

Virginia parents, teachers worry about gun violence after school shootings

Virginia parents' fears about gun violence in schools, already top of mind, have been intensified by two school shootings in the commonwealth this year — [one at Newport News](#) in January and one on [Thursday in the parking lot of George Wythe High School](#) in Richmond.

The recent violence has area parents on edge.

If Henrico County mom Jamie Bass drives past her two kids' schools during the day, she worries when she sees small details awry, like a police car parked out front, or a door being propped open.

"Something that I had always heard but didn't understand until I was a parent is that when we enroll our kids in school, we are trusting schools with the physical safety of our children for a huge portion of the day," Bass said.

Amid heightened concerns, local school divisions are taking varied approaches to school safety. In Henrico County, for example, the school division piloted metal detectors starting in February at some schools to study the effectiveness.

Bass is part of an increasingly worried group of parents across the nation. [A CBS News poll](#) conducted this month shows that American parents' concern about gun violence is higher than it was last summer.

This month, 77 percent of parents are at least somewhat concerned about the possibility of gun violence at their children's school, according to the poll, while 72 percent of parents had the same concern last year.

About 61 percent of parents of school-age children reported this month that their children worry about gun violence at school, either "a lot" or "sometimes."

Days after a 6-year-old student fired a single round and intentionally shot his teacher Jan. 6 at [Richneck Elementary in Newport News](#), Colleen Renthrope, mother of a 7-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son in the school system, was among parents pouring out their anguish at a meeting of the Newport News School Board.

"There's no single answer to this abhorrent situation that our kids, teachers and parents find ourselves in daily," Renthrope said. "I send my kids to school and find myself praying to God that they will return home safely."

[Around the same time that the 6-year-old shot teacher Abigail Zwerner in Newport News](#), another teacher across the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel faced threats of gun violence from students. She said the school administration failed to act, the same way that school administration reportedly failed to protect the teacher in Newport News.

Kelley Green, a third-grade teacher in Virginia Beach, said she reported a verbal threat of gun violence from a student immediately after it happened, but said she did not hear back from school administration until four hours after school had ended.

“I still had to sit in the office with that same student who had threatened me that day with an AK-47,” Green said. (The student did not have a gun.)

“When the situation at Richneck Elementary occurred, it was weeks after numerous incidents of teachers, myself included, reporting unsafe scenarios, and nothing being done.”

Green has faced several threats and acts of violence during her teaching career. Within her first few weeks of her first teaching job, a student punched Green in the stomach. Earlier this school year, a parent came into school and struck her, she said.

Next year, Green will join a new school in Virginia Beach.

“I was allowed to be assaulted. After reporting it for 17 days and saying that I don’t feel safe, nothing was done,” she said. “I was told that, ‘Well, you were hit because that was your fault.’ That’s when I knew I kind of had to go.”

Green said recent school shootings across the U.S. have prompted school division officials to hold faculty meetings and reassure teachers that they are safe. But the officials have not taken any actions to make teachers safe, she said.

“We are someone’s child as well,” Green said. “We deserve to be able to go home to our families and our parents and our kids and our pets in order to do what we love the next day.”

Green plans to push for better policies in her school division to protect teachers.

She proposes that teachers should be given personal leave to go home and recover if they have been physically or mentally assaulted by students or others. The proposal also says parents who threaten teachers should be banned from the school, and threat assessments should be mandatory.

She said she is pushing for things that should be the bare minimum in order to make a better environment for teachers and students.

“I love those kids, and I love being able to make an impact,” Green said.

“As many headaches and heartaches as they give, they’ve given more love. They deserve so much better.”

Alarming, but uncommon

Although school shootings and parents' worries about them are on the rise, school gun violence remains uncommon.

“Despite the alarming scariness of school shootings and, despite the fact that they have increased in recent years and the terrible nature of them, they’re still an extremely rare event and extremely unlikely to happen in any individual school,” said Jeff Temple, a professor and psychologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch who studies adolescent violence.

“For many people, a large number of our kids, school is the safest place that they can be.”

Gun violence overtook automobile accidents as the leading cause of youth deaths in the U.S. as of 2020. But less than one percent of youth gun deaths each year happen in schools, and even fewer are from mass shootings in schools.

