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Goffstown schools 'devastated' by kindergarten teacher's death; investigation ongoing

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DUNBARTON — Wendy Tefft was supposed to welcome her new kindergarten students at an open house at Glen Lake School in Goffstown Thursday afternoon.

But that morning, police were called to her Dunbarton home, where they found the 38-year-old woman dead from a single gunshot wound.

In a news release Friday, officials labeled Tefft's death "suspicious," but said the manner of death had not been determined, pending further investigation.

Authorities are releasing few details about a tragedy that has shocked and saddened residents in two communities — Dunbarton, where Tefft lived with her husband and young son, and Goffstown, where she taught its youngest students.

Jeffery Strelzin, senior assistant attorney general and chief of the homicide unit, on Saturday would not say whether Tefft's death was a homicide or suicide. "I don't have any comment beyond what's in the news release," he said.



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In Dunbarton, the First Congregational Church opened its doors from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday for those who needed a place to grieve or come together after the death of Wendy Tefft. (Eli Okun/Union Leader Correspondent)



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Asked why her death is considered suspicious, he said that term means "there are characteristics of the case that make us question whether there is any criminal involvement in the death."

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Tefft taught pre-K and kindergarten at Glen Lake School in Goffstown, where classes start Tuesday. There was an open house scheduled last Thursday.

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School Superintendent Brian Balke posted a statement on the district's website Saturday, saying the Goffstown educational community is "devastated" by the beloved teacher's death. He said she had worked for the school district since 2010.

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Balke said systems have been put in place to help grieving staff and to support students.

And Kathy Stoye, the Glen Lake School principal, posted a letter to parents. "We are heartbroken and grieving, and our hearts are with all those who loved her," she wrote.

Stoye said the faculty will not be discussing Tefft's death with students. "We leave it to you, as parents and guardians, to address that if and how you see fit."

Becca Landrigan of Goffstown, whose son had Tefft for a teacher last year, said the timing of the teacher's death is especially sad. "Her classroom was all set up and ready for the year," she said in an email exchange with the Sunday News.

"She really set her room up for a great learning environment and had good communication with parents. She enjoyed rewarding the children and making them feel important."

Landrigan said Tefft "was a great teacher and really tried to help students learn and succeed."

But she remembers something else about the woman, who was quiet and reserved. "It did seem like she was kind of sad but tried to cover it up," she said.

Strelzin would not say whether Tefft's son was at their Barnard Hill Road home Thursday when the shooting happened. "I can just tell you that the child is safe," he said.

And Strelzin would not say where the woman was found or by whom. Asked who called police, he replied, "I can't reveal that now."

This would have been Wendy Tefft's third year at Glen Lake School. She had helped organize Field Day activities at the school in June.

Tefft was certified to teach elementary and general special education, and as an early childhood special educator, according to an online faculty page. She held a bachelor's degree from Southern New Hampshire University and a master's degree in education from Rivier College.

Tefft wrote in her faculty profile that she liked reading, skiing and the beach.

In newsletters sent home to parents last year, Tefft was enthusiastic about her students, highlighting their progress in reading and numbers.

"Your children are amazing!" she wrote. "They are coming in ready to learn every day. It is so wonderful to see their smiling faces every morning."

Steve Beal's twins had Wendy Tefft in pre-kindergarten two years ago and loved her, he said. "She was just a very soft-spoken, kind-hearted woman," he recalled.

But he, too, felt there was something beneath her quiet demeanor, "some sort of either sorrow or pain that just seemed to be present," he said.

He and his wife haven't talked to their kids, now 6, about their former teacher's death. They're waiting for more information, he said.

But Beal said he's scared of what that will reveal. "Something had to go horribly wrong for it to end up the way it did," he said. "I don't even like to think about it."

Investigators from the state police Major Crimes Unit, which is investigating Tefft's death with the AG's Office, had canvassed the Dunbarton neighborhood Friday but were no longer on the scene Saturday, according to Strelzin.

The First Congregational Church in Dunbarton opened its doors from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday for those who needed a place to grieve or come together.

"We see ourselves as a community church," said moderator Alexis Wallace. "Just trying to be responsive to the needs of the community."

In Goffstown, a police officer parked outside of Glen Lake School Saturday morning said the premises were closed to all but faculty and staff.

A teacher who has worked in the school as a paraprofessional for 10 years will be teaching Tefft's class when school opens on Tuesday, according to the principal.

Elisha Campbell, the head of the parents' group at Glen Lake School, said Saturday that Tefft's death "has rocked us to the core and we are all heartbroken."

But she said the school community has pulled together to make the school year as normal as possible for Tefft's incoming class.

"Wendy was always gentle and kind with her students," Campbell said. "She loved her students and absolutely adored her son.

"She has touched so many people's lives and she made a difference in the lives of Glen Lake families every day."

The district has posted tips for helping children cope with grief and loss on its website, <http://goffstown.k12.nh.us/SAU19/> (<http://goffstown.k12.nh.us/SAU19/>).