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Reporting from Sacramento -- As the battle over same-sex marriage makes its way through California's courts, another gay rights fight is smoldering in the Legislature.

Democratic lawmakers have revived a plan to require state schools to teach about the contributions of gay, lesbian and transgender Americans. They are reigniting a movement that halted five years ago when legislators approved such a requirement only to run into opposition from then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger [1].
Now, with a Democrat in the governor's office, the lawmakers and gay rights activists are more hopeful that school curricula will be revised.Gov. Jerry Brown [2] has not taken a position on the proposal. But the push has divided religious leaders, educators and lawmakers and prompted accusations from opponents that those behind the effort seek to impose their values on the state and on students and parents who find same-sex relationships objectionable."It is, in fact, legislating morality," said Craig DeLuz, a parent and Sacramento school board member. "It is requiring taxpayers to foot the bill to promote a lifestyle to which they may or may not be morally opposed."

If implemented, the measure, which would revise social science textbooks, could have effects beyond California. The state is a major purchaser of educational texts, and publishers often produce books tailored to California that other states use as well.

The proposal would require that social science texts and other instruction include "a study of the role and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans … to the economic, political and social development of California and the United States of America, with particular

emphasis on portraying the role of these groups in contemporary society."

Each school district would decide which age groups received such instruction.

Gay rights activists say the legislation is overdue and would extend recognition long provided in textbooks and classrooms to historical figures who are African American, Latino and Asian American.

Sen. Mark Leno [3] (D-San Francisco) who introduced the bill, SB 48, said it addresses a glaring oversight in educating young people that has led to harassment of gays by their classmates.

In an emotional plea for the bill at a recent legislative hearing, Leno invoked the name of Seth Walsh, a 13-year-old student from Tehachapi who committed suicide last year after facing anti-gay bullying at school.

"In light of the ongoing and ever-threatening phenomenon of bullying and the tragic result of suicides, it seems to me that better informed students might be more welcoming in their approach to differences among their classmates," Leno said in an interview. "Students would better understand that we are talking about a civil rights movement."

Some gay high school students said they welcomed Leno's effort, which they said would make them feel less isolated. It would show that non-heterosexuals "have contributed to the U.S. in significant ways," said a 17-year-old at Bell High School.

The student said he would join dozens of other gay and lesbian students advocating for the bill at a rally Monday at the Capitol.

Meanwhile, several Republicans [4] are aggressively fighting the proposal. State Sen. Bob Huff [5] (R-Diamond Bar) charged at a recent education committee hearing that it would "sexualize the training of our children at an early age."

Leno took umbrage at the remark, saying, "I would imagine you have never been harassed or discriminated against because you are gay. I have."

In the first test of the measure this year, the panel passed it on a 6-3 party-line vote last week.

The measure is backed by California Church Impact, a group whose members include the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the Greek Orthodox Church and others. But lawmakers have been flooded with letters of opposition from groups including the California Catholic Conference, the First Southern Baptist Church and the Thousand Oaks Christian Fellowship.

"This is all absurd," said a letter from several religious leaders, including Arland Steen, a pastor for the Thousand Oaks group. "At a time when our state lacks dollars to pay for the current needs in education, this Legislature is actually considering adding more financial burden on schools to pay for new textbooks that will teach so-called gay history."

Leno said the proposed law would cost nothing. Textbooks would be changed in the next scheduled revisions, due to be approved by the state in a couple of years.

Although some teachers have testified against the change, it is supported by the California Teachers Assn. and the Los Angeles Unified School District [6].

"We are trying to provide, for those students that feel disenfranchised, some role models," said Virginia Strom-Martin, the district's lobbyist.

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