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Irene Rojas-Carroll was always troubled by the fact that her social studies lessons failed to mention people like her.

Important figures of various ethnicities, races or cultures were present in her history books, but references to contributions made by bisexuals like Irene were nonexistent.

Gays, lesbians and transgender people were left out too, the El Cerrito High School senior noted.

A controversial bill moving through the state Legislature would change that, requiring social science instructional materials to include the role and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans, as well as Pacific Islanders and those with disabilities.

The measure, SB48, sponsored by Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, would add to existing laws requiring the inclusion of the historical influences of American Indians, African Americans and European Americans among others in the public school social science curriculum.

A long list of religious and conservative organizations has come out vehemently opposed to the measure, including the California Catholic Conference, California Concerned Women for America, the Conservative Party (California) and the Traditional Values Coalition.

Antidote to bullying

Irene said she believes a more inclusive curriculum would help reduce the slurs and bullying related to sexual orientation in schools by helping students understand the diversity of those who contributed to society.

"I would feel that then I was included in the history of America, that I wasn't being blocked out on purpose," said the 16-year-old, who also calls herself pansexual, which means gender doesn't matter to her.

The measure is now headed to the Assembly after the Senate approved it Thursday by a vote of 23-14. Leno said he hopes to have the bill on the governor's desk by the end of summer.

Those opposed aim to stop it before it gets there.

The measure "forces the inclusion of LGBT persons into social science curriculum based on their sexual orientation alone," said Ron Prentice, CEO of the California Family Council, in an e-mail. "Sen. Leno's intention with SB 48 is to increase every public school student's exposure to the homosexual lifestyle, while disallowing any accurate but potentially unfavorable content to be included in the related curriculum."

Another critic, Alameda parent Gary Fanger, told legislators on the Senate Judiciary Committee last week that he believes the measure will require schools to promote homosexuality, something he morally opposes.

His kindergarten daughter already has learned in school about two gay penguins who nurture an egg in New York's Central Park Zoo, as part of a controversial anti-bullying curriculum presented in the Alameda Unified School District.

"When you start at the age of 5 and 6 teaching these children about gender preferences, you're confusing them," he said, adding that the content contradicts the definition of family taught at home. "We are going to protect our children."

An old argument

Leno countered that the same religious and moral arguments were used against women's studies and black studies decades ago.

"The genius of our democracy is that it does not allow one interpretation of any one particular holy book to become state law," he said. By ignoring the accomplishments and role of gays, lesbians, disabled people and others throughout time, "we are currently censoring history."

Leno noted that specific content used in curriculum textbooks would be determined by the state Board of Education and local school boards, through the public process.

The curriculum, for example, might include the fact that Harvey Milk was the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California just as it includes that Willie Brown was the first African American speaker of the Assembly, according to the legislative analysis of the bill.

The measure, as Irene hopes, is intended to address bullying related to sexual orientation by educating children about people's differences, Leno said.

Critics have called that goal a clear homosexual agenda.

Leno agreed that he has an agenda.

"This is about a political agenda - a political agenda that promotes respect, dignity and validation for human life," Leno said during the Senate hearing last week. "An agenda that promotes loving thy neighbor as thyself. That's what this agenda is about."

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