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Shooting after graduation ceremony ignites fresh anger about gun violence

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime-courts/graduation-shooting-seven-shot-two-dead/article_6466f5b6-04c6-11ee-9190-6b5d4870d02e.html

Two men were shot and killed outside the Altria Theater Tuesday evening following the Huguenot High School graduation, locking down a large section of the [VCU campus](#) and [prompting fresh outrage about gun violence in the community](#).

One of the men killed was an 18-year-old who was graduating on Tuesday afternoon, and the other was a 36-year-old man. Another five people also sustained gunshot wounds.

Richmond's Acting Police Chief Rick Edwards said a 19-year-old suspect is in custody and police, in consultation with Richmond prosecutors, expect to seek charges on two counts of second-degree murder, plus additional charges. Police detained another person with a firearm, but do not believe he was involved with the shooting, Edwards said.

Police believe the suspect knew at least one of the victims, said Edwards, who said he was unsure whether the suspect is a student.

As for the other shooting victims, Edwards said a 31-year-old victim sustained a life-threatening wound.

Four others suffered gunshot wounds that were not life-threatening: a 14-year-old boy, a 32-year-old man, a 55-year-old man and a 58-year-old man.

A 9-year-old girl who was struck by a car in the resulting commotion was treated at the scene, released and later went to a local hospital. She did not sustain a life-threatening injury, Edwards said.

"At this time I'd like to just express my concerns and my sympathies for those who lost their lives today and those whose lives were forever changed by the events today," said Edwards, who also thanked an array of local, state and federal law enforcement partners who also rushed to assist.

Panic as gunshots are heard

[A gunman opened fire at 5:13 p.m. as Huguenot High School](#) was ending its graduation ceremony and Thomas Jefferson was preparing to begin its commencement.

A panic erupted on Main Street as the shots went off. High school seniors dressed in their graduation robes ran from the scene, along with their friends and families who came to watch the ceremonies.

School Board member Jonathan Young, who was at the scene, said he saw “a lot of shock. A lot of people that injured themselves in the melee, the stampede ... All running as fast as they can, no shoes, people tripping over themselves, falling on top of (one) other, crying and yelling.”

A woman who said she is related to one of the graduates said, “As soon as we got out there, we were trying to find my brother, and then all I heard was boom boom boom. They were shooting and we all ran.” She asked not to be identified.

VCU student Saadat Bahrami said he was on his way to the library when he heard gunshots.

“I heard these shots going off and I didn’t really think much of it,” Bahrami said. “And then I saw a bunch of cops racing down the road.”

“Honestly, I think it’s a wake up call,” Bahrami said. “And the fact that there’s no changes being done whatsoever anywhere across the nation that are making a profound effect...I think that just speaks about where the priorities lie in our government, and it’s really not for the safety of the people.”

Richmond Schools Superintendent Jason Kamras, who was attending the graduation ceremonies, somberly pleaded with the community for an end to the violence.

“This is supposed to be a joyous day when our kids walk the stage and get their diploma, which is what they all did here for Huguenot today,” Kamras said. They “walked out the doors into their families’ and friends’ arms, taking pictures, and then this tragedy occurred.”

“I’m just tired of seeing people get shot and I beg of the entire community to stop – to just stop,” Kamras said.

He said the students can’t take it, “the teachers can’t take it, our families can’t take it anymore. I beg of you to stop.”

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney said, “we are going to do everything we can to bring the individuals involved in this to justice.”

“This is tragic, but also traumatic because this is their graduation,” Stoney said at a press conference. “The question that comes to mind right now is: Is nothing sacred any longer?”

'Who is in charge?'

Following the news conference, Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears addressed reporters and appeared to hold Richmond leaders accountable for stopping the violence. Democrats pushed back on Twitter, noting that Earle-Sears, a U.S. Marines veteran, had toted an assault-style rifle in an image she used in her 2021 campaign.

“The people that I represent are not safe – they’re not safe in this city, and we have to figure out why that is,” Earle-Sears said near the Altria Theater. “This is not about law-abiding gun owners, this is about gangs,” she said.

“Who is in charge – is that the mayor, is that the chief, who is that? I mean, let’s start naming names,” Earle-Sears said. “Because otherwise, if no one is accountable, if all we do is come in front of a camera... and keep talking about, ‘oh, this shouldn’t happen, and that shouldn’t happen.’ Well, you’re the one in charge. You’re the one responsible. So let’s cut it.”

