News



St. Michael's College School in Toronto is seen Nov. 20. Six students face sexual assault charges stemming from an alleged incident in the school's locker room. (CNS/Michael Swan, The Catholic Register)

by Catholic News Service

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An iconic Canadian Catholic high school is reeling following the arrest of six students who are charged with assault and sexual assault following an alleged incident in a locker room.

The accused are 14- and 15-year-old students of St. Michael's College School in midtown Toronto. Five of the accused turned themselves into police early Nov. 19 and a sixth was arrested on his way to school.

Their names and ages are protected under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

Police announced the charges at a news conference. The accused are facing charges of assault, gang sexual assault and sexual assault with a weapon, said Inspector Dominic Sinopoli, who heads the Toronto police's sex crimes unit. They appeared in court Nov. 19 and were released into the custody of their parents. They are scheduled to make their next court appearance Dec. 19.

A video that circulated on social media appeared to show teens pinning a student whose pants had been pulled down, while two others allegedly assaulted him with the handle of a broomstick. The alleged attackers, as well as the youth who allegedly recorded the incident, have all been charged.

Police are also investigating five other incidents, said Sinopoli, all which have occurred within this school year. The school has been cooperative in the investigation, he added.

"All of these instances seem to be hazing related," said Sinopoli.

St. Michael's is a private, all-boys school founded 166 years ago by the Basilian Fathers. It currently has more than 1,000 students enrolled in Grades 7 to 12.

The school is renowned across Canada for its academic and athletic programs, and particularly for its rich hockey history. Dozens of St. Michael's graduates have played in the NHL, and 11 are in the Hockey Hall of Fame.

In the wake of the arrests, the school received two bomb threats, and students were advised to not wear their school uniforms on their way to and from school.

Police have identified 50 witnesses and are in possession of a number of videos that have circulated on social media. They are asking students with any information to

contact police. Possessing video of the incident constitutes possession of child pornography, according to police.

"This is going to be a complex investigation," said Deputy Chief James Ramer.

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The charges came one day after the school announced it was launching an independent examination of its "student culture" in the wake of two incidents that resulted in eight students being expelled. A final report is expected to be delivered by summer.

St. Michael's principal Greg Reeves, speaking at a news conference Nov. 19, said the school community "fully supports those arrests" and that the school has "made it clear to (police) we are at their disposal" in the investigation. He also said the school has set up a phone hotline for students to report any information.

"It's clear we have a problem, a serious problem," Reeves said, adding that faculty and the board of directors "are as shocked and horrified as you are."

"It's an incredibly sad time for our community," he said.

Reeves has faced criticism for failing to contact police immediately after learning of the incidents.

In an interview with Toronto news station CP24, Reeves said he first saw a video of an apparent assault on a student on Nov. 12. He received a second video — this one showing a student allegedly being sexually assaulted — that same evening. Police were not notified of that video until Nov. 14.

"When I saw the second video, we were as shocked and horrified as anyone," Reeves said in explaining his delay in informing police. "At that point I came to understand that he (the alleged victim) had not told his parents. So it was important for me, for total protection of the victim here, that I set up expulsion meetings again for the next morning and that I expel the kids out of the school in protection of the victim."

Reeves added that the parents of the victim were "very pleased" with the school's handling of the situation.

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This report was compiled by the staff of The Catholic Register in Toronto.