fist to eye level and said, “I’m going to punch you in the face,” she recalled. Scared and sad, the girl raced from her table to grab the nearest school staffer, she said.

The school staffer warned the 6-year-old that punching another student could force a visit to the principal’s office, according to the kindergartner and her mother. The girl’s mother said the staffer spoke on the phone with her about a week after the shooting to try to explain the decision-making process in that moment — and to confess that the boy with the raised fist was the same one who, hours later, shot his teacher.

“They felt that they did the best they could by addressing it to the child,” the kindergartner’s mother said, declining to identify the staffer. “But I disagree.”

By 11:30 a.m., reports that the boy had threatened another child reached Zwerner, according to Toscano, Zwerner’s attorney. Toscano wrote in her letter to the school district that Zwerner took the information directly to Assistant Principal Ebony Parker, who is not related to the former superintendent with the same last name.

Zwerner visited the assistant principal’s office and told her about the threat, reporting “that the shooter was in a violent mood,” Toscano wrote. “Yet ... absolutely nothing is done.”

At 12:20 p.m., after the first-graders finished lunch and sat through a brief “Reading” period, they were supposed to head outside for recess, according to the Richneck daily schedule.

By this point, rumors were spreading that the boy had brought a weapon to school, according to Toscano. One teacher searched the 6-year-old’s backpack at around 12:30 p.m., Toscano wrote, but found nothing.

Zwerner told a colleague she had glimpsed “the shooter take something out of his backpack and put it in his pocket” and feared it might be a gun, spurring that colleague to bring concerns to Assistant Principal Parker, Toscano wrote in her letter. But Parker ignored the teacher, Toscano wrote, suggesting the boy’s pockets were too small to contain a gun: “Assistant Principal Parker was made aware at the beginning of recess that Ms. Zwerner was afraid the shooter had a gun in his pocket. And again nothing was done.”

Meanwhile, outside at recess, the 6-year-old approached three other students and told them he intended to shoot Zwerner, according to Emily Mapp Brannon, an attorney who is representing the parents of four Richneck families. Brannon provided a statement that details an account of that day given by a boy enrolled in Zwerner’s class.

The 6-year-old showed his fellow students the gun, which he had concealed in the pocket of his jacket, revealing the clip, according to the statement.

“The shooter also threatened the other classmates that if they told on him, he would shoot them,” the statement says.

Two students immediately ran away terrified, according to the statement.

The statement said the boy told the shooter that he wanted to go play in another area of the playground and left for the monkey bars. Not long after, the boy told a teacher about the gun, Brannon said.

Toscano described a similar incident in her letter to the district, writing that a teacher alerted to the recess gun threat by a student told another teacher, who told Assistant Principal Parker. But Parker “responded that she was aware of the threat and the shooter’s backpack had already been searched,” according to Toscano’s letter.

Around the same time, a school guidance counselor also approached the assistant principal to warn her the student might have a gun — marking at least the third warning about a gun Parker received that day.

The guidance counselor “asked Assistant Principal Parker if he could search the shooter’s person for the weapon,” Toscano wrote. “Assistant Principal Parker’s response was no, because the shooter’s mother would be arriving soon to pick up the shooter.”

Parker did not respond to requests for comment for this story. An attorney for Briana Foster Newton, who was Richneck principal at the time, said in a statement that “it would be imprudent to comment on discussions that Mrs. Newton was not a part of.” She has said Newton, who has since been reassigned, was not told the boy might have had a gun that day.

At 12:50 p.m., first-grade recess wrapped up, per the school schedule. The first-graders filed back into Zwerner’s classroom for what was listed on the schedule as math class.

Shortly before 2 p.m., Toscano wrote in her letter, Zwerner “was sitting at her reading table when the shooter, who was sitting at his desk, pulled the gun out of his pocket.” He squeezed the trigger.

‘We all went under the teacher’s table’

Several things happened almost at once after the shot was fired, according to Newport News police. Surveillance video shows between 16 and 20 students fleeing the classroom to seek shelter across the hall. Another school employee ran into Zwerner's room to restrain the student and continued holding him until police officers arrived on campus. The 6-year-old was ultimately taken to a hospital for a mental health evaluation.

Zwerner was the last to leave her classroom, police have said. She made a right turn and traveled down the hallway before looking back "to make sure every one of those students was safe," Newport News Police Chief Steve Drew has said.

The rest of the school was plunged into confusion and terror. Alyssa Dooley, who is 8 and in third grade, said a lockdown was announced over her classroom's loudspeaker shortly after the shot was fired.

"We all went under the teacher's table," Alyssa said. "There was crying, and we were scared."

Down the hall from Zwerner's classroom, two classes of second-graders had no idea where to go, according to one of the second-grade teachers. Not only did their shared classroom lack doors, but the school had failed to hold a lockdown drill that school year, two Richneck teachers said, leaving the second-grade teachers without a plan.

The second-grade teachers began trying classroom doors until they found the computer lab unlocked, one said. They hustled students inside and sought to keep them calm for about an hour, according to the teacher and a parent of a second-grader, before the principal and police began circulating the building unlocking classroom doors. The adults led the children to the gym to await reunion with their parents.

At the same time, parents began learning of the shooting from news reports — frustrating some, who said they wanted to hear directly from the school.

Mark Anthony Garcia, a parent of a second-grade boy, said he learned of the shooting when his wife called him, herself having gleaned the news from local station WAVY-TV.

"My wife told me to get to the school because there was a shooter at Richneck Elementary," Garcia said.

Garcia said he jumped in his car and sped to Richneck. He got about a mile and a half away before hitting a police roadblock. A woman said he could park his car in her driveway. He left the vehicle and hurried to the school, where hundreds of parents stood waiting in an area cordoned off by yellow police tape.

As the minutes ticked on, parents paced nervously. Others cried. Some were irate. By 2:45 p.m., Garcia said, police began reuniting anxious mothers and fathers with their children.

Garcia captured the moment on video.

"Everybody have their ID in their hand," an officer shouted through a megaphone. She told the crowd to form a single line.

Parents burst through the yellow tape toward the school. One woman shouted, "Go! Go!"

Garcia said he met his son in the gym. He gave the boy a big hug and told him he was a hero.

Garcia and his son then drove to a gas station, where they met up with Garcia's wife, who had been stranded on a different side of the school. The family spilled out of their cars and gathered in a group hug.

Then, together, the boy and his parents said a prayer.