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How Fauquier County schools respond to a student death

Families were notified of the death of a Fauquier High senior this week

By Tate Hewitt and Sarah Dolgin Staff Writers
Dec 5, 2025



File photo

Fauquier County families and community members are mourning the death of a student this week.

Families were notified Tuesday that a Fauquier High School senior had died. The *Fauquier Times* confirmed with law enforcement that the student died by suicide on Dec. 2.

The *Fauquier Times* does not report on the details or specifics of suicides, following **professional guidelines** on how to handle reports of self-harm, and the **risk of contagion** within a community.

But when a young person dies, communities are left searching for answers and context.

The *Fauquier Times* spoke with representatives from the school district and with emergency responders to better understand how the school community responds when impacted by a loss or crisis.

How schools respond in times of crisis

Erica Yelland, spokesperson for Fauquier County Public Schools, said the school division tries to handle student deaths with incredible care, juggling the need to communicate with students' families with the responsibility of communicating with the families of students who have died.

Their first step is to coordinate with the Fauquier County Sheriff's Office to confirm an individual's connection to the school.

Then the principal of the school that the student attended or Nick Napolitano, the assistant superintendent of student services, reaches out to the family before an email is sent to the wider school community.

"We don't share any information until we speak to the family," Yelland said. "Usually that takes some time because families are dealing with some really grave situations."

After that conversation, the school sends an email that notifies students' families of an incident, announces the availability of school staff, and asks parents to contact the school's main office if they believe their child needs to be directly connected to a member of the team.

"We have counselors and social workers on site for students," Yelland said. "It's important to provide services and resources to students and staff."

Yelland said counselors have mental health experience and training, and many students already know them. The entire team is introduced to students at the beginning of every school year and students have regular check-ins with counselors regarding their academic performance.

"It builds rapport between a student and a staff member," Yelland said, trust that is needed when a crisis strikes the school community. During times of crisis, counselors double their efforts to remain approachable and available to students by being present in the hallways as students make their way between classes, Yelland said.

Every middle and high school in Fauquier County also has a full-time social worker to help students. Napolitano said that, in difficult circumstances, the school division sends additional social workers and counselors into the particular school. School leaders might even send emotional support dogs or ask local organizations such as **Encompass Community Supports** to send grief counselors as well.

Napolitano said each school and each circumstance requires a flexible approach that responds to students' needs. Sometimes students ask to set up a memorial, which principals often allow.

“A lot of it is seeing how things go and responding from there,” Napolitano said. “We try to provide as much help as we can.”

Other times, students take questions home. Napolitano said parents are welcome to reach out to school counselors for advice on how to navigate those difficult conversations.

Napolitano said the school district has really focused on expanding access to mental health professionals and training staff in the past few years.

Over 500 staff members have received training from the Mental Health Association of Fauquier County. All school safety officers in the district have received that training, which Napolitano said helps staff members know what to do when students come to them with mental health concerns.

He said that 10th-graders participate in teen mental health training and that all students and staff members fill out regular “school climate surveys” that check in on the well-being of students.

“In January, all of the high school students and staff will take it,” Napolitano said.

Based on their answers, the school can make adjustments, increase staffing or change their approach, Napolitano added.

Resources in the community

Specific times of year can be particularly stressful for some individuals, sometimes exacerbating existing mental health challenges.

“This is a difficult and stressful time of the year for many people,” said Jeff Long, spokesperson for the Fauquier County Sheriff’s Office. “The Fauquier County Sheriff’s Office reminds every one of the resources available: if you or someone you know is having a mental or behavioral health emergency, please call 911.”

For other circumstances, he recommends reaching out to Encompass Community Supports, which maintains a crisis line at 540-617-0774 or alternatively at (540) 825-5656 (option 7). Regionally, people can call the regional crisis center at (434) 230-9704 or dial 988 for the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

In Virginia, reports of mental health emergencies trigger a **Marcus Alert**, which Long says automatically notifies local law enforcement and social service organizations trained to respond to mental health crises.

He said that in Fauquier County, those alerts go to Encompass Community Supports and the Fauquier County Sheriff’s Office, who head to the scene and coordinate their response, as they did this week.

The Highland School and all of Fauquier County’s public high schools also have student ambassadors through **Morgan’s Message**, a nonprofit focused on destigmatizing mental health within the student-athlete community.

The organization was formed after Morgan Rodgers, a Fauquier native and lacrosse player at Duke University, died by suicide in 2019.

“What we have found is the most effective is this peer-to-peer education program,” said Dona Rodgers, Rodgers’ mother and founder of Morgan’s Message. “When kids are talking to each other and having these hard conversations, having these open, vulnerable conversations, they feel very much less alone.”

Rodgers guides ambassadors in her program to talk to peers who may be acting out of character, such as being late to school or skipping sports practices. She encourages them to ask their peers if there’s anything they want to talk about or if they’d like to get a coffee.

If students reach out to one another and have honest conversations about mental health, it could help those struggling gain the courage to seek help before they’re in crisis, Rodgers said.

Students should also know that there are always adults in their corner, she added, whether it's a best friend's parent, an aunt or an older sibling.

"Sometimes that's all some kids need is just someone to hear them, and so that's the shame about high school-aged kids," Rodgers said. "When they don't feel like anyone is in their corner and they don't feel like there's a light at the end of the tunnel. As adults, we know that there always is."

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, call or text 988 anytime to connect with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for free, confidential support.

You can reach out to a professional or find a local counselor or therapist online at fauquier-mha.org or by calling 540-617-0774.

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