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# Queer youth lobby lawmakers on school discipline bills

Nearly 50 high school students from communities throughout California came to Sacramento Monday to lobby state legislators in support of two bills aimed at protecting students from extreme or unjust discipline policies.

From Crescent City to San Ysidro, Half Moon Bay to Truckee, students gathered for a morning rally on the north steps of the Capitol before meeting with lawmakers and their staff as part of the April 30 Queer Youth Advocacy Day.

Encouraging them to engage lawmakers, students heard firsthand the personal stories of out state legislators and fellow students advocating for AB 1729, Creating Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion, and AB 2242, Reducing Out of School Suspensions for Minor Infractions that was authored by Assemblyman Roger Dickinson (D-Sacramento). Organization sponsors of the advocacy day claim that LGBT students, students of color, and students with disabilities suffer disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion, hence the need for the bills.

Out Assemblyman Tom Ammiano (D-San Francisco), who authored AB 1729, told the students of the LGBT community's struggle for equal rights by those who came before them.

"I was around when Harvey Milk spoke of the young man from Altoona, Pennsylvania who feared coming out, of being institutionalized by his parents," recalled Ammiano.

"When you visit legislators, look at who they've hired," Ammiano told the students. "Do they have any out gay people, any transgender staff, working for them?"

After his speech Ammiano, a former teacher, told the Bay Area Reporter, "It's always inspiring to see these LGBT youth involving themselves in the political process to fight for their equal rights as citizens. They seem to get a little feistier each year, and they actually get a pretty good reception when they visit these offices, even from my Republican colleagues. It's kind of hard not to care about our young people."

Kirsten Hendrickson, a freshman at nearby Folsom High School and vice president of her gay-straight alliance club, stood before her fellow students to tell of being harassed at school. She said that she was shaken when she received a note on her locker that said, "lesbian."

"I tried to laugh it off, but I was shocked. I had to take an important exam that day but I couldn't stop thinking about the note," said Hendrickson.

Out Assemblyman Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens) told students at the rally of how difficult it was for him to grow up in a Latino family in a southern California barrio. Lara told students that his father once told him, "If one of my sons were gay, he could see ending the life of his own child," Lara said of his parents' three sons, two of whom are gay. Lara said his parents have come to embrace their sons' sexual orientation.

"They are both very loving and proud of who we are," he said.

Lara ended his speech by telling the students, many of which were Latino, "Si se puede." ("Yes it is possible.")

Gay Assemblyman Rich Gordon (D-Menlo Park) told students how important it was that they were at the Capitol to advocate for LGBT equality.

"It's called a movement for a reason," said Gordon. "We have to keep moving to end discrimination all the time. I want you to know I'm very, very proud of you."

Kayla Evans, a junior at River City High School in West Sacramento, told the B.A.R. how visiting the offices of legislators empowered her.

"At first it was slightly intimidating and we were prepped for people that might be against us," Evans said. "I never realized I had the resources to talk to elected representatives to advocate for new laws. I realize now that I can."

Evans, who lives just a few miles from the Capitol, had never been inside the building.

"Lobbying would never be a career for me, but I intend to do it for issues important to me for the rest of my life," she said.

Queer Youth Advocacy Day began 15 years ago when former Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl introduced the first bill to protect school-aged youth from harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity on California school campuses. Last year students helped shepherd Ammiano's Seth's Law, and the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act by out state Senator Mark Leno (D-California) to the governor's desk where both bills were signed into law.

Advocacy day was sponsored by GSA Network, Equality California Institute, Transgender Law Center, the Trevor Project, and American Civil Liberties Union of California.

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