



Fairfax County Teachers Talk with Virtual Students to Learn How to Save Real Lives

CASE STUDY

For a large suburban school district, online simulations train educators in practical skills to connect students with support.

OPPORTUNITY

Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is the tenth largest district in the country, with more than 27,000 employees and 190,000 students across 198 schools. Beginning in 2013, the county, schools, and community came together to address local concerns about youth suicide.

The school district and the county human services agency, the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board (FFCCSB), had a history of working together to raise awareness of issues such as bullying, depression, and suicide prevention.

Laura Yager, Director of Systems Transformation for Fairfax County and former Director of Partnerships and Resource Development for the FFCCSB and Dr. Mary Ann Panarelli, FCPS Director of Intervention and Prevention Services, both believed additional resources were needed to equip district staff to support students experiencing emotional distress following several deaths by suicide of youth in the district.

In addition, both leaders knew that talking about suicide

or emotional distress with a student is uncomfortable for most people, and many educators lack the skills or confidence to intervene in these situations.

FCPS needed a solution that could reach educators across the district about having these conversations with students. And, with teachers' busy schedules and the many priorities competing for their time, Dr. Panarelli said, speed and cost-effectiveness were essential considerations.

SOLUTION

An Online Evidence-Based Program

Hunting for a solution, Ms. Yager had discovered a novel online option on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) website. The program, *At-Risk for High School Educators*, provided users with practice managing challenging mental health conversations through animated role-play scenarios with emotionally responsive virtual humans.

"Part of my job is to 'normalize' the conversation and get people more

CLIENT
Fairfax County Public Schools
Fairfax-Falls Church
Community Services Board

MARKET
K-12

SIMULATIONS
K-12 At-Risk Product Suite
Step In, Speak Up!
Friend2Friend

comfortable with talking about suicide, depression, and emotional distress," said Ms. Yager. "Kognito's program is a really easy way to do this, because [it's] not threatening."

"It would be difficult to ask every teacher to take an eight-hour class on suicide prevention," Dr. Panarelli noted. "*At-Risk* is short enough to make it manageable, and teachers loved the content and format."

Unlike other training programs, *At-Risk* simulations go beyond building knowledge and awareness about mental health. By providing users with the ability to practice challenging conversations with students, the simulation builds educators' conversation skills and self-efficacy to apply best practices when approaching a

student, building rapport, and trust, and, if necessary, connecting them with support services.

A Tiered Implementation Strategy

With funding from FFCCSB, two *At-Risk* simulations were initially adopted: a version for high school and one for middle school.

Dr. Panarelli agreed that the use of Kognito's *At-Risk* simulations was a great idea. "We liked them because they fit within our overall messaging to educators and to students—that your primary responsibility is to get help if you see somebody who needs help," she said.

Then-Superintendent Karen Garza quickly recognized the value of Kognito simulations as well and approved Dr. Panarelli's request to make *At-Risk* mandatory for middle and high school teachers in Fairfax County.

Dr. Panarelli and her team first introduced *At-Risk* simulations to school counselors, psychologists, and social workers, who in turn introduced it to teachers during faculty meetings at nearly 50 sites across the district's middle and high schools. Debriefing discussions were offered to teachers if they wanted to ask questions.

FCPS had no problems getting staff to comply. To date, close to 22,000 teachers and staff have engaged with an *At-Risk* simulation. "It helped that the early adopters told the other teachers, "This is



"People can walk away from this simulation feeling confident that they have the intervention skills that can help save lives. That's very powerful."

-Laura Yager, Director of Systems Transformation for Fairfax County and former Director of Partnerships and Resource Development for the FFCCSB



pretty good. You should do this," Dr. Panarelli said. She added: "The fact that *At-Risk* is a high-quality product is obviously important."

Expanding the Simulation Program

The positive reception of *At-Risk* led FCPS to adopt more Kognito simulations. *At-Risk for Elementary School Educators* bolstered FCPS's efforts to reach staff across all grade levels. *Step In, Speak Up!* focuses educators on creating a safer school climate for LGBTQ students.

