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Dennis McMillan

On March 25, the Gay-Straight Alliance club at a San Francisco public high school, International Studies Academy (ISA), defended marriage equality in the face of possible student and parent protestors. Student members of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club did a presentation supporting marriage equality as part of a school spirit rally. The presentation featured a lesbian couple, gay male couple and straight interracial couple dressed in wedding attire. The couples came out on stage, holding hands, and then a public statement was read in support of marriage equality and civil rights for all people.

GSA Network (a statewide youth organization with over 470 GSAs in California) and Equality California (the state's LGBT advocacy and civil rights organization) organized community leaders and GSA supporters to assemble outside the school at 1 pm to show support for marriage equality and the GSA's brave actions. ISA is located at Vermont St. at 18th in the Potrero Hill neighborhood.

A dozen members of Equality California, including Molly McKay, Lisa Weightman, and Kelly Hart, as well as Assemblymember Mark Leno, Andy Wong from Community United Against Violence, Calvin Gipson from Glide Memorial, and Anna Damiani from Assemblymember Leno's office came out to support the GSA. A few cars drove by slowly to check them out, but none stayed to do their counter protest. "After reading so much about the upsurge in hate violence in the country, it was very encouraging to see the youth police one another as well as welcome our presence," said Hart. "For me this was further proof that we in the LGBT community need to stand shoulder to shoulder with our non-gay allies and put an end to all the hate speech that is dividing our nation."

The marriage equality action was spearheaded by GSA club president, Joshua Donatto, a junior at ISA and governing student body secretary, who was motivated to participate in the action because, as he stated, “No one should have to question their rights and freedoms. Marriage is a right.”

School administrators at ISA had previously received a number of parent complaints and a call from San Francisco Unified School District officials who also received parent complaints. Throughout the week, GSA club members had heard that a number of students planned to boycott the presentation at the rally and openly protest the GSA club. There had also been threats of parents and conservative churches protesting at the school on that Friday. Despite the hostility, the Gay-Straight Alliance decided to continue with the presentation, and ISA’s administrators backed the students in the GSA.

“It is disheartening to learn that some parents are putting pressure on the school to exclude equality issues from the school rally,” said Donatto.
“The GSA’s presentation is only a small part of the event. Parents should be supporting—not undermining—student leadership and enthusiasm for an event that was organized to celebrate school spirit and unity,” said Carolyn Laub, Executive Director of Gay-Straight Alliance Network.

“Gay kids deserve to dream of a happily ever after too,” said Geoff Kors, Executive Director of Equality California. “It is unfathomable that in San Francisco, a city that prides itself on celebrating our diversity, that parents would attempt to infringe on students’ free speech rights and discourage them from discussing pressing issues that impact their future rights, such as their right to grow up and marry the person of their choice.” He added, “This conversation amongst peers is a critical part of the educational process.”

The GSA issued the following statement: “The Gay Straight Alliance at ISA believes that we have rights and freedoms that we are willing to fight for, no matter what the cost. We believe as youth that youth have the strongest voices in society and the community that they live in. There are not enough youth fighting for their rights and the rights of others. We want to compel and encourage other youth organizations and individuals to speak out against hate and oppression, and to fight for the rights of the people. This isn’t just about the right of same-sex couples around the world to marry but also about making a change and being part of that change. This is for all the rights and freedoms that are abused by those that support oppression of any kind.” Donatto concluded, “This is our statement and our time to show the world that we care and we want change to happen now.”

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GSA Network 1550 Bryant St., Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94103 | 415-552-4229 | info@gsanetwork.org
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