Published on *Gay-Straight Alliance Network* (http://www.gsanetwork.org)

Students Fight Harassment on Campus

A couple of weeks ago, the State Senate approved AB 9, a bill that would require schools to update and implement their anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies.

"Seth's Law" is named after 13 year-old Seth Walsh, a gay junior high school student from Tehachapi, who hanged himself after years of harassment at school.

There are already laws on the books to counter bullying, but the requirements are vague, and schools differ in terms of their responsiveness to complaints. As Alex Liu reports, some young students in California are learning how to be proactive

Alex Liu: About two dozen people are gathered for a school board meeting. A debate erupts between a student and his principal over what's being done to stop student bullying.

Principal: So I've extended olive branches to all these groups and they walk away, yet they come here and lie so...

Student: I'd like to respond to that comment, we were never offered anything. We were simply ignored several times when we made an appointment.

Liu: After an hour of heated discussion, the board votes whether to take on a more active role to combat harassment.

Board Member: And those in favor of beginning to more actively participate in student safety....Motion approved!

Liu: In fact, this isn't a real school board meeting. It's a mock meeting, held during a unique summer camp called the Northern California Gay Straight Alliance Activist Camp.

A similar one was held in Los Angeles. At the camps, student leaders train their peers to fight anti-gay discrimination and bullying.

For 17 year-old camp counselor Javi Pinedo, it's a battle he knows too well.

Pinedo lives in Tracy, a Central Valley city about 70 miles east of San Francisco. He came out his freshman year, and says that's when the name-calling started.

Javi Pinedo: There would be some very rude remarks with derogatory terms, such as 'faggot.' Things that were just totally uncalled for.

Liu: Soon, he says, the verbal harassment turned to physical violence.

Pinedo: I did feel unsafe at some times and sometimes I just did not want to go to school at all.

Liu: The bullying got so bad, Pinedo came close to taking his own life.

Instead, he decided to do something about it, by participating in a campaign to educate his peers and promote tolerance. He got help from the statewide nonprofit group Gay Straight Alliance Network to start a chapter on his campus.

Pinedo: If it hadn't been for GSA Network, I wouldn't be alive today.

Liu: Pinedo's not alone. Experts say gay teens who are bullied are at a much higher risk for poor academic performance, substance abuse, depression and suicide.

At the Marin camp, 20 students spent two and a half-days learning how to make their hallways safer. They participated in seminars to teach them organizing skills and discussed strategies for promoting anti-harassment policies at their schools.

Research shows that students report less bullying in schools that explicitly announce their non-discrimination policies and have teachers that intervene when they see harassment.

A survey of Massachusetts schools showed that active support groups for gay students appear to reduce suicide attempts.

The mock school board meeting helped the students put their newly-acquired skills to the test, trying to convince counselors posing as school officials to take bullying seriously.

After the meeting, the counselors gave feedback about how the students could improve their public speaking skills.

Counselor: Knowing what you're going to say before you get up is super important, so that doesn't stifle the message or the message doesn't get lost.

Seventeen year-old Shay Harleston lives in Bakersfield, and is the president of his campus Gay Straight Alliance.

He left camp excited about the upcoming year. He says he wants to work with school officials to develop educational seminars to stop slurs at his school.

Shay Harleston: It might create a better learning environment for people. And they won't have to worry about walking through the halls and being called 'retarded' or 'f-----' or 'n-----.'

Liu: As the campers in Marin began to make their way back home to other parts of the state, many said the best part of camp was they no longer feel alone.

For the California Report, I'm Alex Liu.

Sep. 6, 2011
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