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## Local firm joins LAUSD lawsuit

A Valencia legal firm is representing nine victims in a case being brought against a former Los Angeles Unified School District teacher accused of committing lewd acts on 23 children over a five-year period.

“At least 50 percent of the fault belongs to the school district,” Santa Clarita Valley attorney Greg Owen said Wednesday.

Owen, Patterson & Owen has filed three lawsuits on behalf of three clients involved in the case, along with three government claims, and may file three more claims Thursday, Greg Owen said.

Reviewing the case evidence has been an upsetting process for the firm.

“That’s the first time in a very long time I’ve felt like crying,” Owen said.

Among the evidence are photos allegedly taken by former teacher Mark Berndt showing Owen’s clients blindfolded and being fed a milky, white liquid authorities believe was semen.

“In some of the photos, we see students with hands tied behind their backs with blindfolds,” Owen said.

Owen said the evidence included CD compilation of songs for his students and cards and letters he sent them in care of their parents’ addresses.

The school district admitted that crimes have been committed against the children, so as Owen sees it, the district has two options: what he calls “early mitigation” or taking the case to court, he said.

An early settlement won’t traumatize the children any further, whereas litigation could take up to two years, Owen said.

“I hope the county wouldn’t make the victims go through this,” he said.

Two spokesmen for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, which is investigating the case, said investigators were assuring the families of possible victims that their immigration status would not be an issue if they came forward with information.

Berndt taught at Miramonte Elementary School in South Los Angeles, where the entire staff was replaced this week amid outrage from parents.

(The Associated Press contributed to this report.)