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GSA Network

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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"Seth's Law" Proposed to Make a Safer School Environment ?for California Students

Assemblymember Ammiano and LGBT Equality Organizations Co-Sponsor AB 9

March 14, 2011 - Today, California Assemblymember Tom Ammiano will introduce a comprehensive bill that tackles school bullying by providing California schools with specific tools to prevent and address the pervasive problem in order to create a safe school environment for all students.

AB 9, also known as "Seth's Law," would ensure that every school in California implements updated anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies and programs that include actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, as well as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and religion. It would also empower students and parents to know what their rights are, and how to advocate for them.

AB 9 is named "Seth's Law" in memory of Seth Walsh, a 13 year-old gay student from Tehachapi, California, who took his own life in September 2010 after facing years of relentless anti-gay harassment at school that school officials effectively ignored.

Schools often do not have the tools or knowledge to adequately protect lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgender (LGBT) students and others from bullying, which remains a serious issue across California and the rest of the nation. Students, parents, and school employees often don't know what the rules are or what to do if bullying occurs.

"As a former teacher, I know how important it is for our students to feel safe at school. Each day throughout California, LGBT youth experience harassment. I am proud to introduce this bill in honor of Seth Walsh, which will give schools the necessary tools to prevent any young person from being bullied, harassed or worse because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression," said Assemblymember Tom Ammiano.

"Seth was a wonderful, loving child, and I loved him for who he was. I can't bring my son back. But schools can make a difference today by taking bullying seriously when students and parents tell them about it. It's time for change. We have to create better schools for everyone," said Wendy Walsh.

The bill is co-sponsored by a coalition of organizations advancing LGBT equality and justice – including the ACLU's California Affiliates, Equality California, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and Gay-Straight Alliance Network.

"Bullying can have serious and tragic consequences, particularly for students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender," said Carolyn Laub, Executive Director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. "We must take pro-active steps to ensure that California's schools are safe for every student. Seth's Law will help schools protect students, and prevent and respond to bullying before a tragedy occurs."

"Public schools have tremendous power and responsibility to protect students from bullying and harassment," said Elizabeth Gill, Staff Attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union. "Better school procedures and policies to prevent and address bullying will make a safer environment for students who are suffering, and can even save lives."

"Everyday in California, many students go to school fearful of another day of harassment and intimidation with no hope of a better tomorrow," said Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California. "Seth's Law will give all students the tools to seek the help they need to keep them safe and make sure that educators combat bullying in our schools."

In a recent national survey, nine out of 10 LGBT students reported being harassed at school. The problem persists in California as well, with LGBT students reporting significant harassment. The California Safe Schools Coalition reported in 2010 that 42% of California students who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and 62% who identify as transgender reported being harassed at least once based on gender non-conformity.

What's more, young people often face bullying and harassment based on what their peers perceive to be their sexual orientation, regardless of whether they identify as being LGBT. According to the most recent California Healthy Kids Survey 12% of 7th graders and 10% of 9th graders reported being harassed based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

The consequences of bullying and harassment can include falling grades, depression, and risk of suicide. LGBT youth are three times as likely to seriously consider suicide as heterosexual youth.

"No child should fear going to school, and yet that is the daily reality for thousands of California students who face relentless harassment and bullying," said National Center for Lesbian Rights Executive Director Kate Kendell. "It's our responsibility to make sure schools are taking active steps to address this problem and using the tools that we know will work to create true change. It is not enough to punish students who bully. We must create a school-wide culture of inclusion and respect for difference."

Under Seth's Law, every school district in the state would:

- Create strong and clear anti-harassment policies and programs, if they don't have them already.
- Have a system in place to ensure that all reports of harassment are taken seriously, addressed quickly, and that parents and students understand the process of making these complaints.
- Explain the harmful impact of bullying and discrimination to students and staff.
- Provide ongoing professional development for teachers, school counselors and administrators about identifying and stopping harassment and discrimination and creating a school-wide culture of inclusion and respect for difference.

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The American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (ACLU-NC) is the largest affiliate of the ACLU a nationwide, nonpartisan organization with more than 550,000 members dedicated to the defense and promotion of the guarantees of individual liberty secured by state and federal Constitutions and civil rights statutes. www.ACLUNC.org [2]

Equality California is the largest statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights advocacy organization in California. Over the past decade, Equality California has strategically moved California from a state with extremely limited legal protections for LGBT individuals to a state with some of the most comprehensive civil rights protections in the nation. Equality California has passed more than 70 pieces of legislation and continues to advance equality through legislative advocacy, electoral work, public education and community empowerment. www.EQCA.org [3]

Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) is a national youth leadership organization that empowers youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools by training student leaders and supporting student-led Gay-Straight Alliance clubs throughout the country. In California alone, we have brought GSA clubs to 53% of public high schools, impacting more than 1.1 million students at 850 schools. GSA Network's youth advocates have played a key role in changing laws and policies that impact youth at the local and state level. GSA Network is also the founder of the Make It Better Project, which aims to stop bullying and prevent suicide. www.gsanetwork.org [4]

The National Center for Lesbian Rights is a national legal organization committed to advancing the human and civil rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community through litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. www.NCLRrights.org [5]

http://www.gsanetwork.org [4]

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