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

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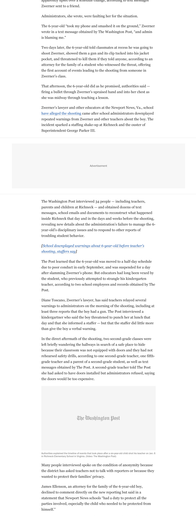
Published July 31, 2023 Updated August 1, 2023



Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia, where a 6-year-old shot a teacher on Jan. 30. (John C. Clark/AP)

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Abigail Freeman has frustrated.

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

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

The 6-year-old "took my phone and smashed it on the ground," Freeman wrote in a text messaging platform by The Washington Post, "and admin is blaming me."

Two days later, the 6-year-old held classmates at recess he was going to shoot Freeman, 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 Freeman's class.

That afternoon, the 6-year-old did fire his prominent, authorities said — shooting Freeman's teacher in the chest and hand and into her chest as she was walking through teaching a lesson.

Freeman's lawyer and other educators at the Newport News, Va., school have alleged the shooting came after school administrators downplayed concerns about the student's behavior, including his threat to kill. The incident sparked a staffing shake-up at Richneck and the ouster of Superintendent George Parker III.

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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 that day and the months of warnings that preceded it. Some parents and educators said they felt administrators failed to manage the 6-year-old's disciplinary issues and to respond to other reports of troubling student behavior.

Richneck downplayed warnings about 6-year-old before teacher's shooting, staffers said

The Post learned that the 6-year-old was involved in a ball-day schedule that he post-crushed in early September, and was suspended for a day after threatening classmates. Administrators also had been alerted by the student, who previously attempted to strangle his kindergarten teacher, according to two school employees and records obtained by The Post.

Diane Toscano, Zeemeer'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 kindergarten who said she has 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 moved to the cafeteria, where students could see blood on the floor because their classrooms 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.

A Richneck classroom in the aftermath of a student who had shot a teacher with a gun on Jan. 30. (Photo by Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images)

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 wanted to be protected from himself."

Newport News school district spokeswoman Michelle Price declined to comment on behalf of Parker, the former superintendent, and Toscano, Zeemeer's attorney.

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'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 Zeemeer's attorney sent to the school system due, ya announcing her intent to sue. The letter was first reported by the Daily Press.

"The abuser 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 reach the teacher, who left the school and authorities have not released information about the incident.

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

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

"I will haven't gotten any info about [the student's] full day schedule," Zeemeer wrote.

The Richneck Elementary shooting: What we know

- Richneck Elementary School teacher shot by 6-year-old boy in classroom, officials say
- Richneck teacher shot in chest and hand, officials say
- Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Virginia, should be locked down, officials say, according to staffers.

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No chrome' 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.

Explainer: How seeing failed the 6-year-old accused of shooting his teacher?

Text messages and a photo shared between teachers show that a student in Zeemeer's class repeatedly hit a teacher so hard with a chair that her legs became dotted with green and purple lesions — and that, at another point, a kindergarten was accused of pushing a pregnant teacher to the ground and kicking her in the stomach so hard that she feared for her life. Toscano said Friday that the 6-year-old who shot Zeemeer had a few administrators responsible to those episodes, although one educator wrote in a text this fall that the twisted 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 duties."

The second-grade teacher added, referencing administrative failures, "It's only gotten get worse."

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'Again nothing was done'

About two months later, on the morning of Jan. 6, the 6-year-old brought a gun to school and shot Zeemeer in her classroom, 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 9 a.m., passing a school sign that still ended students "Happy New Year" to 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 at school during class, the family said in a statement last month. On size, he has unknown trauma, the parents discontinued that plan. "The work of the shooting was the first work when we went back to class with him," the statement said.

Around 11:15 a.m., the boy was slated to leave Zeemeer's classroom and go to a special education class down the hall, which is typically 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 and no windows, administrators had been discussing concerns about 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 teacher, 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 her level and said, "I'm going to punch you in the face," she recalled. Scared and tired, the girl raced from her table to grab the nearest school staffer, she said.

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The school staffer scolded the 6-year-old that pinching another student "wasn't nice," she said. The girl's mother said she called 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 confirm 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 Zeemeer, according to Toscano, Zeemeer's attorney. Toscano wrote in her letter to the school district that Zeemeer took the information directly to Assistant Principal Bryan Parker, who is not related to the former superintendent with the same last name.

Zeemeer visited the assistant principal's office and told her about the threat, reporting that the student was in a violent mood, Toscano wrote. "Yet ... absolutely nothing is done."

At 12:30 p.m., the 6-year-old boy grabbed his gun and ran through a brief "lockdog" period, they were supposed to hunt 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.

Zeemeer told a colleague she had glimpsed "the shooter tube 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. The teacher, according to Toscano, Toscano wrote, suggesting the boy's pocket were too small to contain a gun. "Assistant Principal Parker was made aware at the beginning of recess that Ms. Zeemeer 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 Zeemeer, according to Emily Mapp Brunson, an attorney who is representing the parents of four Richneck families. Brunson provided a statement that details an account of that day given by a boy enrolled in Zeemeer's class.

The 6-year-old showed his fellow students the gun, which he had concealed in the pocket of his jacket, recalling the day, 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 was young 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 wooden barn. Not long after, the boy told a teacher about the gun, Brunson said.

Toscano described a similar incident in her letter to the district, writing that a teacher alerted to the issue gave the boy a smaller toilet 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 Bryan Parker Newton, who was Richneck principal at the time, said in a statement that "it would be impossible to comment on discussions that they. Newton was not a part of." She is Assistant Principal, 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 Zeemeer's classroom for what was listed on the schedule as math class.

Shortly before 1 p.m., Toscano wrote in her letter, Zeemeer "was sitting at her reading table when the shooter, who was sitting at his desk, pulled the gun out of his pocket." He expressed 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 between a teacher and a student who had been sitting nearby, the teacher said in a video call with The Post, showed students ducking and hiding behind and under tables and scattering from Zeemeer's desk.

Zeemeer was the last to leave her classroom, police have said. She made a right turn and traveled down the hallway before fading back. "It only sure every one of these 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 lit and its third grader, 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 Zeemeer's classroom, two classes of second-graders had left for recess when the shooting occurred, according to a teacher who had her aide tell their shared classroom lock down, 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. Soon after the principal and police began circulating the building unlocking classroom doors. The adults led the children to the gym to wait reunion with their parents.

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

Kathleen Garcia, a parent of a second-grade boy, said he learned of

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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.

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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.

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