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California?s GLBT Community Unites For Safety in Schools

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Student advocates from across California will participate in Queer Youth Advocacy Day 2008, a three-day youth leadership summit co-sponsored by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, Equality California Institute, Transgender Law Center and BIENESTAR. GLBT youth leaders and their allies will hold a press conference at the Sacramento, Calif., on May 5, nearly three months after the tragic death of Lawrence “Larry” King, who was shot in the head by a classmate at his Oxnard middle school.

Youth will call for the end of violence and discrimination against GLBT students like Larry, whose murder is believed to be motivated by the 15-year-old’s gender expression. The student who is charged with Larry’s murder is accused of committing a hate crime.

Youth advocates participating in Queer Youth Advocacy Day 2008 will learn new leadership and advocacy skills to encourage change in their local high schools and communities. The student leaders will meet with lawmakers, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell and staff of the California Department of Education and California School Boards Association, encouraging policy makers to better implement existing laws designed to protect GLBT youth in public schools.

State law protects GLBT youth from harassment and discrimination under the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act (AB 537, Kuehl). Although AB 537 was enacted in 2000, and later strengthened by the Safe Place to Learn Act (AB 394, Levine) and the California Student Civil Rights Act (SB 777, Kuehl), students still report that they do not know their rights under these laws. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of California students witness the mistreatment of other young people — and report little or no direct intervention from teachers and

administrators.

"When I walk down the halls at my school, I am often taunted and shoved into lockers because I identify as a gay transgender person," said Nik Castillo, a sophomore from Bakersfield. "Some of my peers call me names and actually say that who am I am is not ‘right.’ Really, what's not right is the hate and ignorance teens like me face every day."

“I chose to participate in Queer Youth Advocacy Day this year because I have seen the harassment and I have heard the stories of my peers who aren’t understood or accepted by others just because they’re queer,” said Isaiah Iboko, a senior from Los Angeles.

To advocate for change, GLBT youth and their allies will hold a press conference on the west steps of the Capitol from 11 a.m. to noon on May 5. At the press conference, youth leaders will share real-world experiences about what it is like to identify as GLBT or an GLBT ally in California schools so lawmakers are informed as they consider two bills moving though the legislature that will impact GLBT youth. Legislators, including Sens. Sheila Kuehl and Christine Kehoe and Assemblymen John Laird, Mark Leno, Mike Eng and Lloyd Levine, are also scheduled to speak.

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