

Expanded suit says rat infested, substandard schools deny education to poor

By LINDA DEUTSCH, AP Special Correspondent

LOS ANGELES (AP) _ Many poor and minority students will start the school year in rat-infested, substandard schools lacking textbooks or credentialed teachers, the ACLU said Tuesday, expanding its class action lawsuit against state education authorities.

ACLU Legal Director Mark Rosenbaum said children at one Los Angeles school, Dorsey Senior High School, do without books and are taught in hot classrooms with broken windows and rats running rampant in classrooms.

"Dorsey students routinely see rats in their classes," he said. "Teachers set rat traps in some classes and janitors take dead rats away from the traps as frequently as every other day."

"This isn't education," Rosenbaum said. "It's California's twisted version of 'Survivor' for children."

The lawsuit filed in May named 18 schools. It was expanded Tuesday to include 28 more. Rosenbaum said conditions at the additional schools were brought to the ACLU's attention by parents and concerned citizens who heard about the lawsuit.

"On the day the Democratic National Convention takes up the issue of education, the only response to the fierce realities disclosed in our suit from the California state leaders ... has been to dodge responsibility," Rosenbaum said.

He and staff attorney Peter J. Eliasberg said the response to the suit from Gov. Gray Davis and state education officials has been silence.

The lawsuit names the state of California, state school Superintendent Delaine Eastin, the state Department of Education and the state Board of Education.

"The policy of the governor's office is not to comment on pending litigation," said Davis spokesman Byron Tucker.

Eastin also declined to comment on the lawsuit, said spokesman Doug Stone.

The ACLU is suing to have the state fix the schools and provide enough credentialed teachers at all schools. Attorneys also would like the state to set up an agency to monitor schools that are fixed to make sure they remain safe and clean.

At a news conference, the ACLU lawyers introduced Maria Valle, a junior at Dorsey High School, who told of the chaos that engulfs classrooms when rats are seen scurrying across desks.

"People jump onto their chairs. Everyone's screaming. It takes 20 minutes or more for everyone to settle down," she said. "Students at Dorsey regularly see mice and cockroaches, too."

"We don't have any books in our math classes," she said. "There are students in our schools that would like to have a better future and because of this we are falling behind."

Joscelyn McCauley, the parent of an 8-year-old girl who attends Frank D. Parent School in Inglewood, said the Parent Teacher Association has to pay for toilet paper in bathrooms or there would be none. She said the school is overcrowded and teachers are inadequately trained.

"One teacher was so overwhelmed last year that she locked her whole fourth grade class out of the classroom," McCauley said.

"We pay our taxes. We uphold our part of the bargain," she said. "We want our children educated and prepared to compete across the board in the 21st century. Our children are your future."