

U.S. NEWS

A criminal probe continues into staff at a Virginia school where a 6-year-old shot a teacher



BY BEN FINLEY AND DENISE LAVOIE

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NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — A criminal investigation into staff members at a Virginia school where a 6-year-old shot his teacher could shift to why the troubled child's disciplinary records disappeared after the violence.



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A special grand jury recently concluded its probe into the shooting, which resulted in [charges against a former school administrator](#) who is accused of dismissing concerns the boy had a gun. But prosecutors in Newport News said Thursday they'll continue investigating, including into the missing files.

Investigators had searched for the student's records after he shot teacher Abby Zwerner in her first grade classroom, the grand jury said in its report released this week. Every other student's file was located, but not his.

The student had a long history of violence at Richneck Elementary, including choking other children as well as his kindergarten teacher, the report states.

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“We’ll work with the school system to try to ferret out how this happened,” Newport News Commonwealth’s Attorney Howard Gwynn said at a news conference. “And based on the facts of the law, if we believe somebody else needs to be charged, trust me when I tell you, they will be charged.”

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LaQuiche Parrott, director of elementary school leadership, returned one copy of the student's records that she said was in her home or car, the report states.

The grand jury said she had a "suspicious lack of memory" regarding that file.

"It is at its best a complete lack of competence as to how things were run and recorded, and at its worst a cover-up for the child's past disciplinary record by the school administration," the grand jury states.

The grand jury said authorities should consider filing obstruction of justice charges against Parrott. However, Gwynn noted that the statute of limitations for the misdemeanor charge is one year. The shooting occurred in January 2023.

Parrott did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment from The Associated Press.

Meanwhile, former Richneck assistant principal Ebony Parker is facing charges of felony child neglect. The grand jury report states that she showed a “shocking” lack of response to multiple warnings the boy had a gun in the hours before he shot Zwerner.

Parker attended a court hearing Thursday morning to discuss who her attorney would be. But the matter was continued until next month. Parker did not comment to reporters and ran from cameras outside the courthouse.

A few hours later, attorneys for Zwerner called for investigations into the shooting by the U.S. Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Education in the wake of the grand jury’s report.

The report also bolsters Zwerner’s [\\$40 million lawsuit](#) against Newport News Public Schools.

“We’re going to have to prove every fact in our own case,” one of Zwerner’s attorneys, Kevin Biniazan, noted. But he said the grand jury report “provides resources to the truth. It provides resources to unearthing and revealing the facts and the circumstances that will lead to a just and righteous outcome.”

The criminal probe in Newport News is among a small number of recent criminal investigations in the U.S. that are signaling a shift toward greater accountability of adults — teachers, parents and police — when it comes to preventing school violence.

“In tragic school shootings, civil lawsuits are very common whereas criminal charges have been much more rare — although this is changing,” said Amanda Nickerson, a school psychology professor at the University at Buffalo.

Nickerson, whose research focuses on preventing school violence, said caregivers are facing greater scrutiny for how they respond to possible threats.

“Although each case is unique, what seems to make the difference in criminal cases are when the warning signs for violence are clear and prevention could have stopped the injury or death,” Nickerson said.

In recent years, a handful of criminal investigations have focused on school employees. But they’ve had mixed outcomes.

For example, [a former school resource officer](#) in Florida was [acquitted last year of all charges](#), including felony child neglect, after he was [accused of hiding](#) during the Parkland high school massacre in 2018.

In 2021, a prosecutor in suburban Detroit criticized Oxford High School's decision to keep teenager Ethan Crumbley in school before he killed four students. But more than two years later, the probe ended without charges of school employees in Oakland County, Michigan.

"We did not find sufficient evidence to support criminal charges," David Williams, chief assistant prosecutor, said last month.

Meanwhile, prosecutors in Uvalde, Texas, are still investigating the police response to the 2022 elementary school shooting, which is one of the deadliest in U.S. history. The gunman was killed roughly 77 minutes after police arrived on the scene

Parents are also facing scrutiny.

The mother of the 6-year-old who shot Zwerner was convicted in two separate cases. Deja Taylor got two years in prison for felony child neglect. She also received [21 months in federal prison](#) for using marijuana while owning a gun, which is illegal under U.S. law.

Ethan Crumbley's parents, James and Jennifer Crumbley, were sentenced Tuesday in Michigan [to at least 10 years in prison](#). They were accused of not securing their son's gun and acting indifferently toward his deteriorating mental health. They are the first parents [convicted in a U.S. mass school shooting](#).

While national statistics are hard to come by, at least seven criminal cases against parents have been filed in the last eight years after a child brought a gun to school and it was fired, intentionally or not.

Associated Press reporter Acacia Coronado in Austin, Texas, and Ed White in Detroit contributed to this article.

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