House Minority Leader Don Scott Jr., D-Portsmouth, tweeted in response: “This gaslighting and political pandering by a LT. GOVERNOR who LITERALLY campaigned holding a picture of an assault rifle is lecturing others on preventing gun violence. She runs out to the scene with no empathy for the victims just thinking of how to appeal to MAGA,” Scott said, referring to former President Donald Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again.”

Gov. Glenn Youngkin said in a statement on Twitter: “My administration continues monitoring the terrible shooting in the heart of Richmond tonight. State law enforcement are fully supporting the Richmond Police Department as this investigation moves forward.”

All Richmond Public Schools classes are canceled Wednesday, the division announced in an email to families on Tuesday evening. The school system said counselors are available.

“For someone to commit this evil heinous act to show zero regard for anyone ... that’s just evil,” Young said. “And it’s long overdue for everyone who resides here, irrespective of their position or title to call it what it is, and that’s evil. If you commit evil acts, you need to pay the consequences.”

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'Shooter! Run!' Huguenot teachers locked selves in bathroom

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime/richmond-shooting-virginia-graduation-huguenot-shawn-jackson-lorenzo-smith-amari-pollard/article_b5e4af1c-0545-11ee-a46d-57c3f8369545.html

The graduation ceremony had ended, and nearly 300 [Huguenot High School](#) students had filed out of the Altria Theater and onto the sidewalk Tuesday evening. The teachers, wearing black robes and mortar boards, were cheering them, hugging them and clapping for them. It was such a happy moment.

Then Fabiola Chesnut, a Spanish teacher at Huguenot, heard [a series of gunshots](#) in rapid progression. Someone yelled “Shooter! Run!” and everyone scattered — into Monroe Park, into the parking garage and down the nearby streets.

Chesnut fled back into the theater, down one flight of stairs and found a bathroom. She and another teacher hurried inside, slammed the door and turned the lock. For the next 45 minutes, they huddled together, unsure what was occurring outside.

Just minutes earlier, the theater had been packed. The ROTC had presented the colors, the principal had welcomed families and two students had given speeches.

A teacher with 12 years’ experience, Chesnut knows when a fight is about to break out. She can see it escalating. But there was none of that Tuesday night.

[Chesnut never saw the shooter.](#) But she heard about 10 gunshots, one immediately after another. The crowd scattered, some tripping over one another, and Chesnut instinctively ran back to the theater.

“I was in disbelief,” she said. “It was surreal.”

Inside the bathroom, she called 911. There was a shooter, she said. Send somebody. The dispatcher told them to stay quiet.

There were screams coming from outside the bathroom, and Chesnut imagined the shooter closing in.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door and pushed on it. Was it the shooter? Chesnut and her colleague decided not to answer. Three more times, they heard knocks and pushing against the door.

On her phone, she texted other teachers and administrators. Some responded they were safe, hiding in closets.

Minutes went by, and eventually there were two loud, jarring bangs on the door. “Richmond police department,” someone shouted. The other teacher went to open the door, but Chesnut stopped her. Was it really the police?

Chesnut texted an assistant principal. Is it safe to come out?

“I think so,” he responded.

Chesnut dialed another colleague, who said the scene was under control. Carefully, Chesnut opened the bathroom door and stepped out.

Outside the theater, students and families were traumatized, tears running down their cheeks. They held one another.

Chesnut got on the bus that would take her back to Huguenot. But she saw a student she knew, and she rushed off. The student had been standing next to his friend when the friend was shot and began to bleed. The friend's father, also hit, had suffered a gunshot wound to the face.

The surviving student's voice quivered, his body trembled. Chesnut embraced him and tried to comfort him. She urged him to seek professional help for the trauma he had just endured.

Police identified the slain victims as Shawn Jackson, an 18-year-old new Huguenot graduate, and Renzo Smith, 36, Shawn's stepfather. Five others were injured in the shooting, and one was in critical condition Wednesday afternoon. Authorities have charged Amari Ty-Jon Pollard with two counts of second-degree murder.

Chesnut often saw Jackson entering English class in the room next door, but she did not know him well. Back on the bus, Chesnut called her husband and grown son to let them know she was okay. After she arrived at Huguenot, another teacher asked, "Wasn't this the worst experience of your life?"

The question transported her 35 years into the past, when she was living in Mexico and working as a dentist. She routinely rode a bus a short distance from Morelia to Lázaro Cárdenas, about 200 miles west of Mexico City, where her office was located.

One night, on the ride home, the bus stopped halfway short of its destination. Three men carrying machine guns boarded the bus, possibly members of a drug cartel. They demanded everyone's money, and one of the men took the tip of his gun and touched it to Chesnut's head. To this day, she can still feel the point of the rifle on her head.

