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School for deaf denies sexual-abuse allegations; Alberta Lawsuit

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WINNIPEG - Students at an Alberta school for the deaf suffered sexual and physical abuse, according to the first of what is expected to be several lawsuits alleging abuse of deaf students across Canada.

The lawsuit is the opening shot in massive, planned class action to be launched on behalf of more than 61,500 students who attended 12 provincially funded schools for the deaf, says lawyer Tony Merchant of Merchant Law Group.

Students at the schools ranged in age from about 10 to 17 years.

In Edmonton yesterday, Mr. Merchant's Saskatchewan-based firm filed a claim against the Alberta government -- the first of what he said will be claims against every province except New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

"Unfortunately, deaf children were ideal victims for this kind of abuse, imprisoned in a world with ineffectual communication and inadequate safeguards," said Mr. Merchant. He said information lawyers have gathered leads them to believe thousands of students -- almost entirely young girls -- were sexually and physically abused at schools around the country.

The statement of claim filed in the Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta in Edmonton puts forward allegations of abuse at the Alberta School for the Deaf from 1955 to 1996.

Three hearing-impaired Edmonton residents allege the school had a "brutal and callous disregard" and "complete lack of care" for children who attended the Alberta School for the Deaf between 1955 and 1996.

The three complainants allege they were choked, slapped, strapped and hit with a wire hanger, a hairbrush and a hockey stick during their time at the school, which ranged from six to 13 years.

They say teachers dumped cold water on students to wake them in the morning and used rope to tie a child's hands to punish him for picking his nose.

Two of the complainants allege repeated sexual assaults by both teachers and other students.

None of the allegations have been proven in court. A statement of defence has not been filed.

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A spokeswoman for the Alberta's education department said yesterday the province has not yet been served and therefore could not comment on the lawsuit.

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