

## After Student's Suicide, an Elite School Says It Fell 'Tragically Short'

The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey on Sunday made a remarkable admission of failure and committed to a new focus on mental health.



By Benjamin Weiser and Tracey Tully

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Last April, Jack Reid, a 17-year-old junior at one of the nation's elite boarding schools, tucked a Bible into his gym shorts and a note into his pocket directing his parents to a Google document explaining his feelings of despair. Then, inside his dorm room, he took his own life.

On Sunday, the anniversary of Jack's death, the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey offered an extraordinary admission of failure, publicly acknowledging that it had been aware that Jack was being bullied by other students, but that it had fallen "tragically short" of its obligation to protect him.

"The school acknowledges that bullying and unkind behavior, and actions taken or not taken by the school, likely contributed to Jack's death," Lawrenceville officials wrote in a statement posted Sunday morning on the school's website.

The school committed to taking a series of corrective actions including endowing a new dean's position that will be focused on mental health issues, with a goal of becoming a model for anti-bullying and student mental health.

The statement was part of a negotiated settlement with Jack's parents, Elizabeth and Bill Reid.

It offered a candid and detailed catalog of the school's missteps before Jack's death and a window into the culture of a private institution where tuition plus room and board top \$76,000 a year. It also represents shifting attitudes surrounding the mental health crisis among teenagers and the role of bullying in an always complex set of factors that can contribute to suicide.

"We feel like we both have life sentences without the possibility of parole," Dr. Reid, a clinical psychologist, said in an interview in which her husband also participated. "The only thing I'd love to change here is to get Jack back. I can't."

She added, "I do know if he were alive, he would want me — both of us — to try to make something good out of this and honor him in the way he lived his life."

Richard Lieberman, the lead suicide prevention expert for the public school system in Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest system, called Lawrenceville's response rare — and courageous. He said he had never before heard of a school's accepting responsibility so publicly after a suicide.

"We need to talk more about this. We really do," he said. "It's a leading cause of death of our youth."

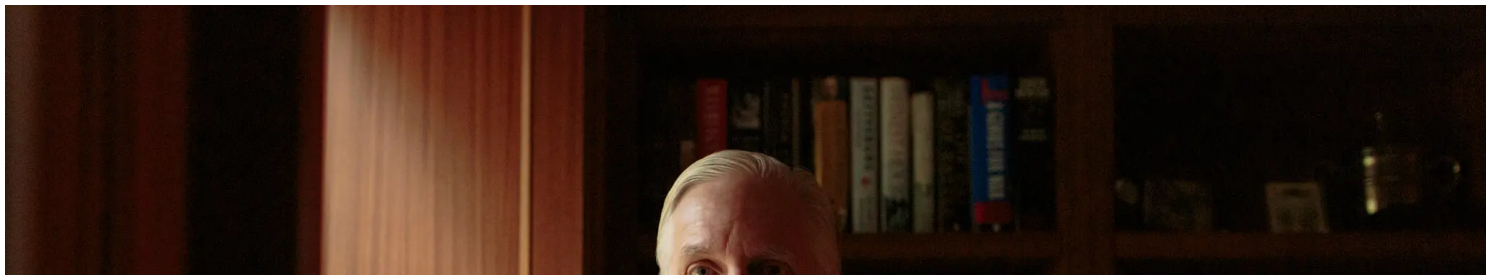
Jack was bullied over the course of a year, the school said in the statement posted on Sunday.

After his suicide, the school's board of trustees retained the law firm Petrillo Klein & Boxer to investigate the circumstances surrounding his death. The investigation included interviews with 45 students, faculty members and others, according to a detailed report on its findings, which the school provided to The New York Times.

The firm also reviewed emails from more than 100 students and school personnel, as well as Jack's personal emails, phone records, text messages and internet searches, the report said.

"We said from the beginning, 'Let's seek the truth and follow it where it leads us. Period,'" Stephen S. Murray, Lawrenceville's head of school, said on Sunday. "And that's what we've tried to do every step of the way."

He added: "This happened on my watch and I'm grief stricken. And yet I can't begin to compare that to the grief and sorrow of Bill and Elizabeth Reid."





Elizabeth and Bill Reid, Jack's parents, at their home on Saturday. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Lawrenceville's statement said that its settlement with the Reids was aimed at "honoring Jack, taking appropriate responsibility and instituting meaningful changes that will support the school's aspirations of becoming a model for anti-bullying and student mental health."

The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated an already worrying mental health emergency among teenagers, made worse by a severe shortage of therapists and treatment options and insufficient research to explain the trend. Nearly three in five girls reported feeling persistent sadness in 2021. Suicide rates also ticked up that year after a two-year decline, particularly in groups most affected by the pandemic, according to a report released in February by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Christine Yu Moutier, chief medical officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, said the causes of suicide were always complex and were never tied to only one stressor.

