

# Teacher shot by first grade student in Virginia elementary school

Jane Wise  
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Elementary school teacher Abby Zwerner, 25 of Newport News, Virginia, is recovering from a life-threatening gunshot wound inflicted by a six-year old student on Friday. While specific details of the incident at Richneck Elementary School have not been released by authorities, the police allege that the shooting was intentional.

News agencies initially reported Zwerner was shot during an altercation with the first grade student. However, it is now known that she was teaching when the six-year old took aim and fired into her chest with a 9mm pistol brought from home in a backpack. The gun had been legally purchased by the student's mother. The child is reportedly under observation in a local hospital.

Though remarkable due to the assailant's young age, the Richneck Elementary shooting is the third gun-related incident in the school district in 17 months, one of which resulted in the death of a student, continuing the unprecedented acceleration of school shootings recorded throughout the United States in the last decade.

According to the K-12 School Shooting Database, last year saw a historic 302 school shooting incidents, a new high from the 250 in 2021. These include the horrific Uvalde, Texas massacre, in which a 18-year-old gunman killed nineteen children and two teachers last May while police stood by for more than an hour.

Already in 2023, the K-12 School Shooting Database has registered seven incidents. School shooting incidents, broadly defined by the database as any instance of a firearm being brandished or fired, or a bullet hitting school property, and including suicides, domestic violence, gang-violence or accidents that take place at school-related events, have steadily increased in the last decade, with a 1,410 percent increase last year compared to the 20 recorded incidents in 2012.

The targeted attack on a teacher by a student also reflects the growing trend of violence and threats against

educators in recent years, the most horrific example being Nohema Graber, an Spanish teacher in Iowa who was beaten to death by two students using a baseball bat in November 2021. The high schoolers plotted over social media to kill their teacher because of bad grades.

In a recent study from the American Psychiatric Association which polled 15,000 pre-K-12 educators between March 2020 and June 2021, one-third of teachers said they had experienced at least one incident of verbal abuse or threat of violence from students during that period.

Akron, Ohio teachers, who were set to strike this week but were prevented from doing so with the announcement of a tentative agreement by the Akron Education Association, have identified violence in schools as a major area of concern for them. As reported by the World Socialist Web Site, teachers in Akron reported 63 assaults by students in the 2022-2023 school year so far. Teachers have demanded safe working conditions, including resources to improve their security.

Predictably, much of the media commentary on the shooting at Richneck Elementary School has focused on how to prosecute the six-year old shooter. There have been only three documented school-related shootings by six-year olds, two of which were accidents. In the third case, a child shot a classmate they allegedly did not like. The relatives of the shooter were charged in lieu of the child, who was placed in child protective services and later foster care, arguably a sentence of a different kind.

Authorities and the media will soon settle upon who can be blamed for this latest atrocity, while keeping the discussion within the standard framework of emphasizing gun reform and mental health. But they will dutifully ignore the most fundamental aspects of American society that make it possible for young people to kill and be killed with such frequency.

As the International Youth and Students for Social

Equality wrote following the Uvalde massacre, “violence pervades the capitalist system to its core.” This includes official state violence, such as the more than 1,000 people killed by American police each year and the decades of unending war waged by American imperialism abroad, and the ruling class’s homicidal response to the pandemic, which has killed over 1.1 million people in the US, including at least 1,977 children and 8,000 educators .

When it comes to funding the US police and military, the Democrats, like their Republican colleagues, spare no expense. Under President Biden, the Democrats have thrown open the coffers to fund a proxy war against Russia to the tune of \$55 billion, which risks escalating into a nuclear third world war. The Senate, with a Democratic majority, unanimously passed a \$60 million funding bill in 2022 for local police departments. And last week, Biden requested \$3.5 billion to repel migrants and asylum seekers at the southern US border, forcing them back to the countries they fled to undertake the arduous application process for asylum.

Meanwhile, the President’s 2022 school funding plan fell short of his proposal of a 41 percent increase in US Department of Education (DOE) spending. The DOE instead received a meager 5 percent budget increase. Last year, the budget for the DOE was \$68 billion, a fraction of the \$800 billion-plus for the Pentagon.

Indeed, the decades-long bipartisan starving of funding from public education has created an environment inside schools of physical, social and cultural decay. School infrastructure is literally crumbling, while teachers have reported mold, mildew and vermin in their classrooms; millions of children have been thrown off the free school meals program and are going hungry at school; and teachers are increasingly muzzled under regressive “gag” laws which have been passed in 25 states, representing 42 percent of the US population, over the last three years.

During the first two years of the pandemic, much was made of children’s social and emotional health. The hypocritical concern feigned by politicians was central to the push to reopen schools and lift mitigation measures. Despite over \$350 billion provided to school districts by the CARES Act, student services such as psychologists, school counselors and nurses remain grievously underfunded.

The student-to-school counselor ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ACSA) is 250:1. The current average ratio in US schools is 408:1. In Virginia, the state average is a little better, at 348:1.

However, at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, VA, where more than half of students receive free and reduced-price lunch vouchers, the student to counselor ratio is 689:1.

Onerous teacher-to-student ratios are also commonplace across the US, which is in the midst of an historic teacher shortage that has only accelerated during the pandemic. The response of the capitalist ruling elite is not to retain and recruit teachers on the basis of good-paying jobs and good working conditions, but to slash the requirements for becoming certified to teach. According to data from the Department of Education’s biennial Civil Rights Data Collection, Richneck Elementary has a teacher-to-student population ratio of 22:1, compared to the Virginia state average of 14:1.

The relentless and craven disregard of the health and welfare of children, educators and workers by the ruling elite has reached a tipping point. The ruling class in the United States has adopted a policy of social murder of elderly citizens, and its criminal handling of the pandemic has caused life expectancy, the most fundamental indicator of population health, to regress to where it was a quarter of a century ago. Now, it is willing to risk nuclear war with Russia in pursuit of its geopolitical interests.

At the same time, there is a resurgence of the class struggle in the US and internationally, with the working class fighting back against the mounting attacks against their lives and living standards. Throughout the world, workers are being driven into struggle for better wages and working conditions, bringing them into direct confrontation not only with the corporations and capitalist politicians but also with the trade union bureaucracies. This struggle is increasingly pitting workers directly against the capitalist system itself.

The only progressive solution to the epidemic of school shootings is the mass mobilization of the working class in a politically conscious movement to abolish capitalism, which is the root cause of all forms of anti-social violence, poverty and war.



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