After the passengers handed over their watches, rings and cash, the men left. But the incident compelled Chesnut to leave the region of Michoacán and its escalating violence.

"I came to the United States in search of safety," she said.

She's lived here 30 years now, but school shootings are occurring with "relentless frequency," she said, causing her to confront her own vulnerability.

Last year, it was the final day of the school year at Huguenot, and students were playing basketball and volleyball outside. A teacher screamed, "Gun!" That prompted security

and police to descend on the blacktop, but they never found a gun. The school year ended in lockdown.

“We couldn’t say goodbye to anyone,” Chesnut said.

Anger has filled her over what she termed a lack of gun control legislation despite the numerous acts of violence occurring every day.

Death and fear have become all too familiar at Huguenot. One student, Jaden Carter, was shot and killed near campus in January. Another, Josie Cox, died in a car crash in November. Both were posthumously given certificates at Tuesday’s graduation.

The faculty was given the day off Wednesday. Chesnut woke up feeling grateful to be alive. Her husband, Andrew, is a continent away, currently conducting research in eastern Brazil.

On Saturday, Chesnut will board a plane and fly to Brazil to see her husband again.

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Victims at Huguenot graduation shooting identified, suspect taken into custody

https://richmond.com/news/local/crime/renzo-smith-shawn-jackson-richmond-shooting-graduation-amari-pollard-altria-theater/article_417a06de-0560-11ee-a55d-0b2fb77df44f.html

[A day set aside for pomp and circumstance](#) ended with two dead, a woman mourning her husband and her son, and a public outcry against gun violence.

On Wednesday, the two dead were identified as [Renzo Smith](#) and his step-son, Shawn Jackson, an 18-year-old Huguenot High School graduate.

Tameeka Jackson-Smith appeared at a press conference late Wednesday but was overcome with grief and sobbed while the family spoke on her behalf.

“My nephew and my brother-in-law both were hard workers,” said Datrell Glover, Jackson’s aunt and Smith’s sister-in-law. “My nephew had a smile that can light up a whole room; my brother-in-law would do anything for you. They were very special to us all.”

Soon after Glover began her remarks, Jackson-Smith broke down, walking away from the gathering.

“Something that was so special, was supposed to be a happy moment for all of us, turned into a tragedy,” Glover said.

“He had no idea his life was gonna end that day,” she added.

Earlier in the day, Jackson-Smith told The Associated Press that the family had watched the graduation, then got separated in a large crowd after they walked outside. “He was so happy — oh my God — because he got to graduate. He worked hard.”

She said she saw “a man run up beside (Shawn and Renzo) and start shooting.”

Minutes before he was shot, Jackson was greeted by his former principal, Kevin Olds, who described him as a “bright young man who could master any textbook.”

“At times, Shawn wanted to give up, and he considered dropping out of school. But the safety net of the village would not allow that,” said Olds. “Because of their efforts and Shawn’s diligence, he graduated yesterday. I am utterly heartbroken that his life ended just minutes later.

‘20 minutes before he died’

[On Wednesday](#), the morning after the shooting, the investigation provided details, but little relief, after the bloodshed drew national attention leading to Richmond schools ending the school year three days early.

Richmond police identified a main suspect — Amari Pollard — in the mass shooting that also [saw another five hospitalized](#). The shooting occurred as students from Huguenot High School were leaving their graduation ceremony at the Altria Theater.

Jackson had just crossed the stage to receive his diploma.

“I shook his hand and wished him congratulations about 20 minutes before he died,” Jason Kamras, superintendent of Richmond Public Schools said. “He was rightly proud, smiling and celebrating like all his peers. Then just a few minutes later, while he was enjoying the moment with his family in Monroe Park, he was gunned down.”

Kamras said he “couldn’t shake the image” of Jackson receiving CPR while still in his cap and gown.

Renzo Smith was praised for his service in the U.S. Army. Smith was a military veteran, deploying to Iraq in 2008, said Bryce Dubee, an Army spokesman. He served as a motor transport operator in the Army Reserve from October 2005 to August 2006, and was in the regular Army until 2010, holding the rank of specialist at the end of his service, Dubee said Wednesday.

“He was just everything that you could wish for in a person,” Jackson-Smith told the AP.

Also injured was Rennyah Jackson-Smith, Jackson's 9-year-old sister, who was hit by a car in the wake of the shooting. Glover addressed reports that the girl was wheelchair-bound.

"She's going to be able to walk again...just a lot of healing," Glover said about Rennyah's condition. "Emotionally...yes, that's going to be a lot of healing too."

Little has been released regarding the motive. Interim-Police Chief Rick Edwards suggested that the two knew each other, and that the killing was "targeted," but was not more specific.