"Bullying absolutely can be an important factor that can be part of the multi-factor convergence of things that culminates in suicide," Dr. Moutier said in an interview, speaking generally and not about Jack Reid's death or any other specific incident. "But it is not thought, in any case of suicide, to be the sole cause."

The law firm Kaplan Hecker & Fink, which represented the Reids, declined to comment on the settlement or whether it included a payment by the school to the family.

Lawrenceville enrolls about 830 students on a spacious campus in western New Jersey, between Trenton and Princeton. It is considered by the school-ranking website Niche to be among the nation's top 10 boarding schools. Before enrolling in Lawrenceville as a sophomore, Jack attended the Buckley School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where he was recalled as a leader who consistently stood out for his kindness. Roughly 900 people attended a funeral service, Jack's parents said, and 1,500 more watched it online.



Jack Reid arrived at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey as a 10th grader in 2020.  
 Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

Jack's early days at Lawrenceville, where he arrived as a 10th grader in the fall of 2020, were happy ones, his parents said. He made friends and the dean's list.

But in the spring of 2021, a persistent and untrue rumor that Jack was a rapist spread widely throughout the student body and led to cruel comments from some students, according to his parents.

In September 2021, when he returned to school as a junior, he was nonetheless elected president of Dickinson House, one of the residential houses where the school's boarding students live. That appears to have increased animosity among some of his classmates and caused the rumor to spread further, his parents said.

A few days after the election, the unfounded rape accusation was posted anonymously to a nationwide, student-run app popular with boarding-school students, Jack's parents said.

The bullying spread quickly online, his parents said, and at Christmastime, during a secret Santa gift exchange among Lawrenceville classmates, Jack received a rape whistle and a book about how to make friends.

Mr. Reid recalled that his son was hurt deeply, and that when Jack came home for Christmas he seemed withdrawn. "Dad, will this ever go away?" he said his son asked him, "Will it ever get off the website?"

Mr. Reid noted that the in-person bullying at school combined with the power of the internet posting compounded the rumor's impact.

"We think bullying, with the 1,000 times echo chamber of the internet and everybody knowing, is much more devastating to kids and, in Jack's case, produced a very impulsive act," he said. "He had to escape the pain from the humiliation he was feeling."

Early on, with support from his parents, Jack approached school officials and asked them to intervene, leading to a school-led investigation surrounding the bullying and the sexual assault allegation.

The school inquiry found that the claim was bogus, and a classmate involved in spreading the rumors, who was later expelled for an unrelated violation of school rules, was formally disciplined for bullying Jack, according to the school's statement.

But Lawrenceville never told Jack or his family — or anyone else — that the investigation had concluded that the rumors involving a sexual assault were utterly false.

"There were steps that the school should in hindsight have taken but did not, including the fact that the school did not make a public or private statement that it investigated and found rumors about Jack that were untrue," Lawrenceville said in the statement.

The school and the Reids also tried unsuccessfully to get comments related to the sexual assault claims removed from the app.

The school also acknowledged that it had erred more specifically on the night Jack took his life, just hours after the classmate involved in the bullying was formally expelled. Instead of being supervised as he packed his belongings, the boy was permitted to participate in a drawn-out farewell that included a final run around campus and a group photograph. During the gathering, some students also made harsh comments about Jack, inaccurately blaming him for the boy's expulsion.

"School administrators did not notify or check on Jack," the school's statement acknowledged. "That night, Jack took his life, telling a friend that he could not go through this again."

Dr. Reid said that Jack had been seeing a therapist at the time of his death because of the bullying, but that he had never discussed killing himself. Jack also displayed none of the underlying factors that might have indicated he was at risk for suicide, she said.



"I do know if he were alive, he would want me — both of us — to try to make something good out of this and honor him in the way he lived his life," Elizabeth Reid said. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

The school said that it would contribute to a foundation the Reid family has established that will focus on education and prevention of bullying, and that it would make a recurring gift to a mental health organization to support research and best practices for suicide prevention in school environments.

Public schools in most states are governed by laws that regulate the investigation and response to behavior considered bullying and require instruction aimed at limiting its spread.

But private, parochial and boarding schools have far more autonomy in deciding how to address bullying.

Mr. Reid said that the family also hoped to lobby for legislation in New York and New Jersey in an effort to broaden laws tied to bullying at private schools.

Lawrenceville said in its statement that it would contract with a specialist to draft policies to identify and address behaviors that lead to school bullying and cyberbullying.

"We acknowledge," the school said, "that more should have been done to protect Jack."

*If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline or go to [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for a list of additional resources.*

**A correction was made on May 1, 2023:** An earlier version of this article misstated the cost of attending Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. The cost can top \$76,000 for tuition plus room and board, not for room and board alone.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [nynews@nytimes.com](mailto:nynews@nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)

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