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Youth Take On Controversial Issue in State?s Capitol

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By Elizabeth Hsing-Huei Chou

Seventy high school students who participate in gay-straight alliance clubs at their campuses had the opportunity to meet several of their state representatives in Sacramento this week as part of an experience that grew beyond the usual civics lesson.

They were able to lobby directly on an issue that affects them personally, pushing for the passage of three new bills, one of which would require that schools teach the history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, LGBT, people, a group with which they identify.

The students' trip to Capitol Hill was organized by the Gay Straight Alliance Network, and is part of its annual Queer Advocacy Day event. State representatives, including local Assemblyman Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens), were among those who met with the students to talk about the bills.

The experience changed one high school student's view that politicians work against the interests of gay youth. "Before, I would have never thought it was possible for me to go to an office and tell them what I believe, and what I believe should be done," said Brandon Serpas, a 15-year-old high school student.

Serpas, president of the Gay-Straight Alliance club at Schurr High School in Montebello, joined several other students from similar clubs around the state that took part in a rally on Monday. On Tuesday several among them testified during a committee hearing on one of the three bills – the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act (SB 48), authored by Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco).

If passed, SB 48 would require schools around the state to include the history of LGBT people in textbooks alongside the histories of minority groups like African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans.

“We want a chance to feel we’re equal to other people who are heterosexuals and minorities that have come to be respected in the United States,” Serpas said.

The students believe teaching about LGBT history in schools would reduce negative stereotypes they feel are leading to severe bullying of students who identify as gay or are seen as such. They believe the bullying has dire consequences, causing some young people to endure emotional stress that could lead them to commit suicide.

“Some stereotypes are for example, they’re all feminine… you have to fit this gender role,” said 17-year old Bell High School student Isaias Guzman, who like Serpas is president of his school’s Gay Straight Alliance club. “I think everyone can relate to this. Not everyone acts specifically how they’re supposed to… everyone expresses themselves differently.”

Local area students like Bell High School student Isaias Guzman, left, met with representatives, including Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco), right, to discuss bills that affect LGBT people. (Courtesy of Edward Dunkin, GSA Network)

The students came prepared to discuss not only SB 48, but also Seth’s Law (AB 9), a bill authored by Assemblyman Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco) that would update anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies at schools to include discrimination against actual or perceived sexual orientation; and Assemblywoman Toni Atkins’ Gender Nondiscrimination Act (AB 887), which would bolster the housing and employment rights of LGBT people.

“We’re very hopeful and believe that these laws can be implemented and even if they don’t, the GSA Network will come every year to fight for these laws,” said Guzman, who later testified in favor of SB 48 during a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Tuesday.

Recent cases of gay youth, or youth perceived to be gay, committing suicide have been blamed on anti-gay bullying. Seth’s Law, for example, is named after Seth Walsh, a 13-year old Tehachapi boy who killed himself last year after enduring bullying that targeted him for being gay.

“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 gender identity,” said Leno.

His own bill was passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday and was recommended for the Senate Floor. Leno says his bill would kick in only when schools decide to purchase new books to replaced old ones.

Students from statewide gay-straight alliance clubs are not the only ones who are taking note of Leno’s bill. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the California Teacher’s Association, and groups like the Gay Straight Alliance Network are among the supporters of the bill, while numerous organizations affiliated with churches or parent groups have come out in opposition

against SB 48.

Elizabeth Swanson, a parent in Leno's district, spoke at Tuesday's hearing to oppose SB 48. She believes it would bar discussion of efforts to change people from homosexuals to heterosexuals, labeling such discussion as hate speech. "As a free society that values freedom of speech and freedom of religion, this is a very dangerous road that we are going down," she told EGP.

Swanson is a member of the Protect Kids Foundation, which is campaigning against SB 48. She says schools should not get involved in teaching about LGBT people and feels rather that it is harmful to tell students who identify as gay that they were "born that way."

Some groups say lawmakers need to be sensitive to the concerns of parents, especially when it comes to bringing up the subject of sexuality in a school setting. "This is not age appropriate, and it is also very disrespectful to the wide diversity of parents and children with a wide range of moral and social backgrounds and needs," said Brad Draco, president of the Pacific Justice Institute, a legal defense organization focusing on religious freedom and parental rights.

Those who oppose the bill say bullying could be dealt with in other ways. They also believe there are other factors such as the quality of the young person's home life that may have contributed to the spate of suicides and the emotional distress experienced by some gay youth.

Leno's bill received a dissenting vote from Vice Chair Senator Tom Harman (R-Costa Mesa) during the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing, while Senator Noreen Evans (D-Santa Rosa) who chairs the committee and spoke in favor of Leno's bill.

Evans drew a connection to her own experience of the women's movement. "I was told I couldn't be a lawyer because I wasn't a man… I remember reading our textbooks, and they were written in the male gender exclusively, as though women were not involved" in the process, she said, before voting to move the bill to the Senate floor.

Whether Leno's bill ultimately passes, students like Serpas and Guzman say they have begun taking their own steps back home, such as implementing anti-slur measures at their schools. "We have to fight for things that people who don't fall under our category take for granted – the right to marry, the right to feel safe within our schools… the right to feel we're worth something… basic fundamental rights that everybody feels they need to have… we have to be treated like people," said Serpas.

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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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