Jackson was described as a prolific musician with an online presence, where he went by the monikers "OTG Shawn" and "Shawn Wicc," a restyling of movie hitman John Wick. He had released eight rap albums in the past three years, the most recent of which, "Baywood Preacher," was released in May.

Timond Billie, a Richmond-based music producer who worked with Jackson, described him as dedicated.

"He always dreamed and believed he was going to make it big. When I started producing music, he was the first artist to actually believe in me and my craft," said Billie.

Edwards said that the suspect had attended the Huguenot graduation before exiting the Altria Theater to retrieve a handgun from his car. When he returned, he opened fire. He was apprehended in the area by VCU Police and surrendered without further incident, Edwards said.

Pollard was arraigned Tuesday morning on two charges of second-degree murder. Pollard has pleaded not guilty.

The case was continued until June 21 while Pollard hires an attorney, prosecutors said. In the meantime, the court ordered that he be held without bond at the Richmond City Justice Center.

It was a tragic night for Richmond Public Schools, which also saw three other students shot at Armstrong High School in two separate incidents unrelated to the Huguenot tragedy, Kamras said at a press conference at Police Headquarters. Police described the injuries in those incidents as non-life-threatening.

'Every parent's worst nightmare'

Yet another shooting involving young people ignited a salvo of debates by lawmakers.

U.S. Rep. Jennifer McClellan, D-4th, gave a passionate floor speech on the House on Wednesday. “What should have been the happiest day of (Huguenot students’) lives turned into every parent’s worst nightmare,” said McClellan, a Richmond parent.

She was one of numerous city officials to decry yesterday’s [shooting in the heart of downtown Richmond](#), on a day in which the horrific events drew national attention to Richmond.

McClellan and Kamras both called for policy solutions to address Richmond’s gun violence crisis. Kamras said there was an immediate need for federal help in fighting poverty, housing issues and other root causes of violence in the city.

“Every time there is a shooting, we go through this same routine. Every time, my son is afraid, wondering when he will be next. And I hug him and say, ‘I am doing everything in my power to make sure that you are safe.’”

Gov. Glenn Youngkin also spoke about the shooting at a previously scheduled event in Petersburg Wednesday, resisting “premature calls to action” before an investigation is concluded.

“We need to see what it finds before we think about new laws,” Youngkin said.

However, his deputy, Lt. Gov. Winsome Earle-Sears, was less restrained. Earle-Sears arrived at the still-active crime scene to launch pointed barbs at Richmond’s largely democratic leadership.

“Who is in charge here?” said Earle-Sears. “The people that I represent are not safe — they’re not safe in this city, and we have to figure out why that is.” On Wednesday, she softened her remarks.

On the VCU campus, students lay wreaths and flowers down outside the Altria Theater, where there were still bloodstains.

“It was just very surreal,” said Chloe Hawkins, a recent VCU graduate who lives near Monroe Park. “I literally walk through the park every day to go to school.”

In the afternoon, several dozen RPS families marched around the Virginia State Capitol to protest the spate of gun violence. Katherine Jones said she has three children in RPS schools, one of whose graduation from Thomas Jefferson High School was canceled after the shooting.

“Done with guns, that’s what we’re here for,” Jones said.

Wendy Rake and her family moved from Nashville to Richmond last summer, months before the March shooting at The Covenant School, a private elementary school in

Nashville. Rake lived less than a mile from Covenant and knew people involved in the shooting.

“You really do feel like there’s really no safe place, which is hard as a parent,” Rake said. “I don’t adhere to this notion that I need to be carrying a firearm to keep my family safe; I just want to be able to go about my day.”

Rake said that she comes from a family of responsible gun owners. She still believes in responsible gun ownership, but wants more provisions to ensure they guns do not end up in the wrong hands.

“I do think that there are definitely safety measures that can be put in place to help at least keep our school children safe,” said Rake. “Especially children who are about to celebrate a big moment in their lives like a high school graduation.”

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Huguenot High School community shaken by fatal shooting of graduate Shawn Jackson

https://richmond.com/news/local/education/huguenot-shooting-high-school-memorial-renzo-smith/article_fb2c7620-0551-11ee-b1a1-4f52107bdf71.html

A sign in front of Huguenot High School congratulating graduates transformed into a memorial on Wednesday, following the [fatal shooting](#) of graduate Shawn Jackson and his stepfather Renzo Smith in downtown Richmond [Tuesday evening](#) after the school’s commencement ceremony.

What would have been a regular school day for non-graduating students instead saw a mostly empty school and no classes, with some students trickling in and out for mental health counseling.

