

Fairfax County teachers talk with virtual students to learn how to save real lives.

Online simulations provide educators practical skills to connect students with support—possibly preventing a tragedy.

CHALLENGE

Statistics on youth and mental illness are sobering. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide was the second leading cause of death for youth ages 12–17 in 2010. About 14 percent of high school students nationwide say they have considered suicide, and more than six percent say they have attempted it. Meanwhile, the National Institutes of Mental Health estimates that nearly half of lifetime mental disorders emerge by the mid-teens.

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 Partnerships and Resource Development, Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board

These statistics sound the alarm for parents and public health officials, but it is educators who are poised to make a difference. The teachers, coaches, and other adults who work with students on a day-to-day basis are often in an ideal position to recognize signs of distress and connect students to the help they need.

Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS)—the 10th largest district in the country—and the Fairfax-Falls Church

Community Services Board have a history of working together to raise awareness of issues such as bullying, depression, and suicide prevention. Dr. Mary Ann Panarelli, Director of FCPS Office of Intervention and Prevention believed the district needed to provide additional resources to equip its staff to support students experiencing emotional distress following several deaths by suicide.

Both organizations knew that talking about suicide or emotional distress with a student is often uncomfortable for most people, and many educators lack the skills or confidence to intervene in these situations. They therefore decided to adopt Kognito's *At-Risk for High School Educators* and *At-Risk for Middle School Educators*. These online programs are innovative, research-proven, and cost-effective tools to prepare teachers and staff to intervene with and connect students in distress with support.

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CHALLENGE

An Engaging, Evidence-Based Program

Laura Yager, Director of Partnerships and Resource Development for the Fairfax-Falls Church Community, discovered *At-Risk for High School Educators* on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) website. *At-Risk* was developed by Kognito, a New York City-based company that designs immersive learning experiences where users practice managing challenging health conversations with fully animated and emotionally responsive virtual humans.

The *At-Risk* suite, unlike other training programs, goes beyond building knowledge and awareness about mental health. By providing users with the ability to practice challenging conversations with at-risk students, the simulation builds the 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. Kognito's *At-Risk* series of mental health simulations were developed for the PK-12 and higher education settings and are utilized in more than 15 states including Texas and Illinois and 450 colleges and universities around the country.

"Part of my job is to 'normalize' the conversation and get people more comfortable with talking about suicide, depression, and emotional distress," said Yager. "Kognito's program is a really easy way to do this, because they're not threatening."

RESEARCH

Training 9,400 educators

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

School counselors, psychologists, and social workers introduced *At-Risk* to teachers during faculty meetings at each of the District's middle and high schools, nearly 50 different sites. Debriefing discussions were offered to teachers if they wanted to ask questions. FCPS had no problems getting them to comply. To date, more than 9,400 teachers have completed *At-Risk*. "It helped that the early adopters told the other teachers, 'This is pretty good. You should do this,'" Dr. Panarelli said.

She added: "The fact that *At-Risk* is a high-quality product is obviously important."

Real and Meaningful Changes in Skills and Behaviors

A longitudinal study of the FCPS users found the *At-Risk for High School Educators* and *At-Risk for Middle School Educators* resulted in statistically significant changes that remained significant in 3-month follow-up point in the educators' self-reported

KOGNITO PK-12 PRODUCT SUITE

Kognito role-play simulations prepare faculty, staff, student leaders and students to build awareness, knowledge, and skills about mental health and suicide.



AT-RISK FOR
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
EDUCATORS



AT-RISK FOR
MIDDLE SCHOOL
EDUCATORS



AT-RISK FOR
HIGH SCHOOL
EDUCATORS



FRIEND2FRIEND

preparedness and self-efficacy to identify, approach, and connect a student at-risk with support services. In addition, the study found an increase of 30-40% in the actual number of students educators approached and discussed seeking help with. Finally, 95% said they would recommend the simulation to colleagues.

“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.”

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 took 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.

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—Dr. Mary Ann Panarelli, Director of
FCPS Office of Intervention and Prevention

With teachers’ busy schedules and the many priorities competing for their time, Dr. Panarelli says it would have been hard for her to require the training be completed this fast and cost-effectively in any other format.

“I can’t say to everybody to take an eight-hour class,” she noted. “This is short enough to make it manageable and practical—and it’s so valuable that your teachers are going to thank you.”

FCPS has since bolstered its efforts even further by providing access to *At-Risk* to more high school and middle school teachers in the county, as well as elementary school educators. They are also planning to launch a new Kognito immersive learning experience to students entitled *Friend2Friend*, which is a peer support program. •



The Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board (CSB) is the public agency that plans, organizes and provides services for people in the Fairfax and Falls Church communities who have mental illness, substance use disorders, and/or intellectual disability. The CSB also provides early intervention services for infants and toddlers who have developmental delays.

Learn more at
fairfaxcounty.gov/csb.



Kognito is a health simulation company that believes in the power of conversation to change lives. We are pioneers in developing research-proven, role-play simulations that prepare individuals to lead real-life conversations. Our simulations build and assess confidence and competency by enabling individuals to practice conversations with our growing family of emotionally-responsive virtual people. Our innovative approach uses the science of learning, the art of conversation and the power of game technology to measurably improve social, emotional, and physical health. Kognito is the only company with health simulations listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Learn more and access demos
at kognito.com.