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SANTA CRUZ -- A record number of local high school students attended Saturday's statewide Gay-Straight Alliance conference, which educators and students say reflects a growing interest in advocacy clubs for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students and their allies.

Pajaro Valley Unified School District's three high schools and local donor Mike Dively paid for two motor coaches coordinated through Santa Cruz City Schools to send 81 students to the Youth Empowerment Summit in San Francisco, an event by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network supporting 1.1 million students with clubs at 850 schools in California. It's only the second year schools have provided transportation.

Topics included as safe schools, anti-bullying, team building, LGBT history and coming out for athletes.

Students also learned about the Fair Education Act, a California bill that would require schools teach on the histories of people of color, people with disabilities and LGBT people. Another 10 students attended the conference through STRANGE, a program for LGBT youth and allies provided by Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center.

"I thought it would be a good thing, helping and being an activist for making things fair for everyone," Molly Jean Judd, 15, a sophomore at San Lorenzo Valley High, said about why she joined her Gay-Straight Alliance. She is set to be president next year.

Students said getting transportation to the conference demonstrates their districts' dedication to supporting queer youth.

"It's really cool that they're open about things," Judd said.

Victor Martinez, a 17-year-old Aptos High senior who serves as treasurer of his Gay-Straight Alliance, said, "It thought it was very generous and helpful to us and a number of students from Santa Cruz."

Gay-Straight Alliance clubs are gaining momentum, students and educators say.

"When I see a GSA send five students to the YES conference one year and then send 15 students to the exact same conference the following year, that shows me students are seeing a direct benefit of the skills they are learning in a regional setting and bringing them back into a local setting," said Stuart Rosenstein, director of the Queer Youth Task Force advocacy group in Santa Cruz. "They are seeing the beauty of a circle that keeps getting stronger and stronger."

Other participating high schools included Santa Cruz, Soquel, Harbor, Watsonville, Pajaro Valley and North Monterey County.

In addition to supporting the clubs, Murry Schekman, assistant superintendent for the Pajaro Valley district, said schools host dramatic presentations and other activities to raise awareness throughout the year.

"It says to me that we've got some real cool kids and adults trying to do the right thing," he said.

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