Jackson, 18, struggled in school, said Huguenot High School Principal Robert Gilstrap. He was not on campus much the past few years as he focused on his passions, like music.

But despite that, Jackson graduated Tuesday afternoon.

“I’m glad he was able to accomplish that,” Gilstrap said. “I know that was important to him, even though it was a challenge for him and his family. I know that he worked really hard the last couple of weeks to get there, and he did.”

About 20 minutes after Jackson walked across the stage and received his diploma, he and his stepfather were shot dead.

“I don’t know what I can do to comfort 3,000 people who have experienced a traumatic event like that,” Gilstrap said. “I will be probably more focused on comforting my staff than ... the students because we just won’t have access to them.”

The last day of school scheduled for non-graduating students is Friday. Richmond Public Schools canceled all classes on Wednesday, the division announced Tuesday evening following the shooting.

Keona Louis-Jean, who was at the Altria Theater for her sister’s graduation on Tuesday afternoon, said she is badly traumatized.

“I don’t even look at life the same” anymore, Louis-Jean said.

She had her 8-month old son in her arms and saw her and her child’s life flash before her eyes, she said.

Angela Jones, Richmond Public Schools director of culture, climate and student services, said the division is trying to focus on healing.

Members of Richmond Behavioral Health Authority and Child Savers and RPS social workers, school counselors and psychologists set up support centers inside the high school on Wednesday to offer grief and mental health counseling.

“There’ll be a range of emotions felt, from anger, to grief, everything else,” Jones said. “We’re here for kids and families right now. The community has to stand together to get through this.”

Along with the support offered inside the high school, the Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities hosted “safe spaces” across Richmond for community members to gather throughout the afternoon. The Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center was also open all day Wednesday for Latino and Hispanic people affected by the shooting.

Anyone who needs to speak with a counselor is encouraged to call ChildSavers Immediate Response Helpline at (804) 305-2420, RBHA at (804) 819-4100, or Challenge Discovery Projects at (804) 643-0002.

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Lt. governor says trigger man in Richmond shooting 'is ultimately responsible'

https://richmond.com/news/state-regional/government-politics/winsome-earle-sears-virginia-graduation-shooting/article_d3ddfde0-0539-11ee-b0af-9b426c97d85e.html

Lt. Gov. [Winsome Earle-Sears](#) has become a political lightning rod after calling out Richmond leaders, including [Mayor Levar Stoney](#) — a potential 2025 rival for governor

— following Tuesday’s mass shooting after the Huguenot High School graduation at the Altria Theater.

Sen. [Lamont Bagby](#), D-Henrico, said at a Wednesday morning news conference: “To go out there and throw red meat to a national audience, before the bodies had been buried and while we still didn’t know all the facts about the case? It’s despicable.”

In a statement Wednesday afternoon, Earle-Sears appeared to redirect her anger somewhat, saying she joins Virginians in praying for the victims’ families and that the ultimate fault lies with the perpetrator.

“Last night I got angry that we continually allow these tragedies to occur in our communities without holding people accountable,” Earle-Sears said in the statement. “Make no mistake — the one that pulled the trigger is ultimately responsible for his heinous actions. But our system has broken down when our leaders fail to maintain law and order in the places where we live, the places where we celebrate, and the places where we work.”

Separately Wednesday, Gov. Glenn Youngkin, during an unrelated, previously scheduled appearance in Petersburg, renewed his call for tougher penalties for gun violence.

“What happened yesterday was something that is beyond any explanation. That somebody could steal two lives, steal the hope from what should have been a joyous occasion ...” the governor said.

Regarding renewed calls for stricter gun laws, he said: “We already have some of the toughest gun laws in the country. This is about what an individual did — individuals do these and they need to be held accountable.”

Youngkin also associated himself with Stoney’s pledge Tuesday to bring the responsible parties to justice.

“I stand with the mayor, when he called for accountability,” Youngkin said. “An entire family, an entire community, an entire city was hurt.”

In Washington, Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., on Thursday plans to roll out “a legislative agenda that includes a roadmap to tackle community safety issues such as gun violence.”

Earle-Sears spoke to reporters Tuesday evening near the site of the shooting, following a news conference that featured Acting Richmond Police Chief Rick Edwards, Stoney and Richmond Public Schools Superintendent Jason Kamras. Her comments went viral and prompted a [national Fox News](#) story.

“When do we say enough is enough?” Earle-Sears said. “When do we say that? How many more people have to die before we say, ‘You’re going to jail. We’re gonna lock you up and there’s not gonna be any bail’ so we can have safety in our communities.

