Twenty-six school districts in the 13th Judicial District were sent informational letters Tuesday, Feb. 28 regarding mandatory reporting of sexual misconduct allegations.

Letters were sent by District Attorney Bob Watson. “Unfortunately, we have recently had several incidents in the 13th Judicial District where school officials were aware that children had been subjected to nonconsensual sexual touching, but no report was made,” said Watson in the letter.

Holyoke School District was the subject of a 9News exposé Monday, Feb. 27, which highlighted that an alleged incident between two students in December at Holyoke High School should have been reported to law enforcement by the school district.

A written statement provided by Holyoke school officials for the 9News program cited concern for privacy rights of students and families as the reason the district doesn’t comment for stories on discipline issues involving individual students.

A thorough investigation is conducted in matters involving student discipline. “It is important to me that parents know that student safety is always a priority for this district,” said Dr. Jeff Tharp, board president, in the written statement.

Watson said there seems to be some confusion in distinguishing between sexual harassment or sexual assault, which isn’t a choice for schools to make.

Watson said on the 9News report he has decided not to charge the Holyoke school officials with any wrongdoing.

At this point, he’s pursuing the route of educating all school districts in his judicial district, which includes the counties of Phillips, Yuma, Logan, Sedgwick, Morgan, Kit Carson and Washington.

When contacted Tuesday morning, Watson said it seems to him there was no malicious intent nor flaunting of the law on the part of the Holyoke School District in the incident. He reiterated this isn’t the only school district this has come up in.

Watson sees this as an issue needing education. At this point, “I want compliance, not punishment,” he added Tuesday.

“As is proper, great discretion is afforded school officials in dealing with disciplinary matters,” said Watson in his letter to school officials.

“The Colorado legislature, however, has determined that certain matters must also be reported to law enforcement, notwithstanding any school action. These include allegations of sexual misconduct, including unlawful sexual contact.”

Watson said his office continues to be more than willing to provide any training on this subject. “It is our goal to work together to protect our children.”

Holyoke Enterprise March 1, 2012