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Public schools in California will be required to teach students about the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans starting Jan. 1 after Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday signed a controversial bill to add the topic to the social sciences curriculum.

Textbooks now must include information on the role of LGBT Americans, as well as Americans with disabilities, though California's budget crisis has delayed the purchasing of new books until at least 2015.

"History should be honest," Brown, a Democrat, said in a statement. "This bill revises existing laws that prohibit discrimination in education and ensures that the important contributions of Americans from all backgrounds and walks of life are included in our history books."

The governor called the legislation, SB48, introduced by Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, "historic."

The law - the first of its kind in the nation - adds the two groups to an existing list of minority and other groups that are required to be part of the social sciences curriculum.

Safer schools

Gay rights supporters heralded Brown's action as a major victory. They said the law will help make public schools a safer place for LGBT students as well as give those students, and their classmates, examples of accomplished and important LGBT people.

Throughout the debate on the measure, backers noted the recent spate of suicides among young LGBT people and said it would help to combat bullying that typically occurs beforehand.

Opponents, however, fiercely opposed the measure, citing religious objections to homosexuality and questioning whether such instruction is necessary. They expressed dismay with Brown's signing of the bill.

"If children in other countries are learning math and science, and American children are learning about the private lives of historical figures, how will our students compete for jobs in the global economy?" said Sen. Sharon Runner, R-Lancaster (Los Angeles County), the vice chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Education.

Beyond California

The provision on inclusion in textbooks could reach beyond California, too, as many book publishers tailor their texts to California's standards because of the state's large population. The bill does not prescribe how schools will teach the subject, and Leno said that decision will be made by local school officials and teachers.

"What the bill calls for is for the contributions of LGBT people to be included," Leno said, adding, "We wrote it broadly for a reason. We would be subject to more criticism than we've already been getting if we were more dictatorial."

Leno said the mandates apply broadly, though, telling reporters it would affect kindergarten through high school curriculum, "and, of course, in an age-appropriate way."

Gay rights advocates said they will be vigilant about making sure schools across California comply.

Carolyn Laub, the founder and executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, which works to establish gay-straight clubs in schools, said such clubs exist in 55 percent of California's high schools.

"We'll certainly be letting all of our constituents know about this bill, and when it goes into effect I can assure you there will be thousands of students" watching to see how it is implemented, she said.

Proponents have cited slain San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk as a person with historical significance, along with events such as the Stonewall Riots in New York City that helped launch the LGBT rights movement as examples of topics that could be taught.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, a Democrat, praised Brown's move, saying, "Our history is more complete when we recognize the contributions of people from all backgrounds and walks of life."

Cutting into class time

Still, opponents questioned the effect the bill would have and the need for explicit instruction for all students about a relatively small group.

The bill "does absolutely nothing to reduce bullying, improve the poor state of our education system, ensure students graduate or prepare them for global competitiveness," said Paulo Sibaja, legislative director of the Capitol Resource Institute, a socially conservative organization in Sacramento. "Instead it diverts precious classroom time away from science, math, reading and writing, and focuses on the agenda of a small group of people."

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