“When does that happen? Who is in charge? Is that the mayor? Is that the chief? Who is that? I mean, let’s start naming names,” Earle-Sears said.

“Because, otherwise, if no one is accountable and if all we do is come in front of a camera or several cameras and keep talking about: ‘Well this shouldn’t happen and that shouldn’t happen,’ then, well, you’re the one in charge. You’re the one responsible. So let’s cut it and let those who have the accountability finally say, ‘People are going to jail. I’m authorizing my chief to put them in jail.’

“That’s what we need, leadership, true leadership. Because I tell you what — this is not happening where the movers and shakers of this community live. It should not have happened at a graduation, a life event.”

Earle-Sears added: “This does have to stop, and we know where it starts. If I had the accountability and the responsibility, this wouldn’t keep happening. The people who are elected here, they are in charge. They must make that adjustment so this, the shootings, don’t keep happening.”

Rep. Jennifer McClellan, D-4th, noted in an interview Wednesday that three days after she was sworn in as a member of Congress, a classmate of her son at a Richmond middle school died of an accidental gunshot wound.

It wasn’t gang violence that killed Marquan Mitchell-Kent, a Binford Middle School classmate of McClellan’s 12-year-old son, Jackson Mills. It was access to a gun, which she said he was using as a prop for a video he was making when he was accidentally shot.

As for Earle-Sears’ assertions: “It was irresponsible to make a political statement when she didn’t have all the facts about what happened in the community – while the community was still hurting,” the congresswoman said.

“I would rather focus my attention – not on what she said – but what we’re going to do going forward,” she said.

Rep. Rob Wittman, R-1st, who represents parts of Henrico, Chesterfield and Hanover counties, as well as New Kent County, said he was “heartbroken by the horrific act of violence” following the graduation ceremony.

“No parent or family member should have to endure such pain, and my prayers are with the victims and their loved ones,” Wittman said in a statement. “We must continue to work toward effective solutions to gun violence by preventing criminals from acquiring firearms, addressing the behavior that leads to this violence, and promoting legislative

measures that bolster law enforcement agencies' abilities to identify and respond to warning signs of violence.”

Also Wednesday, in a text message, Sen. Amanda Chase, R-Chesterfield, called the shooting “so tragic” and added: “I’m 100% against gun violence.”

Chase called for officials to “end gun-free zones now so that law-abiding citizens can protect themselves against evil-doers.”

A host of Democrats criticized Earle-Sears, a U.S. Marines veteran whose campaign materials in 2021 pictured her holding an assault-style rifle.

“VA’s proud AK-47 wielding LG just hijacked an informational police press conference about a horrific Richmond high school shooting to attack Democrats instead of console victims in hospital fighting for their lives,” tweeted state Sen. Scott Surovell, D-Fairfax.

Del. Jeff Bourne, D-Richmond posted on Twitter: “Gun violence is the leading cause of death for kids and teens. Don’t give us your thoughts and prayers now when you refuse to come to the table on common sense reforms.”

On Twitter Sen. Mamie Locke, D-Hampton, faulted Earle-Sears for what she termed “self-righteous outrage.”

Bob Holsworth, a veteran political analyst in Richmond, called it “unprecedented” that the lieutenant governor would show up uninvited for a news conference “at the scene of a horrible tragedy” and make political accusations of gang violence that were unfounded.

“She clearly kind of photo-bombed the press conference to make her own points,” he said.

Politically, Holsworth said he doesn’t know whether Earle-Sears was making a calculated pitch to voters in a potential gubernatorial race in 2025 or acting on impulse. Either way, he said, she tied herself more closely to gun-rights policies that may not be supported by the general public, especially in Richmond.

“It could help her in a Republican primary, but I don’t see at all how it benefits her in a general election,” he said.

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After graduation shooting, grief and fear for Richmond-area students and families

https://richmond.com/news/local/education/richmond-shooting-graduation-shawn-jackson-lorenzo-smith-amari-pollard/article_b807f8d2-0624-11ee-8dc7-ab5d7bb48d2a.html

In the wake of Tuesday night's [fatal shooting at the Altria Theater](#), many students and their families are experiencing myriad emotions.

[William Fox Elementary](#) hasn't had a normal year since before COVID-19. Last year, a devastating fire impacted the school. This year, parents and students were looking forward to celebrating the end of a "normal year," [when school was canceled for the last three days because of the shooting](#).

"People lost their lives, and that is just feeling too much like the new normal," Katie Ricard, a Fox mom said about having to explain to her kids why school was canceled.

Ricard, a former high school administrator in Chesterfield, knows the effort put into getting students their diplomas and what should have been a joyous occasion for the Huguenot students — a generation that has already experienced loss and a disruption in education during COVID-19, Ricard said.