Although school shootings are statistically rare, they are on the rise. Last year, more school shootings took place in the U.S. (46) than in any year since at least 1999, when 15 were killed at Columbine High School in suburban Denver, according to a [Washington Post database](#).

“School shootings are not only here to stay, but they’re probably going to get worse before they get better in terms of frequency and severity,” Temple said. “We’re going to have a day in the not too distant future where we’re going to have two schools have mass shootings on the same day. That will happen, just statistically speaking.”

Moms Demand Action is a national nonprofit organization with localized groups of parents who are advocating for what they term “common-sense” gun laws to make schools safer.

Membership for the Richmond chapter has soared in the wake of the high-profile school shootings March 27 at The Covenant School in Nashville, Tennessee, in which a former student killed three 9-year-olds and three adults — and Jan. 6 in Newport News. It was largely dormant during the depths of the pandemic when parents were hunkered down, focused on their kids’ online learning.

Last year, the group’s membership snowballed.

“It wasn’t until after the Uvalde (Texas) shooting” in May 2022, in which a former student killed 19 elementary school students and two teachers, “that we have seen an enormous surge in interest in joining the movement,” said Kristin DuMont, a local co-lead for Richmond’s Moms Demand Action chapter. “Now we’ve had over 100 people join us in the last few weeks, really since the Nashville shooting.”

Aside from what it terms common-sense gun laws — like stricter background checks and mental health checks on gun purchases — the group pushes for practices and laws

that would keep kids from having guns in the first place. It also wants parents to talk to children, educate and be mindful about guns.

School safety measures

Henrico County Public Schools Superintendent Amy Cashwell said the school system is constantly talking about safety and how to upgrade or improve it.

Within the past five years or so, the county's schools have seen visible changes to safety features. Security vestibules where visitors can do school business without coming into the school were added, while a buzz-in system keeps people from entering schools without speaking to someone in a front office.

Cashwell said the overall goal of the school district's security systems is to have a layered approach that catches all types of gun violence, from potential mass shootings to students who bring guns into school.

The school division has a host of physical security devices like visitor identification scanners, newly upgraded camera systems and KnoxBoxes — wall-mounted safes that hold keys so first responders can access a building. The school system just concluded a study testing metal detectors and weapons scanners at three of its schools.

Cashwell said that beyond the need for physical protections at schools is the importance that each school community plays in reporting problems that might involve students.

“It's been public that we've had some weapons on our campus, at our high schools specifically,” Cashwell said. “Without picking any one of them out, in almost every instance, a student reported that they believed another student had a weapon on their person either through anonymous alerts or to a trusted adult directly.”

HCPS also has an internal team that focuses solely on its school safety plans, which are vetted annually by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services' school safety audit program. Cashwell said the system is consistently working to upgrade those plans based on expert feedback.

Student mental health

Despite the effort, coordination and resources, those best-laid school security plans have not proven entirely perfect.

Joshua M. Langberg, a parent of a student at Holman Middle School in Henrico, said the safety measures themselves can be dangerous for children.

He said Holman had experienced two gun-related events over the past couple of months. In the second, which the school said “appeared” to be a prank, police burst into

his daughter's classroom during a lock-and-hide drill with their guns drawn, "red laser dots leveled at all around the room."

"I understand that given all that's going on in the world, we have to focus on and prioritize school safety but, as a parent, I feel the pendulum has swung too far and that we've forgotten that our core mission at schools is child development and well-being," Langberg said.

"That's why we send our children to school. If we focus on safety too much, we will not be able to meet our core mission."

Langberg is a licensed child psychologist in Virginia and New Jersey, having worked for Virginia Commonwealth University for 11 years. He says his daughter has been showing signs of PTSD since the incident that drew law enforcement.

"This is not normal. This is stuff that we typically don't think about it unless people are in war situations," Langberg said. "Can we at least acknowledge that some of the safety procedures we've put into place are literally causing our children potential PTSD, which is a lifelong debilitating condition — and I want to make sure that side of the discussion doesn't get left."

Data compiled by [Everytown](#), a national gun safety nonprofit, found that 52% of school campus shootings come from arguments that escalate, robberies or parking lot altercations. The compilation found that less than 1% of school gunfire incidents were done with the intent to commit a mass shooting.

