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Calif. lawmakers want to know if anti-bullying laws actually protect gay students

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California lawmakers plan to request a state audit on how schools and local education agencies apply anti-bullying and harassment laws in response to recent incidents in which students were targeted for their sexual orientation.

Democratic state Assembly members Ricardo Lara of Bell Gardens and Betsy Butler of Los Angeles will bring up the issue at a Wednesday meeting of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee. The aim is to identify any gaps in enforcement and determine steps to improve how bullying is dealt with, said Julia Svetlana Juarez, a spokeswoman for Lara.

More than 200,000 students in California are harassed each year because they are gay, lesbian or someone thought they were, according to a California Healthy Kids Survey in 2000. These incidents occur despite laws that aim to combat such behavior and improve student safety.

In 2008, 15-year-old Lawrence King at Oxnard's E.O. Green Junior High School was shot and killed by classmate Brandon McInerney, 14, for being gay. McInerney was sentenced to 21 years in prison last year after pleading guilty to second-degree murder.

In another case, Seth Walsh, 13, of Tehachapi, Calif., committed suicide in 2010 by hanging himself from a tree after being taunted by classmates for being gay.

The request will ask the state auditor to collect statewide data on how existing laws and regulations on bullying and harassment are implemented by schools and local education agencies.

The lawmakers will ask the audit look at what steps the state's Department of Education takes to ensure compliance; how effective the complaint policies and procedures are and whether that is tracked; determine whether cost affects implementation abilities such as training and investigation of complaints; and identify best practices used locally and in other states to decrease bullying and improve school climate.

According to the audit request, it costs school districts about $39.9 million annually when students miss school because they don't feel safe and are scared of being bullied.

"California cannot afford to lose any more students to bullying and harassment," the request states. "In order to combat discrimination in schools, we must be vigilant to ensure that these laws are being implemented throughout every district and school in the state."

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