"It really breaks my heart that this day was marred by tragedy for them," Ricard said.

[Shawn Jackson, 18, and his stepfather, Lorenzo Smith, 36](#), were killed in the shooting in Monroe Park. Jackson had just received his diploma from Huguenot High School, which held its commencement ceremonies in the nearby theater. At least a dozen people were hurt in the panic after the gunfire.

Amari Pollard, 19, who authorities said had a longstanding dispute with Jackson, was arraigned Wednesday morning on two counts of second-degree murder.

Other students, like Jude Shelton-Eide, 14, and Maya Weinstein, 13, who recently graduated from Binford Middle School in Richmond, expressed sadness, fear and anxiety in response to Tuesday's shooting.

"I think it's really awful and it's so sad," Shelton-Eide said. She mentioned another 13-year-old boy at her school who was killed outside of school grounds in an accidental shooting earlier this year. "It's scary and terrifying. More kids are being shot. Whenever you hear a big bang or something, you always think, is it a gun?"

Shelton-Eide said that she had visited the Altria Theater last week to see "Hadestown." "It's definitely nerve-wracking to think, could that have been me?"

"There are so many school shootings around the U.S. now. It's really scary, and it makes it hard to want to go to school without being scared," Weinstein said.

Both Weinstein and Shelton-Eide said that they were relieved they didn't have to finish out the school year this week and that their graduation, which was held earlier this week, wasn't impacted.

“My kids are 9 and 7; they are sad and confused by Tuesday’s events. Despite our best efforts to answer their questions and help them feel safe and loved, I worry about the long lasting effects of all our kids having to grow up with the fear of mass shootings as gun violence has become the leading cause of death for children in this country,” Richmond’s Faith A. Alejandro said.

Her children attend Mary Munford Elementary School, which canceled school after the shootings.

“My oldest won’t have a formal middle school graduation, as she didn’t have a formal elementary school graduation (because of COVID),” Jessica Levy-Lavelle, a parent with three children in Richmond Public Schools, said. “But that’s not where my frustration lies. It lies with our collective inaction to do better and create a safer world for our kids.”

Dr. Anjali Ferguson is a clinical psychologist specializing in trauma-informed care who treats children and families. Traumatic events like the shooting can have a wide range of impact, whether a child or young adult experiences the trauma firsthand or sees the events happen in their communities, Ferguson said.

These impacts can include changes in sleep, appetite and mood or in behaviors such as anxiety, anger, avoidance and frustration. Trauma may also impact the ability to focus or interfere with one’s interpersonal relationships. Children and young adults may no longer feel a desire to be out in public spaces due to not feeling safe in them anymore, Ferguson said.

Some consequences may be physical. Ferguson said science has observed cumulative trauma resulting in toxic stress, which in the long term may lead to heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke or alcoholism.

Marginalized communities are at greater risk for experiencing different types of toxic stressors. A lot of it is due to systemic inequalities and systemic racism, along with disparities in resources available, Ferguson said.

“Our marginalized communities are experiencing a greater need and that disparity is just growing,” Ferguson said. “The gaps are widening.”

Ferguson said parents must have conversations with their kids about what they’ve seen or heard. Richmond is a strong community that will need to work through these issues and do it together, she said.

“It’s not necessarily a mental health issue; it’s an access to firearms issue,” Ferguson said. “If you ask any mental health expert, they will outline steps that we can take from a policy standpoint and legislative standpoint that would help minimize these risks significantly for our communities.”

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VCU students were already struggling mentally. Then the semester was weighted by tragedy.

https://richmond.com/news/local/education/shawn-jackson-renzo-smith-graduation-shooting-richmond/article_4450e234-06e0-11ee-a723-53fa28ab748f.html

The mental health of students was already a primary concern at Virginia Commonwealth University. Battered by the pandemic, teenagers and young adults have been seeking counseling at VCU and other colleges in increasingly higher numbers.

Then the university suffered a series of tragedies this semester, all within four blocks. Two student pedestrians were killed in separate automobile accidents. And on Tuesday, a Huguenot High School student, [Shawn Jackson](#), 18, was shot and killed minutes after he received his diploma. His stepfather, [Renzo Smith](#), 36, was killed too. Their deaths occurred near the heart of campus, close enough for students and faculty to see and hear the commotion.

Aya Youssef, a recent VCU graduate who now works for the school as a research technician, was walking to her car Tuesday evening when she heard the screams. She turned to see people [running away](#) from the theater. It was the latest in a string of sad moments along West Main Street — all within five months.

