

Feb 8, 2012

## Lawyer expects more sex abuse cases at Los Angeles

*(Reuters) - A lawyer suing on behalf of three students who say they were sexually abused at a Los Angeles area school where two teachers have been arrested said on Wednesday he expected "many more" victims to come forward.*

Three girls represented by attorney Greg Owen sued teachers Mark Berndt and Martin Springer, along with the principal at Miramonte Elementary School and the Los Angeles Unified School District on Tuesday, claiming intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligence, sexual battery and assault.

Owen said he planned to file four more lawsuits on behalf of Miramonte students this week and represents a total of nine clients in the still-unfolding case.

"I believe there are many more victims," he said, adding that parents in the largely immigrant community have been reluctant to contact police.

Berndt, 61, was charged last week with 23 counts of lewd acts on children following a year-long investigation that began when bondage-style photos of students were turned over to police by a drug store photo technician.

In some of the pictures children were pictured with large, live, "Madagascar-type" cockroaches on their faces, sheriff's officials say. In others, students were seen with spoons of a substance later determined to be semen held to their faces, according to authorities.

On Wednesday, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Lieutenant Carlos Marquez said investigators had uncovered 200 more images of a similar nature on a computer at the drug store where the original photos were found.

### MORE PHOTOS SURFACE

Marquez said authorities had now seized a total of 590 pictures in the case and were still working to identify 25 of the children seen in them.

Springer, 49, was charged on Tuesday with three counts of committing lewd acts on a child in what authorities say is an unrelated case involving a girl who was abused in 2009.

The accusations have touched off protests by infuriated parents and prompted Los Angeles County school officials to temporarily replace the entire staff at Miramonte during an exhaustive investigation.

The school has been closed for two days during the transition and was scheduled to reopen on Thursday.

The lawsuits filed on Tuesday accuse Miramonte's principal, Martin Sandoval, and the school district of allowing Berndt and Springer to keep teaching there despite previous accusations against them by students.

The lawsuits also claim Berndt would take children from an after-school program and perpetrate "heinous acts" on them.

"He was grooming children, grooming families. He would actually go to kids' homes, send the children letters," Owen said of Berndt. "He would give them gifts. Books with notes inside on how they were special. We have all of that."

A Los Angeles Unified School district spokesman, Tom Waldman, said he could not comment on the lawsuits because the district's attorneys had not seen them yet.

The legal action came as reports surfaced that a former teacher's aide at Miramonte was under investigation over letters she wrote to an 11-year-old student there.

The Los Angeles Times reported the aide wrote in the letters she liked having the boy's arm around her and that she got "the chills" when he was close to her.

The district fired the woman in July of 2009 for inappropriate behavior with students, Waldman said without elaborating. Marquez confirmed the woman was under investigation but said she had not been arrested or charged.