

Sex offender was employed as Va. school counselor for 20 months after arrest

A counselor for the state's largest public school system kept his job for more than a year and a half after his arrest in Chesterfield County on charges of soliciting prostitution from a minor.

Virginia has processes in place to prevent sex offenders from working in K-12 schools, but it's unclear at which point in the process there was a breakdown.

Darren Thornton, 50, who also previously worked for Hanover County schools, was arrested in an undercover chat operation in Chesterfield in November 2020. At the time, he was employed by Fairfax County Public Schools as a school counselor.

Authorities in court documents said Thornton chatted with an undercover officer and set up a meeting for sexual acts. The officer told Thornton she was 17, and Thornton agreed to meet up with her, according to chat transcripts included in court documents. He showed up to the apartment and was met by police, authorities said.

Thornton was convicted on March 11 and sentenced to five years, court documents show. But the court suspended the sentence on the conditions of good behavior, following the law and paying court costs.

Thornton also had to register with the Virginia State Police as a registered sex offender. The database lists him as living in the 1300 block of Wentbridge Road in Richmond. From fall 2006 to spring 2020, he was a school counselor and boys varsity basketball coach for Hanover schools.

Thornton in June 2022 was [arrested in another online chatting operation](#) on charges of solicitation of prostitution and frequenting a bawdy place.

In brief phone calls with the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Thornton said he was set up by police in the two undercover chat operations and that police do not tell the exact truth about what happened. He did not elaborate.

According to [state law](#), an arresting agency is required to report anyone charged with a felony who is known to be, or discovered to be, a school employee to their school superintendent.

Chesterfield police spokeswoman Elizabeth Caroon said the department's records indicate the Fairfax school system was notified of Thornton's November 2020 arrest the following day, and again when Thornton was arrested this June.

But when contacted by The Times-Dispatch last month, Fairfax schools spokeswoman Julie Moulton said Thornton was still employed by the school division.

Virginia Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle said he could not recall a similar circumstance.

"We take [educator misconduct] very seriously," Pyle said. "Back in 2008, it was the [VDOE] that strongly pushed for legislation to tighten reporting requirements around educator misconduct, and that's when the requirement was placed on law enforcement to inform employing school divisions of the arrests of teachers."

Since 2000, the state has taken more than 400 actions against teacher licenses, and the majority of those cases involve educator misconduct, according to Pyle.

“Any given year, we have more than 100,000 teachers in our system so it’s a small fraction, but one case is one too many,” Pyle said.

Thornton’s staff page was deleted from the school system’s website on the afternoon of July 28 after The Times-Dispatch began inquiring about the case.

Helen Lloyd, also a Fairfax schools spokeswoman, declined to make school division officials available for interviews or to answer questions about the safety processes.

On Thursday, Fairfax Superintendent [Michelle Reid](#) sent a message to families addressing the issue and said the division “took immediate steps to dismiss the employee” as soon as she and the School Board knew of the situation.

It is not immediately clear where the breakdown of communication happened, and Fairfax district officials declined to answer questions. The school system counted 178,636 students last year, according to state data.

Reid was appointed to her post in April and began the job July 1. She follows former Superintendent [Scott Brabrand](#), who now serves as the executive director of the [Virginia Association of School Superintendents](#). Brabrand was not immediately available for an interview on Friday afternoon.

Reid said in the message to families that she initiated a comprehensive, independent investigation by outside counsel into the circumstances surrounding the situation.

“There is no higher priority than the safety of our students and, on behalf of the school board and myself, I want to make this very clear: this entire situation is unacceptable from any perspective. We are deeply concerned about how this happened in one of our schools,” Reid said in the

message. "I want to assure you that we are doing everything possible so this cannot happen again. I am committed to keeping you updated on this issue."

Thornton's next court date for his June arrest is Sept. 27 in Chesterfield District Court.

Chesterfield police email about arrested counselor never delivered to schools

[The Chesterfield Police Department](#) tried to notify the Fairfax schools division when a school counselor was arrested on sex charges, but the emails were never delivered, and the counselor flew under the radar and continued his employment with the state's largest school division for 20 months after his first solicitation arrest.

[Darren Thornton, 50, was arrested in a November 2020 undercover chat operation on charges including soliciting prostitution from a minor.](#) At the time, he was employed by Fairfax County Public Schools as a school counselor.

[The Chesterfield Police Department](#) said Tuesday that an employee called Fairfax schools within a day of Thornton's 2020 arrest to find out the best way to notify the superintendent about Thornton being arrested. But a Fairfax schools employee provided two incorrect email addresses for the superintendent, according to a statement released Tuesday afternoon by Chesterfield County Police Chief Col. Jeffrey Katz.