Anne Forrester, a middle school teacher in Richmond Public Schools, said the answer is not hardening schools or more discipline — it is more mental health supports for students.

"I don't think our schools have become any more or less safe (over the past few years). I think that our students' mental health has declined," Forrester said. "It's not that I'm not concerned about violence, but I think what's causing violence amongst our students is unmet mental health needs."

The problem, she said, is that students come to school with unprocessed and unresolved trauma. It stems from violence in their households and their communities, she said.

"In the news, you see this child brought a weapon to school, or this child assaulted someone, or this child made a threat. At the end of the day, there were teachers and parents and other students who knew that child and probably cared about that child, and knew that child as someone who was suffering, as someone who needed a lot of help. There's more to it than 'this kid was bad,' " Forrester said.

“Kids aren’t bad. People make bad choices, people get desperate in bad circumstances, especially kids. As a teacher, I have to believe that they can change if they just get the help they need.”

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U.S. probe into racial bias in Henrico Schools prompts overhaul of gifted program

Matthew Docteur started kindergarten in Henrico County Public Schools in 2019-20, the year that COVID-19 hit. He misbehaved and refused to turn on his computer camera during virtual classes. He was acting out because he was bored, his mother says.

His first-grade teacher knew early on that Matthew was gifted. But his school counselor said he was not mature enough for the county’s gifted program.

“That didn’t sit right with me,” said Matthew’s mother, Amanda Reisner. “Maturity has nothing to do with giftedness.”

For years, Black students like Matthew have been systemically underrepresented in the county’s gifted program.

Black parents in Henrico said that, from their perspective, schools’ decisions to deny their children participation in the gifted program boiled down to Black students not being identified as gifted due to behavioral issues, according to an external audit of the program.

Matthew was not admitted to Henrico’s gifted program in first grade, and only one student at his school, Mehfoud Elementary in the Varina District, was identified for the program that year.

Varina, a district on the far east end of the county, has areas with high concentrations of poverty. Its student population is nearly 75% Black.

Meanwhile, across town on the wealthier western end, the Three Chopt District has less than 12% Black enrollment and had several elementary schools with upward of 100 students in the gifted program the same year.

Countywide, Black students made up 36% of the public schools population in the 2020-21 academic year, but only 14% of the gifted program.

At every level of education—elementary, middle and high school—the Henrico school with the lowest percentage of students identified as gifted is in Varina.

Matthew was admitted to the gifted program last school year after a federal investigation prompted school officials to make systemic changes to the program.

The Office for Civil Rights, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education, investigated whether Henrico County Public Schools discriminated against African American students by failing to provide them with comparable resources and educational opportunities that are provided to white students to prepare them for postsecondary education or careers. The USDOE does not reveal the source of such complaints to the Office for Civil Rights.

The USDOE conducted the investigation under Title VI, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color and national origin in education programs that receive federal funds from the department. Investigators identified several areas of concern, including the disproportionate enrollment of marginalized students in advanced courses.

In order to alleviate further investigation from the Office for Civil Rights, the Henrico system in 2017 agreed to a resolution that outlines provisions regarding college preparedness for Black students, parental engagement and staff training.

The resolution agreements prompted several changes in the school system. One such change was an overhaul of the way students are identified for the school division's gifted program.

Racial disparities

The Richmond Times-Dispatch reviewed annual reports on the demographics of the Henrico students identified as gifted and compared them with the division's enrollment demographics.

The data reveals that, while Henrico was already making progress on diversifying its gifted program before the beginning of the federal investigation, significant racial disparities remain, even after the implementation of recommendations from an external equity audit.

In the 2013-14 academic year, Asian and white students in Henrico were, respectively, 7 times and 5.4 times likelier than Black students to be identified as gifted. By the time the investigation started in 2017, those multipliers had shrunk to 5.4 and 4.1. But progress has slowed in recent years.

As of the 2021-22 school year, Asian and white students were 4.9 times and 3.5 times likelier than Black students to be determined gifted.

The disparities are more pronounced in Henrico than in Virginia at large. Statewide, Black students make up just under 12% of the students identified as gifted, but are only 22% of total public school enrollment.

