

FIREHOUSE

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Teens Allegedly Took Video While Setting Fire at Vacant WA School

Three teenagers face charges after video they took while allegedly setting fire to a vacant Tacoma school was shared.

By Peter Talbot

Source The News Tribune (Tacoma, Wash.)

1 Jan. 14—A large fire that tore through Tacoma's historic Gault Middle School — long closed and long troubled by [vandalism](#) — was [allegedly](#) started by a 15-year-old boy who had run away from home, according to charging documents.

2 The boy, his 15-year-old girlfriend and at least three other people under the age of 18 were inside the school when the fire started the morning of Jan. 3. Court documents state that they jumped through a window, and the girlfriend recorded video while the boy lit a fire and piled on [flammable](#) materials.

3 The Tacoma Police Department arrested the girl Wednesday, Jan. 10, at Henderson Bay High School in Gig Harbor, and her boyfriend and another 15-year-old boy were arrested at the girl's home with the assistance of Gig Harbor police.

4 On Thursday, Jan. 11, Pierce County prosecutors charged the boy [accused](#) of lighting the fire and his girlfriend with first-degree [arson](#) and second-degree [burglary](#). [Prosecutors](#) have not charged the third person arrested with a crime, and they requested further [investigation](#) from police.

5 [Pleas](#) of not guilty were entered on their behalves at [arraignment](#) Jan. 11 in a courtroom of [Remann Hall](#). The News Tribune is not naming the [defendants](#), called [respondents](#) in juvenile court, because they are not being charged as adults. After hearing from prosecutors, an [attorney](#) from the Department of Assigned Counsel and

a probation official, Commissioner Karen Watson ordered that both be released to electronic home monitoring under the supervision of their parents, who were present in court.

6 The two respondents entered the courtroom separately, the boy wearing a blue uniform for Remann Hall and the girl wearing orange. Prosecutors recommended both remain in detention due to the seriousness of the charges filed against them. The attorney for the state noted that the boy had been "on the run" for a month before the fire, which she said gave the state concerns that he wouldn't remain at home.



Two days after the blaze, the Tacoma Fire Department received an anonymous tip from a student had video

of the incident, showing who set the fire.

7 A probation official said the current charges are the boy's first referral to the court system, and he had a large support system. The boy told Watson he was willing to live under his father's supervision with an ankle monitor.

8 If convicted of arson or burglary, Watson said, the maximum penalty the respondents could face is being sentenced to remain in the state's custody until they turn 21. She said it was concerning that the boy's first referral to the court was for such serious offenses, but because it was his first, she agreed to release him to electronic home monitoring and advised him to make the best of choices going forward.

9 The boy's parents politely declined to speak with The News Tribune outside the courtroom.

10 Watson gave similar warnings to the girl accused in the fire, advising her to follow the rules of probation. It was her first referral to the court system, too.

11 "People could have been very seriously hurt during these escapades," Watson said in court.

Arson caused 'significant structure damage' to school

12 Tacoma Fire Department firefighters battled the fire at Gault Middle School, located at 1115 E. Division Ln., all morning and into the afternoon, working through heavy flames and large plumes of smoke.

13 More than 2,000 people in a one-mile radius received emergency notifications to avoid the smoke, according to the fire department. By the time the blaze was extinguished, several portions of the roof had collapsed. Crews later used an excavator to knock down a portion of the building's facade, including the sign that read Franklin B. Gault Intermediate School.

14 No injuries were reported. Prosecutors wrote in charging papers that it caused "significant structure damage" to the entire school. The fire department couldn't send firefighters inside while they worked to extinguish it because the severity of the

damage further compromised the structure. Records state a detective called it "an extremely dangerous scene" for firefighters due to the instability of the building.

15 Instead, firefighters used three ladder trucks to blast water on it from above. More than 30 firefighters responded to the scene. The bulk of the blaze was in the main, historic portion of the building, fire officials said, but it also spread to secondary structures. The 7.3-acre property includes six buildings.

16 Tacoma Public Schools has a demolition permit for the property, and the site was released back to the district Jan. 5. According to a statement on TPS' website, an environmental consultant has been called to the site to analyze debris for demolition and disposal, and the process of tearing structures down will restart once the scope of work is determined. District staff had been working on contractor selection with the goal of starting demolition in February, according to the statement, but the process was expedited because the fire department declared the site an emergency.

17 Gault Middle School opened in 1926, and it closed in 2009 due to declining enrollment. The building has been a source of neighborhood complaints for more than a decade, and videos posted publicly to social media show it has recently attracted people looking to explore the abandoned structure.

Anonymous tip, video led detectives to teens

18 Two days after the fire was started, the fire department received an anonymous tip from a Peninsula High School student who knew who caused it and had video of the incident. TV news station Fox13 published the video, allegedly showing the boy starting the fire.

19 The boy's mother saw the video on the news, according to the declaration for determination of probable cause, and she called the fire department Jan. 8, allegedly telling them she was positive her son was the person in the video starting the fire. He had run away from home, she said, and she identified his girlfriend, who she said went with him everywhere and might have been recording the video.

20 The mother met with a detective the next day, and she allegedly said she recognized her son's clothing and gait in the video. The detective then spoke with the boy's

father, records state, and he said he'd told the boy to come home after a friend of the teen messaged him with concerns about the boy's behavior. The father reportedly told the boy to come home, but he responded that he didn't need to do that or return to school.

21 The teenager was recently un-enrolled from high school due to absence, court records state. A spokesperson for the Peninsula Public School District on Jan. 11 declined to comment on whether he or the other boy arrested were students in the district. The district also declined to comment on their process for determining disciplinary action.

22 A detective also spoke with a security specialist for Henderson Bay High School, where the 15-year-old girl was arrested, who allegedly told investigators she recognized the girl's voice in the video that had been circulating. The security specialist spoke with the girl, who reportedly admitted to the security specialist that she was inside the school when the fire started and recorded video of her boyfriend starting it.

23 A security officer for Peninsula High School also contacted the detective, allegedly telling him that he spoke with a boy who said he was present during the fire and who corroborated the girl's account. He also reportedly said two more people under age 18 were present. Prosecutors have so far not charged the boy with a crime.

24 When police went to arrest the three teenagers Jan. 10, the boy accused of starting the fire was allegedly wearing shoes and a backpack that matched those depicted in the video. Prosecutors noted he had two lighters in his bag.

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