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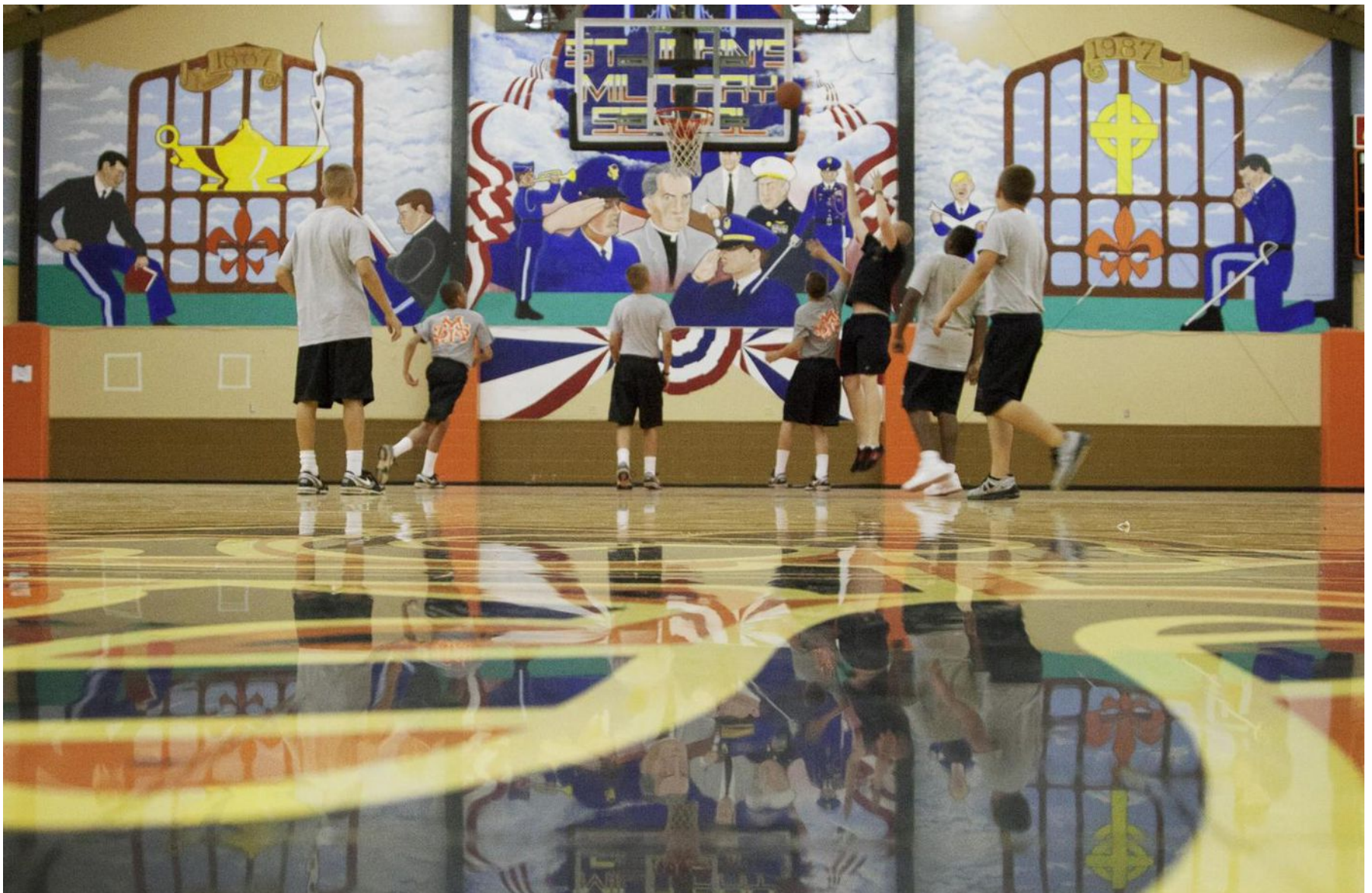
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St. John's Military School in Kansas hit with 339 abuse, hazing and branding complaints from students

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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Cadets play basketball in the gym at St. John's Military Academy in Salina, Kan., in June 2012. (Orlin Wagner/AP)



WICHITA, Kan. — Nearly 340 current and former students made complaints to a Kansas military school claiming they were beaten, hazed, harassed or abused during the past five years, including 21 who say they were branded, according to a court document.


The numbers surfaced last week in a federal lawsuit brought by 11 former cadets and their families against St. John's Military School. The latest filing in the case makes public for the first time the extent of abuse that the plaintiffs claim is part of the culture at the Salina boarding school.



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But the school says the number reflects its concern for student safety and welfare because it investigates and corrects every such instance, including the most minor, and keeps records of them. St. John's president Andy England said in an email to The Associated Press that the school averages fewer than six incidents a month even though students are in close contact 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The school has been sued by former cadets from California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Tennessee and Texas. They claim its quasi-military program, which gives higher-ranking cadets the power to discipline other students, encourages physical and mental abuse. They also say the school intentionally fails to supervise its students, allowing the abuse to continue.



The school reported receiving 339 verbal and written complaints from students over the past five years. A more specific list of complaints was filed under seal. The public filing does not detail how many, if any, of those complaints were turned over to police or other authorities.

One former student, Michael Kelly, who attended St. John's from October 2009 until November 2010, testified in a deposition about being beaten and branded.



