

Fox Elementary, a Richmond institution since 1911, closed indefinitely after late-night fire

A beloved Richmond elementary school in the city's Fan District will remain closed indefinitely after the school, which was built in 1911, was engulfed in flames on Friday night.

Students at William Fox Elementary School — who watched their classrooms burn overnight or woke up to news of it — will have Monday and Tuesday off before going virtual on Wednesday for a period of time, Superintendent Jason Kamras announced on Saturday morning.

"I'd like to ask everyone to please keep our students most of all, their families and teachers, our support staff, please keep them in your prayers," Kamras said. "Please reach out to them and support them in any way you possibly can."

"To the thousands of calls and emails and texts, offering love and support, it's truly a demonstration of the strength of the RPS family. And I assure you, we will dust ourselves off, stand up and move forward with joy, with love and with learning," Kamras said.

No fatalities or injuries have been reported so far in connection with the fire.

The superintendent said his team will look at moving students to other schools while the damage from Friday night's fire is assessed and repaired. He said officials are evaluating the former Clark Springs Elementary School building and other school facilities as alternative locations.

As fire crews continued working to contain the fire Saturday morning, families ambled around the school, taking photos of the burned building and chatting with neighbors about how

their routines on Friday night were disrupted by the acrid smell of smoke and blaring fire engines.

Oliver Speck, a parent of two boys, one who currently attends Fox, said the fire feels even more devastating given that students had just been getting back to a more normal routine at school this year amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The family was getting ready for bed when they first noticed the fire around 10:30. He said they all stayed out watching emergency crews fighting the blaze until 2:30 a.m.

“The cupola on top of the building, we watched it collapse,” Speck said. “It’s been very emotional. Most of his class is out here looking this morning.”

At a media briefing in front of the school on Saturday morning, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney extended his support, and said he had received a call from Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who promised the same.

The fire will be investigated, and no cause is known at this time.

Richmond Fire Chief Melvin D. Carter confirmed reporting from the Richmond Times-Dispatch that crews were dispatched to the school at 9:30 p.m., but after a search did not find anything and left the scene. They were then called back at 10:35, but the blaze had spread by that point and the crews had to adopt a “defensive posture.”

A news release from the fire department sent earlier Saturday morning said crews were called to the school at around 10:35 p.m. in response to a three-alarm fire. Officials said parts of the roof began to collapse at around 11:09. It

was at that time that firefighters started retreating from the building to focus on a “defensive attack” outside of it.

The news release did not mention the response to an alarm that was tripped at the school earlier in the evening.

Audio logs from the initial emergency dispatch indicate that several fire officials were called to the school after an alarm was triggered in the building. There was some discussion as to whether it was due to a smoke alarm or some kind of motion sensor.

The audio also indicated that there was a delay in firefighters being able to access the building, as the alarm company could not immediately get a response from anyone with Richmond Public Schools who had a key.

Carter said Saturday morning that officials were still able to gain access inside the building during the preliminary investigation into the call, but was not aware of how they did so.

“Before we contact the fire marshal, I just wanted to confirm this was a fire alarm. I heard the point of activation was a motion detector,” a dispatcher can be heard saying on the call.

“Yeah, we’re trying to look in through the window now,” a firefighter on the scene replied. “We verified. It’s stating that it’s a photo detector on the 2nd floor classroom number 32.”

Before 10 p.m., a firefighter says he gained access to the building from the “Charlie side.” He doesn’t say how.

According to the audio recordings and call logs, firefighters left the scene at 10:09 p.m. after they said no hazards were found in the building.

Fresh calls about a fire started coming in within the next 30 minutes.

"It's coming from a citizen who reports there are flames visible from the top floor of the school. With gray smoke and debris falling outside. Per the alarm we received earlier tonight, possible point of activation is going to be from classroom 32," the dispatcher said.

Moments later, the dispatcher asked three times to confirm that the building was starting to burn.

At 10:39 p.m., a firefighter answered: "Affirmative. It is a working fire."

About three minutes later, a request from a firefighter on the scene comes over the broadcast.

"You need to send the water."

Garrett Roberts, a father of four who lives in the neighborhood, said he was still awake scrolling through his phone late Friday after the kids and his partner, Lauren Methena, had gone to bed.

Roberts said he checked an online log of emergency calls right after hearing several engines near their home.

He went to investigate, came back and told Methena that he could see flames and thick black smoke coming from Fox, where one of their four kids currently attends school.

"I started crying. I was in disbelief," said Methena, who is involved in organizing kids soccer on the grounds as part of the school's parent-teacher association.

The next morning, their kids pointed out the charred, roofless classrooms on the second floor.

“The field’s also flooded. ... We’re going to have to find somewhere else to try to keep soccer going, just so they have some semblance of normalcy. We were just getting back to normal,” she said.

People from elsewhere in the city also descended upon the neighborhood school to survey the damage or show solidarity.

Shae McGrath, a former Richmond Public Schools teacher, came to visit the school on Saturday morning, chalking messages on sidewalks across from the building in support of the community.

McGrath, who had trained at the school early in her teaching career, said it is renowned as an idyllic place for students, teachers and parents. Other parents and teachers expressed similar sentiments about the school on Saturday morning.

“I always felt like it was so sunny,” McGrath said. “There’s always children playing and teachers who feel supported by this community. That’s something that not all teachers have, so it’s a really special place.”