“You can feel it on campus,” Youssef said. “Morale is pretty low.”

Increase in counseling services for students

During the pandemic, college students often felt lonely, depressed or anxious. In 2021, three out of every four [Virginia college students surveyed said their mental health had been challenged](#).

VCU responded by increasing its counseling services. The university, along with others in the state, contracted last year with a telehealth provider called TimelyCare. Students can engage with therapists on video calls and receive emergency services. Each student gets up to 12 sessions a year.

The university’s counseling center has grown to about 20 employees. Generally, the staff members try to provide immediate and short-term counseling for the university’s 28,000 students.

When students need long-term therapy, VCU staffers work to connect them with off-campus counselors. In some cases, the university will provide long-term care for students who cannot afford or access private mental health care. There is far too much demand to provide all the mental health services students seek, said Jihad Aziz, VCU’s director of counseling.

The university also trained more students to provide peer health education. Sometimes students do not need professional counseling, but they can benefit from the advice of an older student.

Some students want to hear from other students “and not old people like myself,” Aziz said.

When the pandemic began, high schools and colleges allowed students more time to complete tasks and more absences from class. Schools have raised expectations back to normal, but many students have had trouble meeting them, said a VCU professor who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the professor is not authorized to speak for the university.

“Almost any faculty member would say, since the pandemic, it’s just been different,” the professor said. “There are a lot more mental health issues. (Students) have a much harder time. The transition back to post-pandemic has not been easy.”

‘Everyone’s so used to tragedy happening’

The spring semester has been a particularly sad one for VCU. [In January](#), a 22-year-old VCU senior named [Mahrokh Somia Khan](#) was struck and killed by a car while crossing West Main Street outside Altria Theater. Her death occurred in almost the same location as Tuesday’s shooting.

Then in May, 26-year-old [Shawn Soares](#) died when a two-car wreck spilled onto the sidewalk, striking him. The wreck occurred in the 300 block of West Main Street, two blocks east of Monroe Park.

Students also feel the death of Adam Oakes, a VCU freshman who died in a February 2021 hazing incident.

When a death occurs, students are often emotionally impacted for a day and then move on — because they have to, said Isabel Brooks, a VCU sophomore studying nursing.

“Everyone’s so used to tragedy happening,” Brooks said. “It’s just a society thing, I guess.”

Brooks added that she would like to see more legislation to limit gun violence and said the age at which a Virginia teenager can receive a driver’s license should be raised. At night, she hear cars racing down campus streets.

Students generally want to see a response from authorities when tragedy strikes, Youssef said. Following Khan’s death, VCU police started a traffic safety campaign, [writing more tickets](#) and dressing as referees to encourage students to cross the street in a safe manner.

When Soares died, the city took action, installing speed bumps in and around campus. One speed bump has [slowed cars by 15 mph](#), VCU police said. Youssef said she is thankful for the speed bumps, calling the driving in Richmond “reckless.” She added that students need to be more careful crossing the road, and not should not act so invincible.

Most VCU students already had gone home for the summer when Tuesday’s shooting occurred at the end of Huguenot High School’s graduation. Some remain on campus for the summer term, and they were affected, Youssef said.

“A lot of people felt tense because it happened on campus,” she added.

‘I always feel very safe on campus’

VCU prepares for emergency events by conducting active shooter training for professors and staff. A recent training occurred last month.

“I always feel very safe on campus,” the professor added.

When a student death or tragedy occurs, the VCU counseling staff puts boots on the ground, reaching out to departments within the university, dormitories and clubs. Following Tuesday’s shooting, the counselors went to the office of international students, one of the few groups to stay on campus during the summer.

The counseling staff schedules group sessions and invites everyone to attend. When a student dies, the counseling staff makes connections with the social, academic and activity circles in which the student participated.

“Our response is: How do we help them understand what they’re experiencing is normal?” Aziz said.

Aaron Hart, VCU’s vice president for student affairs, tries to make sure the university is proactive with its offerings so students know where to turn when they need help. The university’s [RamStrong](#) webpage contains information on how to access student health and TimelyCare, how to communicate with the Dean of Students office and VCU police and how to access the university’s Recreation and Well-being department, RecWell.

The webpage also contains information for employees to help students and themselves. A program called Kognito helps faculty and staff learn the signs of student distress and techniques for intervening.

VCU students are very involved in their community, Hart said, and experience all the positive and negative emotions that come with that involvement. Many of them have jobs on and off campus and, because of VCU’s urban location, students are part of the city’s fabric, not just nestled in their own enclave.

“They’re not visitors,” Hart said. “They truly live here, in every sense of the word.”