FCPS also adopted Kognito's first simulation for high school students: *Friend2Friend*. *Friend2Friend* is a peer support program that helps students identify friends in distress and motivate them to get support. FCPS has implemented *Friend2Friend* within 10th-grade health curriculum.

With access to the full *At-Risk* suite and now with many educators in the district who have completed an *At-Risk* simulation, FCPS mandates all new teachers and staff entering the district to complete their relevant Kognito training as part of their professional development. FCPS and FFCCSB share the cost, attesting to the value to both schools and community.

simulation found statistically significant changes in educators' preparedness and confidence to identify, approach, discuss, and motivate students in psychological distress and connect them with support services. This data

SURVEY RESULTS

Based on respondents reporting high or very high preparedness before completing At-Risk (high school, middle school, elementary school) vs. three months after completion.

How would you rate your preparedness to:

Recognize when a youth's behavior is a sign of psychological distress

Before Kognito: **48.0%** | **53%** INCREASE
3 months later: **73.6%**

Discuss with a youth* your concern about the signs of psychological distress they are exhibiting

Before Kognito: **38.2%** | **65%** INCREASE
3 months later: **63.0%**

Talk with a student* in psychological distress to motivate them to connect with mental health support services

Before Kognito: **42.1%** | **56%** INCREASE
3 months later: **65.5%**

**For elementary school simulations, this survey question addresses discussing and talking with a parent as opposed to a student.*

USER SATISFACTION

95%

of users would recommend At-Risk to a colleague

RESULTS

Real and Meaningful Changes in Skills and Behaviors

Survey data from FCPS users who have completed a Kognito

found an increase of 30-40% in the actual number of students who

educators approached and talked with about seeking help. Finally,

95% said they would recommend the simulation to colleagues.

KOGNITO SURVEY RESPONSES

Since you completed this training, were there any instances where you applied the skills you learned? What was the outcome?

“I am more aware of student signs of distress, and I know what do when I see them.”

-ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATOR

“As a result of this training, I got more information from youth prior to referring them to support services. I reflected a lot more on my words and questions as I was speaking to youth that I was concerned about.”

-MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATOR

“I had a student who entered class one day and was not interested in participating in class...I was sympathetic about the student’s concerns and asked if they wanted to talk further to a counselor. The student agreed and I sent the student on their way. The student thanked me for helping.”

-HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATOR

“I have spoken with a student about using discriminatory language in front of his classmates. I explained how it wasn’t acceptable to use such language and the student has not used that type of language again to my knowledge.”

-STEP IN, SPEAK UP! PARTICIPANT

“I think this course was very helpful and I plan to use these strategies in real life.”

-FRIEND2FRIEND STUDENT PARTICIPANT

“Participants found the *At-Risk* training simulations extremely helpful,” Dr. Panarelli said. “They liked the format, and many wished they had gone through it earlier in their careers,” she added.

“There is still a lot of stigma attached to talking about suicide, and it’s scary for people,” Yager said. “But interacting with virtual students removes this fear—and it’s actually really fun and interactive.” She added: “You can access the trainings at any time, and you can stop in the middle if you have something else to do. It’s incredibly convenient.”

Overall, FCPS has seen increases in utilization of its counselors and mental health resources, as well as indications that clinicians in the community are working better with schools. According to Dr. Panarelli, many Fairfax County teachers put the immersive learning experience to use right away. For example, when one teacher grew concerned about a student, he talked with her and immediately escorted her to the counselor’s office.

“He told the counselor, ‘I never would have done this, but I had just taken the Kognito simulation and I know that it’s important to get her to you directly.’ So there was a direct correlation to having done the training,” Dr. Panarelli said.

KOGNITO K-12 PRODUCT SUITE



At-Risk for Elementary School Educators



At-Risk for Middle School Educators



Step In, Speak Up!



Friend2Friend