Moving the needle

Director of Teaching, Learning and Innovation Mike Dussault and Gifted Education Specialist Jenna Conlee spearheaded a new five-year plan that will guide the philosophy and operations of the school district's gifted program for the next few years. Both began their respective roles after the federal investigation began.

Under the direction of Dussault and Conlee, the division's gifted program underwent massive changes that moved the needle in the direction of greater diversity among students enrolled in the program.

"When we came on board, we realized we were missing a group of students: English learners, African Americans, special education kids," said Dussault, who became director of teaching, learning and innovation in the 2018-19 school year.

One of the main goals of the new plan, which started last school year, is to increase participation in gifted services in the traditionally underrepresented schools.

There is also a significant divide among the magisterial districts within Henrico. Nearly 1 in 5 students at schools in Three Chopt are listed as gifted. In Varina, it is roughly 1 in 17.

"It is the perception that there are [a greater number of] gifted students in the west than there are in the east—and that is true based on the data," Dussault said. "Our goal is to level that out, but not take anything away from the previous kids that are identified."

While the gap between districts remains large, there has been some progress. In the 2019-20 school year, only 5% of Varina students were identified as gifted. The following year, after changes to the identification process were implemented, 6% of students attending Varina schools were identified as gifted.

"It's a slow growth, but it's where we are," Conlee said.

Reisner's older son, Alex, is also gifted and was one of the first students from Henrico's east end to be accepted to the county's prestigious Early Bird math program, which accepts the top 1% of students in the county.

Reisner said she was told not to expect her son to be accepted because, "most kids from the east end don't make it into that program."

Both of Reisner's sons are "twice exceptional," a term education professionals use to describe students who are academically gifted and have a learning difference or disability. Matthew is diagnosed with ADHD, and Alex is on the autism spectrum, Reisner said.

"Getting people to understand the giftedness and their exceptionality has been very hard," she said.

Systemic changes

School officials' actions to create more diversity involve a three-pronged approach: the identification system, talent development for students, and professional learning for educators.

The identification system now includes screening tools designed to recognize the strengths of students from various backgrounds, including multilingual, economically disadvantaged, culturally diverse or identified with a disability.

"As we wrote our local plan, we were intentional in our goals. We knew there were gaps in identification of English learners, our African American and Hispanic groups," Dussault said. "Those were part of the determining factors as to why we selected those scales."

New scales used in the identification process aim to minimize teacher bias. Checklists present the same gifted trait or characteristic to teachers in two different ways—one way that sounds positive, and another that sounds negative.

For example, one trait could be described as "disrespectful" or a "smart aleck," while another is described as "precocious" or "humorous." Both are describing the same gifted trait, but teachers might view students differently based on their own backgrounds.

Amanda Reisner, who is a teacher in Richmond, said that before she had gifted children of her own, she did not know what to look for.

"You think it's kids with straight A's who sit there in class, do their work, are well-behaved and raise their hands," she said. "There's a stereotype that that's what a gifted kid is, when it's kind of the opposite."

Being gifted is not the same as being smart.

One of the most popular definitions that education professionals have used for decades is "asynchronous development." In its most basic sense, it means a gifted student has developed mental capacities ahead of their chronological age.

Being gifted is a natural trait, educators say, and not something that can be developed through study—though some Henrico parents prep their children for the screener test.

Research suggests that tutoring children for these tests provides meager benefits, but can help students become more familiar with the form of testing.

The author of an equity audit commissioned by the school division wrote that Indian and Asian families were "almost certainly" prepping their children for the screener, and it is a

universal problem. He wrote that, “although the practice is distasteful, the advantage is almost certainly small.”

In another step to make the process more objective, school division officials removed work sample requirements and replaced them with standard performance tasks.

Matthew Docteur initially did not get accepted into the gifted program under the old plan, which could be due to the quality of his work samples. He did not participate much in kindergarten classes, largely because he was bored from not being challenged, his mother said.

“I also think it’s somewhat racial with [Matthew], the way his behaviors interfered,” Amanda Reisner said.

When school officials removed work samples from the equation, he was identified and referred to the gifted program, and now attends Varina Elementary.

“How many times did kids like my son get denied and then get accepted?” Reisner asked. “How much is that happening? Because you don’t just go from being not gifted to being gifted.”

