Rights Groups Sue California Public Schools

By TODD S. PURDUM

LOS ANGELES, May 17 — A coalition of civil rights groups filed a class-action lawsuit today saying that the disparities between California's best and worst public schools are so great as to violate the state constitution's guarantee of a free and equal public education for all, and demanding that the state assure that all schools have the bare necessities of teachers, textbooks, classrooms and toilets.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs described the state court suit as the first in the nation to seek a guarantee of education basics, and said they hoped it would open a new front in a three-decade drive that began with efforts to equalize school financing, then moved on to address adequacy of conditions. The suit seeks no monetary damages, only an order requiring the state to assure certain essential items in classrooms throughout California.

The suit was filed on the 46th anniversary of the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision. It comes as Gov. Gray Davis and other state politicians are grappling with how to return the state, which once led the nation in educational spending, to standards and achievements, to something close to the national average in spending per student, computer resources per student and the like. In his revised budget this week, Mr. Davis proposed more than $3 billion in new spending for education, including a controversial plan to exempt public school teachers from state income taxes.

This is the first case that has said what are the bare essentials that a kid needs to even have a hope of equal educational opportunities," said Mark D. Rosenbaum, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, which filed the suit along with other civil rights organizations, including the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, on behalf of students and parents in poor and minority districts.

"California used to be the model which all states would look to for a public education system that was the institution for democratizing the citizenry," Mr. Rosenbaum added, referring to the era before the late 1970's when Proposition 13 and tax revolt set off a decline in school financing that the state has struggled to stem. "Now it's a measure of the Mississippiification of California that the national average is looked at as a goal to accomplish, and not necessarily one that will be met anytime soon.

Doug Stone, a spokesman for the State Department of Education, and Delaine Eastin, the superintendent of public instruction and the lead defendant named in the suit, said the department would have no immedi-