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# Students Lobby for an End to Bullying

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Group Heads to Sacramento to Have Their Voices Heard

Estimates from organizations that track teen bullying show that at least 30 percent of teenagers in the United States have either been victims of bullying or victimizers. With the rise of social networking, cyber-bullying has given the problem a new medium and students from all over California took steps this week to fight against the harassment.

The Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) took nearly 70 students from various California schools to Sacramento Monday for the annual Queer Youth Advocacy Day, where they spoke to lawmakers about bullying in schools. The students held a rally on the south steps of the State Capitol and were joined by state superintendent of public instruction Tom Torlakson, and State Senators Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) and Christine Kehoe (D-San Diego).

The students then visited their representatives' offices to discuss three new pieces of legislation designed to decrease bullying and make schools a more safe and inclusive place for LGBT youth.

"These laws impact students and the students are in the position to tell the legislators what laws will work," said Jackie Downing, development and communications manager for the GSA.

The GSA has been taking students to the Capitol for Queer Youth Advocacy Day since 1996. The event is part of a three-day trip where students speak to legislators on issues concerning them. The students apply for the trip through GSA clubs in schools where they are trained to be advocates of anti-bullying measures and to speak to legislators. According to Downing, there are GSA clubs in 56 percent of schools in the state.

"We empower the youth," Downing said. "We teach them how to fight slurs and how to educate

their peers through hours of training."

Downing added that schools with GSA clubs have statistically shown higher rates of student safety. Some of the students visited as many as 53 offices during the trip to discuss the importance of Seth's Law (AB 9), the Fair Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful Act (FAIR), and the Gender Nondiscrimination Act (AB 887).

Seth's Law was named after Seth Walsh, a 13 year-old gay student from Tehachapi, California who committed suicide last September after facing years of anti-gay harassment at school. Seth's law would ensure that every school in the state implements anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies and programs that include sexual orientation and gender identity.

"Especially given the tragic suicides of numerous young people in the past year, it is crucial that legislators hear and understand the stories of youth who are working in their schools and their communities to combat bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity," Leno said. "I am inspired by the passion and resolve that these students have brought to Sacramento with their unified goal to make California a safer place for all young people."

The anti-bullying effort did not stop there, as the West Hollywood City Council agreed Monday to co-sponsor the "Teen Bullying Forum," hosted by the National Council of Jewish Women Los Angeles Chapter (NCJW-LA).
"We often work with the NCJW on their programming," Councilmember Abbe Land said.

The forum will be held May 11 at the NCJW-LA Headquarters on Fairfax Avenue and will include a panel of experts from various organizations including the Los Angeles Unified School District, The Trevor Project and the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center.

"We believe young people should be able to be who they are and not worry about being hurt for any reason," Land said.

One of the groups that will be in attendance is the Safe School Ambassadors from Fairfax High School, a group of students who underwent training on how to handle bullying at their school and help their peers deal with the situations. Joyce Kleifield, director of development at Fairfax High, works with the ambassadors and said they are looking forward to participating in the event.

"We want to expose them (students) to that type of discussion as much as possible," Kleifield said. "Kids can't learn in an environment where they don't feel safe or respected."

While the ambassadors will be in the audience at the forum, Kleifield said they are currently searching for a student who has been a victim of bullying to be on the panel to discuss the expierences.

"It's extremely important to become aware of bullying today," Kleifield said.

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