Varina Elementary had 12 students designated as gifted across grades three to five last year: 5.5% of total enrollment. Across town, 60 students at Three Chopt Elementary—more than 1 in 4 students—were identified as gifted.

English learners

Students who are still learning English have also been historically underrepresented in the program.

Teachers began using a new scale to identify gifted students last school year that is geared toward looking for gifted characteristics in English learners.

“We know that sometimes if they have not acquired the language, it’s hard to gauge how they’re performing,” said Conlee, the gifted education specialist.

School leaders have implemented Spanish translated testing, as well as other versions of tests where language is not used to knock a student’s score.

“We had such a jump in referrals for English learners; we weren’t getting any before,” Dussault said. “And they were being found eligible as well. It would be one thing if they were just referred, but the fact that they were found eligible tells us there’s validity in the research-based scale they were using.”

Awareness

Part of the revamp is to spread awareness of the gifted program equally across the district.

“What is the awareness of parents at Highland Springs [eastern Henrico] versus at Colonial Trail [western Henrico] about the gifted program?” Dussault said.

The district’s community engagement department has hosted events to educate parents on the program, and school officials have used back-to-school nights as an opportunity to ensure parents know about the opportunities.

“We’re creating all of these [opportunities] so that when Kaechele Elementary [western Henrico] goes and shows our presentation with all the bells and whistles and videos that go with it, Highland Springs [eastern Henrico] is getting the exact same one,” Conlee said. “Whereas before, I don’t think that was happening.”

Many parents have misconceptions about what gifted learning looks like, based on what it may have been like when they were in primary school, Dussault said.

Reisner, who sits on the county’s gifted education advisory council, is part of the push for more diversity in the program. She says the perception that there are more gifted students in the western districts than the eastern districts is not true.

“It’s that we weren’t necessarily looking for the right things.”

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Students protest Youngkin's K-12 transgender policies: 'VDOE let us be'

A group of students gathered outside the Virginia Department of Education’s headquarters on Friday evening with a message for Gov. Glenn Youngkin and the state education department: “[Trans rights](#) are human rights,” the group shouted in unison, along with chants of “VDOE, let us be.”

The protest of about 40 people, coordinated by the student-led Pride Liberation Project, was organized in response to [Youngkin’s K-12 transgender policies](#), which the group dubbed the “Don’t Be Trans” policies.

In July, the Youngkin administration [enacted the finalized policies](#), which emphasize parents’ rights and revoke certain safeguards that were in place for transgender students under the prior administration of Gov. Ralph Northam.

Ranger Balleisen, 18, a recent graduate of McLean High School in Fairfax County, called the Youngkin administration’s policies an attempt to force transgender youth into unsafe situations.

“We’re going to be forced back into the closet in schools we thought were safe, we’re going to be forced off of our school sports teams, and forced out of the bathrooms we want to use,” he said in an interview. “We will be bullied and dead-named, as is promoted in these policies.”

The state’s guidance requires students to use school bathrooms that match the sex they were assigned at birth “except to the extent that federal law otherwise requires.”

It also requires school division personnel to refer to each student using only the pronouns “appropriate to the sex appearing in the student’s official record — that is, male pronouns for students whose sex is male, and female pronouns for a student whose sex is female” unless a student is emancipated or if their parent provides written instruction saying otherwise.

Youngkin spokeswoman Macaulay Porter said: “The guidelines make it clear that when parents are part of the process, schools will accommodate the requests of children and their families. While people exercise their free speech, these policies state that students should be treated with compassion and schools should be free from bullying and harassment.”

The model policies do not immediately affect school divisions’ practices. They are meant to be a model for local school boards, which, by law, must implement their own policies that are consistent with the state’s model policies.

Many [school boards with left-leaning majorities](#) have already stated they will not implement the new policies. No state funding is tied to the legislative mandate, and it lacks an enforcement mechanism.

But noncompliance opens up school boards to litigation, which materialized in Virginia Beach this week.

The Virginia Beach School Board narrowly voted down a proposal in August to adopt the Youngkin administration’s guidance. Two Virginia Beach parents on Thursday filed a lawsuit against the school division for refusing to follow the Youngkin administration’s guidance. The suit seeks an injunction requiring the Virginia Beach board to adopt the updated state guidance.