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Hundreds of Nude Photos Jolt Colorado School

By **KASSONDRA CLOOS** and **JULIE TURKEWITZ** NOV. 6, 2015

CAÑON CITY, Colo. — At least 100 students at a high school in Cañon City traded naked pictures of themselves, the authorities said Friday, part of a large sexting ring.

The revelation has left parents outraged, administrators searching for missed clues, and the police and the district attorney's office debating whether to file child pornography charges — including felony charges — against some of the participants.

George Welsh, the superintendent of the Cañon City school system, said students at Cañon City High School had been circulating 300 to 400 nude photographs, including images of “certainly over 100 different kids,” on their cellphones. “This is a lot of kids involved,” he said, adding that the children in the pictures were believed to be students at the high school as well as eighth graders from the middle school.

Members of the high school football team, the Cañon City Tigers, were at the center of the sexting ring, Mr. Welsh said. On Thursday night, separate

community meetings were held for parents of football players and parents of other students to address the scandal, which has shocked this quiet, semirural community of 16,000. The team was forced to forfeit its final game of the season.

Because it is a felony to possess or distribute child pornography, the charges could be serious. But because most of the people at fault are themselves minors and, in some cases, took pictures of themselves and sent them to others, law enforcement officials are at a loss as to how to proceed. “Consenting adults can do this to their hearts’ content,” said Thom LeDoux, the district attorney, but “if the subject is under the age of 18, that’s a problem.”

He added that he was not interested in arresting hundreds of children and would “use discretion” if he decided to file charges.

Mr. Welsh said a significant percentage of the student body at Cañon City High School had participated, with boys and girls involved in seemingly equal numbers. The photo-sharing, some of which took place in school, was done largely on cellphone applications called “vault apps” that look innocent enough — some look like calculators — but are really secret troves of photographs accessible after entering a password.

While sexting among children is a rampant problem, “I hope no other school has it at the level we have it at,” Bret Meuli, the principal of Cañon City High School, said in an interview in his office. “But I fear we aren’t the only ones.”

Students at the school described a competitive point system that classmates used to accrue photographs. Different point values were assigned to different students. Students who collected naked photographs gained points by adding these desirable children to their collections. Isaac Stringer, a junior interviewed outside the high school who said he did not participate in the photo-sharing, called the boy with the largest collection “the pimp of pictures.”

The repercussions are likely to resonate loudly over the days and weeks ahead in this small town, a tightly knit community ringed by correctional centers, where many people are employed, as well as tourist attractions such as Royal Gorge Bridge and Park, which claims to have “America’s highest suspension bridge.”

Mr. Welsh, the superintendent, said in a statement that “because a large number of our high school football players were implicated in this behavior, the coaching staff and administration, after careful thought and consideration, decided that stepping on the field to play this weekend to represent the Cañon City community is just not an option.”

The “sexting scandal,” as parents are calling it, shocked many, and it has also elicited anger from parents who say they knew about this type of photo-sharing for years and sought unsuccessfully to get school officials to intervene. Heidi Wolfgang, 41, a mother who no longer lives in the district, said in a telephone interview that she had spoken to a Cañon City Middle School counselor in 2012 after she found photographs of a nude adolescent on a cellphone owned by her daughter, then 12.

“He told me there was nothing the school could do because half the school was sexting,” Ms. Wolfgang said. She called the response “heartbreaking,” and said she eventually decided to educate her child at home.

Mr. Welsh said that like other school systems across the country, Cañon City schools had received reports of students’ exchanging lewd photographs, but that he had not been aware of the scope of the issue until recently, when officials received anonymous tips through a system called Colorado Safe2Tell.

“If there’s not a lead that takes you to this larger thing going on, why would you go there?” Mr. Welsh said.

Another mother, Lisa Graham, 46, said her daughter, now a junior at the high school, had been “propositioned by multiple guys” during her freshman

year. “She received unsolicited photos from guys, which she immediately deleted,” Ms. Graham said by telephone. “I’m frustrated if people knew and didn’t shut it down three years ago.”

Mr. Meuli has been principal for six years, and he was assistant principal of the school before that. He said that the school had had to handle a few instances in which a girl would break up with a boy and fear that he would circulate intimate photos of her, but that nothing this serious had been brought to his attention before.

What to do about a sexting scandal involving potentially hundreds of students was not covered in his master’s degree classes, Mr. Meuli said — but these days, it should be, he added.

The high school has turned over a cellphone that contains several hundred images to the police, and investigators will try to identify the children in the pictures, according to Paul Schultz, the Cañon City police chief. No arrests have been made, Chief Schultz said, and parents have been notified about the apps that can be used to mask the illicit photographs.

Mr. LeDoux, the district attorney, said the investigation would look into whether any adults were involved, whether children were bullied into participating, and whether any illegal sexual contact occurred.

Amy Adele Hasinoff, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver and the author of a new book, “**Sexting Panic**,” contends that schools need to find new ways to talk to students about the issue. Rather than just demanding that students abstain from sending risqué images, she said, educators should aim for open conversations that involve guidance in “safer sexting” with trusted partners.

Teachers and school officials “think they’re protecting people from harm,” Professor Hasinoff said. “But we know it doesn’t work.”

Correction: November 10, 2015

An article on Saturday about high school students in Cañon City, Colo., who traded naked pictures of themselves misstated the distinction claimed by the Royal Gorge Bridge and Park, a nearby tourist attraction that employs many people from the tightly knit community. Park officials say the suspension bridge is America's highest, not the world's highest.

Kassondra Cloos reported from Cañon City, and Julie Turkewitz from New York. Katie Rogers contributed reporting from New York, and Doris Burke contributed research.

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