The entrance to St. John's Military Academy in Salina, Kan. Nearly 340 current and former students made complaints to the Kansas military school claiming they were beaten, hazed, harassed or abused during the past five years. (Orlin Wagner/AP)



Feedback

Court documents show that the school has identified 20 cadets, not including Kelly, who were branded while they were students there, and a former St. John's employee, John Koop, testified in his deposition that he was aware of students being held down and

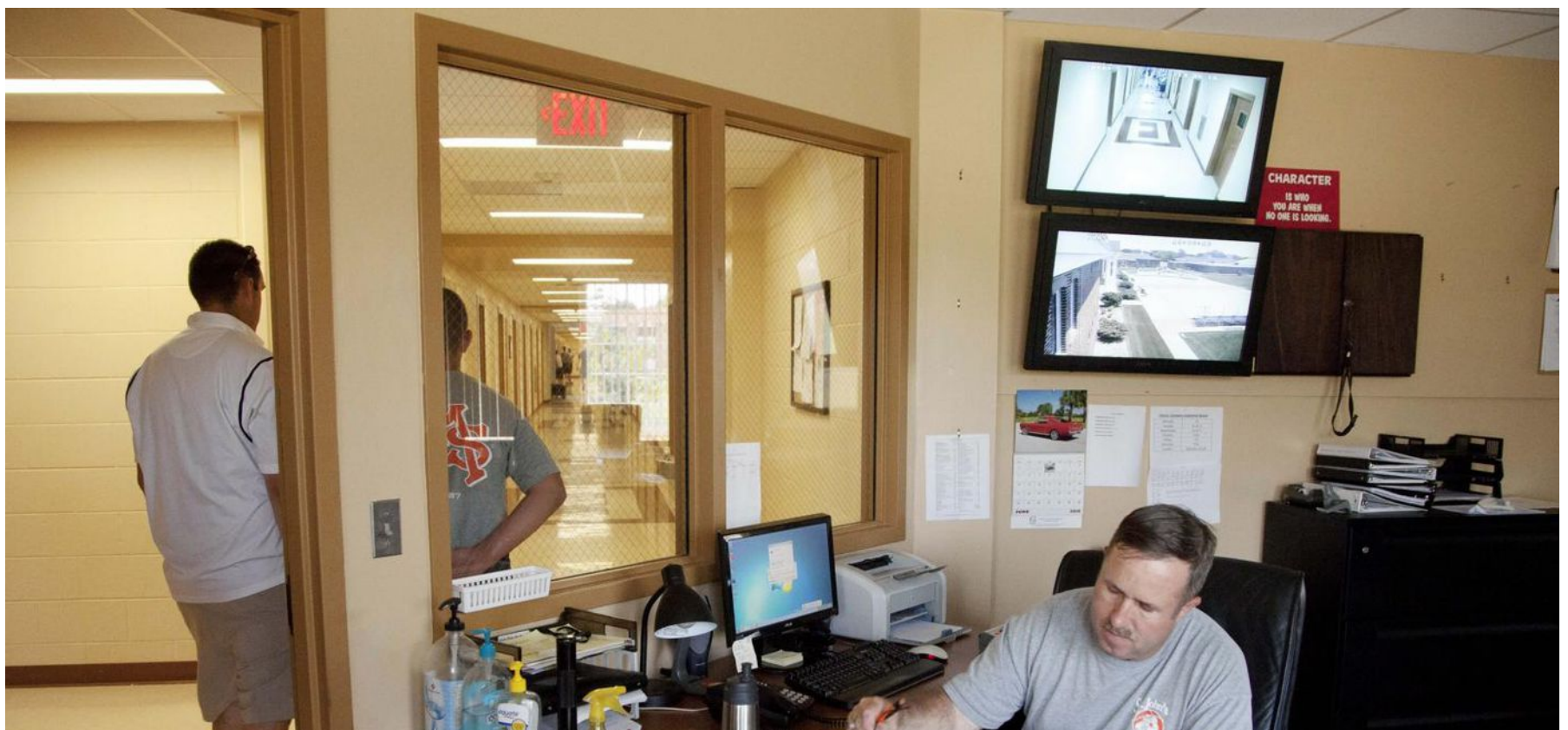
branded against their will.

England said in email that branding became "a badge of honor" for some students, while others used it as a way of getting themselves withdrawn from the school.

"As far as the allegations of branding are concerned, following thorough investigation by the school, nearly all of the alleged incidents were determined to be self-inflicted," he said. "Proper corrective action was taken in each case."

The school has tried to discredit Kelly, sending out a news release saying he admitted in his deposition to lying earlier about being taped, bound and gagged against his will. It also asked a judge to rule partially in its favor based on Kelly's testimony that the incident began as a joke and he asked his classmates to send a picture of it to his mother in Tennessee so she would take him out of the school.

Kelly's attorneys did not have a response to an email sent Monday seeking additional comment. But they said previously that the school is only questioning one of the many experiences described in the lawsuit and sworn testimony and that they stand by the former students and allegations in the lawsuit.





Employees work at St. John's Military Academy in Salina, Kan., in June 2012. The school has been hit with hazing and abuse complaint from cadets. (Orlin Wagner/AP)



In their latest court filing, they note that the school is basing its request for summary judgment on only a brief excerpt from a deposition that lasted more than eight hours and consisted of more than 400 pages. They also say Kelly made it clear that while the incident may have started as a joke, it didn't end that way.



"It all began as just a simple no harm intended joke, but in my mind it escalated and I realized it wasn't a joke and it didn't feel like it was set up. It felt to me like it was intentional," Kelly testified.

The school told AP it encourages students to report all incidents of unwanted physical contact, no matter how minor. England said St. John's uses them as "a teaching moment" at which the school excels.

"Counseling is given, aggressors are disciplined and lessons are learned," England said.



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