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Advancing Racial and Economic Justice

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In case you missed it, last week saw a number of great advances for GSA Network's racial and economic justice work! The fruits of our work on school push out with our education rights partners manifested in a first-of-its-kind Senate hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline. GSA Network submitted written testimony [1] with youth stories that outline the devastating impact zero-tolerance policies and punitive school discipline has had on school climate and academic achievement for LGBTQ youth, especially LGBTQ youth of color. At the start of the hearing, Senator and Committee Chair, Dick Durbin (D-IL) tweeted that LGBT students are "more likely to be disciplined and arrested in schools than their peers," and staff recommended that the nation's leaders do something about interrupting school push out.

Here in California, the GSA racial and economic justice movement continues to grow. On Saturday, we held our largest Youth Empowerment Summit (YES) yet, themed "Say YES to Safe Schools & No to School Push Out." Our 600+ attendees saw a panel on how the school-to-prison pipeline impacts LGBT youth, and then had the opporunity to participate in workshops to take action against school push out.

Earlier in the week, two of our Statewide Advocacy Council (SAC) members and Campaign for Quality Education (CQE) liaisons advocated for English learners across the state at the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). The CTC, a little-known agency which rarely draws media attention, was making decisions on how to continue permitting under-prepared teachers. Testimony from GSA Network SAC members, Sarah Harker from Placer Unified School District and Espii Gutierrez from Tulare Joint Union, touched on the importance of limiting the

number of years that a teacher can teach on an emergency permit, and supporting reasonable recruitment documentation with each emergency permit application.

Raising up the values of fairness and interdependence that they were taught at home and which they lead by in their GSA clubs, Sarah and Espii described how under-prepared teachers most often teach the state's most vulnerable students, English-language learners. These are Sarah and Espii's friends and GSA members who they see as least likely to graduate and most likely to drop out. To prevent this, Sarah and Espii discussed the need for English learners to be taught and supported by the best-prepared teachers, not the worst-prepared teachers. Teachers who are well-prepared know how to maintain a respectful, safe environment when English learners are bullied for not knowing English well and how to provide an education that is understandable and accessible to all.

Their testimony was so powerful - especially because students are rarely seen advocating at CTC proceedings - that many Commissioners came up to them during the break to give them business cards and ask to be new contacts and allies! One commissioner originally from the Central Valley was totally blown away by Espii, also from the Central Valley. The commission adopted 3 of the policy options we supported and pushed the 4th option to be voted on at a later date. Immediately the media requested to interview them.

Check out their amazing interview with ABC News 10 Sacramento:

Read about what they took away from their experience being trained at the fall gathering of the CQE and later engaging in CQE advocacy:

"Testifying for the CTC was intense! I rewrote my testimony two times while we were waiting for them to get to our topic and I had barely finished what I was going to present when my name was called. I presented, totally messed up, and left shaking. Thankfully my mess up was funny and got the room to laugh! It was an empowering experience because not only did we get interviewed for the news, but all the commissioners were really grateful we had come." - Sarah Harker

"Attending CQE and CTC has brought many important things to light. I now understand how having qualified teachers in our classrooms can make a huge impact on students as well as how our education system works. Experiencing the full effect of changing California's education system has to be one of the greatest feelings yet. I cannot wait to further my knowledge about making a difference for my fellow classmates." - Espii Gutierrez

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[1] http://www.gsanetwork.org/news/blog/ending-school-prison-pipeline-hearing-senate-judiciary-committee/12/12/12