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California to Require Gay History in Schools

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Ian Lovett

LOS ANGELES — California will become the first state to require public schools to teach gay and lesbian history.

As expected, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill on Thursday that mandates that the contributions of gays and lesbians in the state and the country be included in social science instruction and in textbooks. School districts will have until next January to begin implementing the new law, which was also promoted in part as a way to combat bullying of gay and lesbian students.

“This is definitely a step forward, and I’m hopeful that other states will follow,” said Mark Leno, California’s first openly gay state senator, who sponsored the bill. “We are failing our students when we don’t teach them about the broad diversity of human experience.”

The state already requires schools to teach students about the contributions of some other minority groups, including black people and women. But until now, gay figures like Harvey Milk received little mention in state-approved textbooks.

The Democratic-controlled Legislature passed a similar bill in 2006, but Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican who was then the governor, vetoed it.

This time, however, California has a Democratic governor, and the legislation came on the heels of a highly publicized string of suicides among gay teenagers, including a 13-year-old boy from the state’s Central Valley.

Advocates for the legislation said they believed the shift would help make schools safer for gay and lesbian students, who are often ostracized.

“There is an increasing awareness in the public and among elected officials that we have to do something to address the problems of bullying, and the negative consequences” for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students, said Carolyn Laub, director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network.

Some conservative lawmakers, however, continued to oppose the bill, saying that curriculum should be left to individual school districts.

“It’s a sad day for our republic when we have the government essentially telling people what they should think,” said Tim Donnelly, a Republican state assemblyman from San Bernadino. Mr. Donnelly said the law prohibited schools from presenting gays and lesbians “in anything other than a positive light, and I think that’s censorship right there.”

Though the new law will take effect in January, state textbooks and curriculum will not be updated for several years. In the meantime, local school districts will have to use supplemental materials in the curriculums.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/15/us/15gay.html?_r=1&hpw [1]
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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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