Thornton was convicted March 11 and sentenced to five years, court documents show. The court suspended the sentence on the conditions of good behavior, following the law and paying court costs.

After his conviction, he was required to register as a sexual offender with the Virginia State Police. Thornton identified himself as “self-employed” while he was still employed by Fairfax schools.

In June, Thornton was arrested in another online chatting operation in Chesterfield on charges of solicitation of prostitution and frequenting a bawdy place. Katz and his team recognized Thornton from the last undercover sting operation, Katz said.

“I was surprised to see that he was still listed on Fairfax County School’s webpage as a school counselor and inquired of our staff how that could be possible,” Katz said in a statement Tuesday. “The next day, our special victims unit supervisor made a second phone notification to Fairfax County Schools, whereupon the matter appears to have been addressed administratively with his firing in August.”

The Virginia Department of Corrections is opening an investigation into the incident. Spokesman Benjamin Jarvela said the department “is prepared to take any and all necessary actions following the results of the investigation.”

Fairfax Schools Superintendent Michelle Reid, who began her job July 1, told news outlets that she didn’t learn about Thornton’s first solicitation arrest until July 28.

The Times-Dispatch first inquired about Thornton’s employment in relation to his 2020 arrest on the afternoon of July 28. Shortly after the inquiry, his staff page was deleted from the Fairfax schools website.

Katz said he learned Monday that the emails sent in 2020, following the department’s phone call with the school division, did not get delivered to the superintendent. The

incorrect email addresses used by Chesterfield Police staff were provided by Fairfax schools, according to Katz.

“Given the reality the former superintendent had multiple email addresses during his tenure, it is possible we were provided invalid or out-of-date addresses when we asked how to make this notification,” Katz said in the statement. “The technical nuances of the email delivery failure are still unknown. Still, we are fully committed to working in partnership with Fairfax County Schools to identify the issue and determine how we can avoid a lapse in communication in the future.”

Fairfax schools spokeswoman Julie Moulton declined to respond to several inquiries from the Times-Dispatch on Tuesday.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow is preparing a communication that will go out to all school divisions Friday to remind them of their responsibilities related to state laws, policies and guidance to protect students from employee misconduct, according to state Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle.

[Gov. Glenn Youngkin on Monday told WSET-TV that the information was “an astonishing revelation.”](#)

“For there to be a school counselor, middle school counselor, who was arrested for sex solicitation of a minor back in November 2020,” WSET reported, “And for that issue only now to be resolved, if those facts are correct, this is wholly unacceptable. And this is, again, a failure on behalf of administrators to in fact protect students.”

Legislation would tighten rules that notify schools of employee sex crimes

The Virginia General Assembly next month will consider [legislation](#) that would tighten existing rules regarding the processes that are meant to inform school leaders when one of their employees is charged with certain felony offenses, including sex crimes.

The proposal follows a Times-Dispatch discovery in August that [a sex offender kept his job](#) at a Fairfax County middle school for 20 months after he was arrested in Chesterfield County on charges of soliciting prostitution from a minor.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax, would guarantee a paper trail to ensure school leaders [receive notifications](#) from law enforcement and courts.

It is not entirely clear what part of the system glitched when Darren Thornton, 50, flew under the radar and continued his employment with the state's largest school division after he was arrested on charges of soliciting prostitution from a minor.

The Chesterfield Police Department tried to notify the Fairfax schools division when a school counselor was arrested on sex charges, but the emails were never delivered.

"When I heard what the problem was, it occurred to me that it's very simple to straighten this out," Surovell said.

The [current law](#) regarding the notification process puts the onus on law enforcement to notify schools, but does not specify where to find the contact information.

In Fairfax County, the mix-up ensued because a Fairfax schools employee provided police with two incorrect email

addresses for the superintendent, according to Chesterfield County Police Chief Col. Jeffrey Katz, though details are still unclear.

Surovell's bill would require notifications to be sent either by certified mail, which provides a receipt upon delivery, or a fax, which also provides a confirmation of delivery.

The bill is essentially a stopgap measure until July 2025, when the Virginia State Police anticipate utilizing a new criminal record keeping system that will improve the notification system for schools along with hospitals and child care centers.

Thornton, who also previously worked for Hanover County schools, listed himself as "self-employed" when he registered as a sex offender, while he was still employed by Fairfax schools.

The proposed legislation would also ensure that every person arrested in Virginia on certain charges undergoes employment verification.

The legislation will be acted on in a Senate committee hearing after the General Assembly convenes in Richmond next month. Surovell said he expects the bill to receive bipartisan support, and would be surprised if it didn't pass unanimously.

If the proposal is approved by the state legislature and signed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, it will become law in July.

A Youngkin spokesperson said the administration continues to plan to implement additional criminal history monitoring.

